The Walrus and the Carpenter

POEM TEXT

The sun was shining on the sea,
Shining with all his might:
He did his very best to make
The billows smooth and bright—
And this was odd, because it was
The middle of the night.

The moon was shining sulkily,
Because she thought the sun
Had got no business to be there
After the day was done—
"It's very rude of him," she said,
"To come and spoil the fun!"

The sea was wet as wet could be,
The sands were dry as dry.
You could not see a cloud, because
No cloud was in the sky:
No birds were flying overhead—
There were no birds to fly.

The Walrus and the Carpenter
Were walking close at hand;
They wept like anything to see
Such quantities of sand:
"If this were only cleared away,"
They said, "it *would* be grand!"

"If seven maids with seven mops
Swept it for half a year,
Do you suppose," the Walrus said,
"That they could get it clear?"
"I doubt it," said the Carpenter,
And shed a bitter tear.

"O Oysters, come and walk with us!"
The Walrus did beseech.
"A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,
Along the briny beach:
We cannot do with more than four,
To give a hand to each."

The eldest Oyster looked at him,
But never a word he said:
The eldest Oyster winked his eye,
And shook his heavy head—
Meaning to say he did not choose
To leave the oyster-bed.

But four young Oysters hurried up,
All eager for the treat:
Their coats were brushed, their faces washed,
Their shoes were clean and neat—
And this was odd, because, you know,
They hadn't any feet.

Four other Oysters followed them,
And yet another four;
And thick and fast they came at last,
And more, and more, and more —
All hopping through the frothy waves,
And scrambling to the shore.

The Walrus and the Carpenter
Walked on a mile or so,
And then they rested on a rock
Conveniently low:
And all the little Oysters stood
And waited in a row.

"The time has come," the Walrus said,
"To talk of many things:
Of shoes—and ships—and sealing-wax—
Of cabbages—and kings—
And why the sea is boiling hot—
And whether pigs have wings."

"But wait a bit," the Oysters cried,
"Before we have our chat;
For some of us are out of breath,
And all of us are fat!"
"No hurry!" said the Carpenter.
They thanked him much for that.

"A loaf of bread," the Walrus said,
"Is what we chiefly need:

Pepper and vinegar besides
Are very good indeed—
Now if you're ready, Oysters dear,
We can begin to feed."

"But not on us!" the Oysters cried,
Turning a little blue.
"After such kindness, that would be
A dismal thing to do!"
"The night is fine," the Walrus said.
"Do you admire the view?

"It was so kind of you to come!
And you are very nice!"
The Carpenter said nothing but
"Cut us another slice:
I wish you were not quite so deaf—
I've had to ask you twice!"

"It seems a shame," the Walrus said,
"To play them such a trick,
After we've brought them out so far,
And made them trot so quick!"
The Carpenter said nothing but
"The butter's spread too thick!"

"I weep for you," the Walrus said:
"I deeply sympathize."
With sobs and tears he sorted out
Those of the largest size,
Holding his pocket-handkerchief
Before his streaming eyes.

"O Oysters," said the Carpenter,
"You've had a pleasant run!
Shall we be trotting home again?"
But answer came there none—
And this was scarcely odd, because
They'd eaten every one.

SUMMARY

The speaker describes a strange scene: the personified sun shines down on the sea with all his strength, trying as best he can to brighten up the waves—despite the fact that it's the middle of the night.

Meanwhile, the moon is pouting as she shines because she thinks that the sun doesn't belong here, given that the day is over; the night is her territory, yet he rudely invades it and ruins her good time.

The speaker then sets the scene for the rest of the poem: the sea is very wet while the sands on the shore are very dry. The sky above is empty, with no clouds or birds in sight.

The Walrus and the Carpenter walk down the beach together. For reasons the speaker never explains, the amount of sand on the beach brings them to tears. It would be really great, they think, if it could all just be cleared away.

The Walrus asks his companion if he thinks that seven maids sweeping the beach with mops for half a year could clear away all that sand. The Carpenter responds he doesn't think so while crying out a single, resentful tear.

The pair then comes across some oysters. The Walrus encourages the shellfish to join them on their walk, insisting that it will be an enjoyable stroll filled with enjoyable conversation along the salty beach. He claims that they don't have room for more than four oysters, however, because he and the Carpenter intend to each help two along.

The oldest oyster in the oyster bed remains silent while looking back at the Walrus. He then winks and shakes his head sadly, declining the invitation.

However, four younger oysters eagerly scurry forward to join them. They've freshened up for the occasion, tidying their coats and cleaning their faces and shoes—despite the fact that they don't have feet.

Another group of oysters joins them, and then another. Then a whole bunch of oysters starts rushing forth, skipping through the foamy surf while scurrying out of the ocean.

After the group continues on for about a mile, the Walrus and the Carpenter decide to rest on a low rock, leaving the oysters to line up before them.

The Walrus suggests they discuss a series of nonsensical topics—everything from shoes to the wax used to seal letters, to vegetables and monarchs. He wonders why the ocean is boiling and if pigs have wings.

But the oysters aren't ready to talk and request a brief rest, since most of them are exhausted from the walk and need to catch their breath. The Carpenter assures the oysters that they're in no rush and can wait, for which the oysters are grateful.

The Walrus then starts listing items they require for a meal, including some bread, pepper, and vinegar—all things that go very well with oysters. He asks the oysters if they're ready to eat.

The oysters, fearing that they might be on the menu, protest that this would be a very rude thing to do—but the Walrus brushes off their concern (and perhaps tries to distract them) by pointing out the beauty of the night.

The Walrus declares how much he's enjoyed the oysters' company. The Carpenter, meanwhile, just rudely asks them to cut another slice of bread, frustrated that he's already had to ask them multiple times.

The Walrus admits that he feels some regret for tricking the oysters like this, especially since they made them scurry so far and fast along the beach. But the Carpenter just criticizes the amount of butter on the bread.

The Walrus insists that he feels deeply for the unfortunate oysters and weeps while selecting the juiciest ones. In fact, he cries so much that he has to hold his handkerchief to his face.

The Carpenter calls out to the oysters, declaring that they've had a nice time and better start scurrying back home. Of course, no one answers him, given that he and the Walrus have eaten all of their companions.

THEMES

POWER, ENTITLEMENT, AND GREED

Although Lewis Carroll's "The Walrus and the Carpenter" is an example of Victorian "nonsense" verse—it features a talking walrus and shoe-wearing oysters, after all—it also subtly critiques entitlement, the abuse of power, and greed. The sun invades the moon's territory without any thought for her feelings, for example, and the titular Walrus and Carpenter end up eating all of the polite, helpless little "Oysters" who accompany them on their walk. In addition to simply entertaining readers, then, the poem illustrates how creatures tend to act in accordance with their desires when they have the power to do so—even when those desires actively harm other creatures.

Throughout the poem, the sun shines despite the fact that it's nighttime. Even though the night sky is the moon's territory, the sun (gendered male) encroaches on it simply because he can. The moon, which is gendered female, "thought the sun / Had got no business to be there / After the day was done." Nevertheless, the sun shines with "all its might"—aggressively imposing on the scene regardless of what's right, and despite the moon's wishes. Even though the sun doesn't belong in the nighttime world, in this poem, he has the power to invade the moon's territory, so he does. While the speaker doesn't explicitly pass judgment on this behavior, the moon's displeasure is obvious. The sun's exercise of power is portrayed as an unfair invasion of the moon's space.

Similarly, the Walrus and the Carpenter indulge themselves at the Oysters' expense, suggesting that power will gobble up what it can, when it can. They invite the young Oysters to accompany them on their stroll, then eat them all. This morbid end to an otherwise whimsical poem demonstrates the pair's selfishness, as well as their willingness to betray their new friends in service of their own appetites. When the Walrus proposes dinner, the Oysters beg him and the Carpenter not to dine on them. Yet although the Walrus claims to regret "trick[ing]" them, he and the Carpenter eat them anyway. For the powerful, it seems, gratification of one's appetites comes before morality.

The initial disagreement between the sun and the moon foreshadows this later betrayal, which demonstrates a more serious form of entitlement. Because the Walrus and the Carpenter are more powerful than the Oysters who accompany them on their walk, they can not only trick them but consume them. Due to their position above the Oysters in the food chain or hierarchy of creatures, they feel their desires outweigh the Oysters', and they act accordingly. The poem might suggest that both in the "real world" and in the "nonsense world" of this poem, power works the same way.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-108

HYPOCRISY, SENTIMENTALITY, AND CRUELTY

Throughout "The Walrus and the Carpenter," both Walrus and Carpenter express outsized emotion while acting with ruthless cunning. Their dramatics help give the poem its "nonsense" quality while distracting the audience, the Oysters, and perhaps even themselves from their dark and selfish motives. Sentimentality, the poem suggests, is often a hypocritical mask for cruelty.

The Walrus and Carpenter gush and emote about matters large and small, even when it makes no sense to do so. They weep "bitter[ly]" over the presence of sand on the beach they're enjoying and "beseech" rather than simply invite the Oysters to join them. They even declare that they "cannot do with more than four / To give a hand to each"—a statement that they seemingly forget completely as more clueless young Oysters join their party.

Eventually, it becomes clear that their grand outward emotions disguise their heartlessness—from others and perhaps even from themselves. The Walrus implores the Oysters to join him and the Carpenter for "A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk, / Along the briny beach," disguising the outing as an adventure among friends. The Carpenter even accommodates the Oysters' request to "wait a bit" before the group begins to talk so that they can rest. The Walrus claims to "weep for" the Oysters even while eating them, holding a "pocket-handkerchief / Before his streaming eyes" as he sorts out the largest ones. Both he and the Carpenter ignore the Oysters' fears of being eaten, brushing them aside with meaningless pleasantries while continuing with their plan.

The one character who sees through their hypocrisy is the "eldest Oyster," and the poem subtly encourages his kind of wary realism. When the Walrus and the Carpenter invite the Oysters to join them, he doesn't respond to their tricks and flattery. Instead, he "wink[s] his eye, / And sh[akes] his heavy head." He chooses to remain in the oyster-bed where he knows he's safe rather than blindly trusting the pair and placing his fate in their hands. The hopeful, naive young Oysters are taken in by the Walrus and the Carpenter's perceived kindness, but the old Oyster knows better. At the end of the day, he's one of the only Oysters left—the Walrus and the Carpenter eat all those who accompany them on their walk.

The poem illustrates how, in the "nonsense" world just as in the real world, sentimentality can be easily faked to disguise cruel motives.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 31-108

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-12

The sun was shining on the sea,
Shining with all his might:
He did his very best to make
The billows smooth and bright—
And this was odd, because it was
The middle of the night.
The moon was shining sulkily,
Because she thought the sun
Had got no business to be there
After the day was done—
"It's very rude of him," she said,
"To come and spoil the fun!"

The first two stanzas of "The Walrus and the Carpenter" set up the absurd, self-contradictory "nonsense" world of the poem. While it seems the speaker is narrating a normal scene—the sun "shining on the sea, / Shining with all his might"—it quickly becomes apparent that something's not right. It is, in fact, the middle of the night!

The diacope of the word "shining" emphasizes the force of the sun's rays, which certainly shouldn't be out at this hour. Nevertheless, out they are, making the "billows smooth and bright." In other words, the sun's light illuminates the swirling water below. The bold /b/ alliteration here ("billows"/"bright") evoke's the sun's eagerness to shine.

Note that the poem personifies both the sun and the moon here: the speaker refers to them using male and female pronouns, respectively. The moon even has an opinion about what's happening, remarking that "It's very rude of him" (him being, of course, the sun) "To come and spoil the fun!" She's "shining sulkily," pouting as her light pours down, miffed that the sun is hanging out where he has "no business" being.

The sun's decision to trespass into the moon's territory also sets the thematic tone for the rest of the poem, which, despite its silliness, makes some real points about hierarchy and power. Even though it's not fair to the moon, the sun follows his desires with no regard for her feelings; later in the poem, the Walrus and the Carpenter will mirror his actions in their treatment of the vulnerable Oysters.

These stanzas establish the poem's form: "The Walrus and the Carpenter" consists of sestets, or six-line stanzas, in which the second, fourth, and sixth lines rhyme. This creates the rhyme scheme ABCBDB. The poem also alternates between lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. Odd-numbered lines include four iambs (poetic feet with a da-DUM rhythm), while even-numbered lines have just three iambs:

> The sun | was shi- | ning on | the sea,
> Shining | with all | his might:
> He did | his ve- | ry best | to make
> The bil- | lows smooth | and bright—

The meter is steady but not so perfect that it feels rigid. Notice, for example, the trochee that starts line 2: "Shining." Overall, the poem's predictable, bouncy meter and rhyme scheme add to its light-hearted tone.

LINES 13-24

The sea was wet as wet could be,
The sands were dry as dry.
You could not see a cloud, because
No cloud was in the sky:
No birds were flying overhead—
There were no birds to fly.
The Walrus and the Carpenter
Were walking close at hand;
They wept like anything to see
Such quantities of sand:
"If this were only cleared away,"
They said, "it
would
be grand!"

After the speaker lays out the dispute between the moon and the sun, they begin to describe the beach laid out under the (strangely well-lit) night sky. In keeping with the Victorian "nonsense" tradition, the sea is "wet as wet could be" while the sands are "dry as dry." Both of these phrases are absurd similes, since they compare the same thing to itself and therefore don't clarify anything about their subject! The sky, meanwhile, is cloudless and empty, with no birds anywhere in sight.

The only two figures in this scene are the titular Walrus and

Carpenter, who stroll down the beach side by side. Although the Carpenter is presumably a *human* carpenter, the Walrus, like the sun and the moon, is personified—he's able to walk, talk, and generally interact with his companion. (Why would a talking *walrus* be friends with a carpenter? Does it matter that this man is a *carpenter*? The poem never says!)

As they walk along the strange beach, the Walrus and Carpenter start weeping at the "quantities of sand" around them while wishing that it could all be cleared away. This doesn't make any sense, of course—they're all worked up over a perfectly natural phenomenon, and if the sand were cleared away, there'd be no beach.

This initial conversation establishes the pair as utterly ridiculous, showing the reader just how silly their concerns and topics of conversation are. In the next few stanzas (and as the narrative develops over the course of the poem) their absurdity soon evolves into apathy and even cruelty toward their fellow organisms.

LINES 25-36

"If seven maids with seven mops
Swept it for half a year,
Do you suppose," the Walrus said,
"That they could get it clear?"
"I doubt it," said the Carpenter,
And shed a bitter tear.
"O Oysters, come and walk with us!"
The Walrus did beseech.
"A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,
Along the briny beach:
We cannot do with more than four,
To give a hand to each."

Utterly distraught that the beach is so sandy, the Walrus idly wonders about a ridiculous solution: what if "seven maids with seven mops" swept the beach for "half a year?" The diacope of "seven maids with seven mops" calls attention to the delightfully absurd specificity here (why not eight maids, or six?). The Carpenter sorrowfully replies that even an intervention at this scale would likely fail to clear the sand from the beach.

Though undoubtedly silly to the reader's ear, this conversation is played completely seriously in the world of the poem; the Carpenter cries a single, "bitter" tear at the (absurdly) tragic thought that the beach must remain filled with sand.

The two are soon pulled out of their conversation, however, when they stumble upon a group of "Oysters." The Walrus calls out to the little creatures, "beseech[ing]," or strongly encouraging, them to join the pair for "A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk, / Along the briny beach." The diacope of the word "pleasant" here hints at the Walrus's powers of persuasion: he tries to make the walk sound as enticing as possible. The internal rhyme between "walk" and "talk," meanwhile, adds to the poem's lighthearted music, as does the bouncy alliteration of "briny beach" ("briny" here means salty).

The Walrus adds that he and the Carpenter want to help them along, so only four of the Oysters can come (since the Walrus and Carpenter have only four hands). He's creating a scarcity situation around the outing—by saying that they "cannot do with more than four, / To give a hand to each," he likely makes the Oysters more interested.

LINES 37-48

The eldest Oyster looked at him,
But never a word he said:
The eldest Oyster winked his eye,
And shook his heavy head—
Meaning to say he did not choose
To leave the oyster-bed.
But four young Oysters hurried up,
All eager for the treat:
Their coats were brushed, their faces washed,
Their shoes were clean and neat—
And this was odd, because, you know,
They hadn't any feet.

The Walrus's manipulations don't work on the "eldest Oyster," who's also personified even though he doesn't say a word. Instead, this older (and, apparently, wiser) mollusk just winks his eye and shakes "his heavy head," declining the invitation. Rather than venturing out into the unknown with the smooth-talking Walrus and Carpenter, he prefers to stay at home. The fact that he refuses to join and that his head is "heavy" hints that he knows the terrible fate that awaits those other oysters foolish enough to take the Walrus up on his offer.

Although the "eldest Oyster" chooses not "To leave the oyster-bed"—a clever pun on both human beds and aquatic oyster beds in which natural oysters gather—four of his younger relatives rush up "eager for the treat." They're so ready for some excitement that they've even brushed their coats, washed their faces, and kept their shoes "clean and neat": all impossible tasks for real oysters, but not for these capital-O Oysters in this nonsensical world, where they're able to wear shoes despite their lack of feet!

Although this poem tells a story through a linear, relatively traditionally structured narrative, details like these help the speaker build a fantastical and illogical environment for these characters. Like the language of a singsong nursery rhyme, the predictable meter, rhyme scheme, and repetition keep readers hooked on the speaker's wordplay, absurdism, and leaps of faith (especially in stanzas like these, where nothing really makes all that much sense).

Indeed, note how the speaker repeats the phrase that closed the opening stanza here:

And this was odd, because it was

The middle of the night.
[...]
And this was odd, because, you know,
They hadn't any feet.

The speaker is winking at the reader here, pointing out the utter absurdity of the situation at hand—and essentially asking readers just to roll with it!

LINES 49-60

Four other Oysters followed them,
And yet another four;
And thick and fast they came at last,
And more, and more, and more —
All hopping through the frothy waves,
And scrambling to the shore.
The Walrus and the Carpenter
Walked on a mile or so,
And then they rested on a rock
Conveniently low:
And all the little Oysters stood
And waited in a row.

The Walrus and the Carpenter get the four young oysters they initially encounter to accompany them, but soon "Four other Oysters" follow in their footsteps, with "yet another four" trail behind them. Soon enough, "more, and more, and more" oysters come "thick and fast, "hopping through the frothy waves, / And scrambling to the shore" in their excitement. The epizeuxis of "And more, and more, and more" emphasizes just how many oysters have decided to tag along, the line's language seeming to pile up on top of itself. It's clear that the pair at the center of this narrative has made a very attractive offer to the easily persuaded, gregarious young mollusks.

Although their motivations are, as of yet, still unclear, the reader has to wonder why the Walrus and the Carpenter were so insistent on the company, and why they don't protest when the oysters join them *en masse* despite their earlier promise to only take four along.

After the group has walked along the beach for "a mile or so," the Walrus and the Carpenter rest on a rock that's "Conveniently low" to the ground while "all the little Oysters" stand in front of them, politely waiting in a neat row. The pair's attention to their own needs and ignorance of their companions highlights both their selfishness and the oysters' tolerance and consideration: even though they're guests on this mysterious expedition, they're willing to do be flexible based on what the Walrus and the Carpenter want.

LINES 61-72

"The time has come," the Walrus said,
"To talk of many things:
Of shoes—and ships—and sealing-wax—
Of cabbages—and kings—
And why the sea is boiling hot—
And whether pigs have wings."
"But wait a bit," the Oysters cried,
"Before we have our chat;
For some of us are out of breath,
And all of us are fat!"
"No hurry!" said the Carpenter.
They thanked him much for that.

Now that the group has found a temporary resting place, the Walrus begins to talk again. He solemnly declares that "The time has come [...] To talk of many things" before launching into a list of ridiculous topics that echo the pair's earlier, equally ridiculous conversations about the quantities of sand on the beach. The list itself is delightfully musical, keeping the poem's tone silly and lighthearted. Listen to all the alliteration and sibilance here:

Of shoes—and ships—and sealing-wax—
Of cabbages—and kings—

The list also just makes no sense; the sea is *not* "boiling hot" and there's no question about "whether pigs have wings." There's more going on than mere nonsense, however. By laying these subjects out without any further description or explanation, the Walrus once again reveals his careless, self-centered nature: he wants to talk about the things that interest him rather than engage in organic communication.

The Oysters gently protest, since some of them are "out of breath, / And all of [them] are fat!" Although they've acquiesced to the Walrus and the Carpenter's desires so far, they want to take a second to relax after their jaunt across the beach before launching into conversation.

The Carpenter responds with a short "No hurry!" and the Oysters thank him profusely, even though indulging the Oysters by waiting a bit to talk is hardly a tall order. It is notable, however, that neither the Walrus nor the Carpenter give up their seats on the rock for their tired companions.

LINES 73-84

"A loaf of bread," the Walrus said,
"Is what we chiefly need:
Pepper and vinegar besides
Are very good indeed—
Now if you're ready, Oysters dear,
We can begin to feed."
"But not on us!" the Oysters cried,
Turning a little blue.
"After such kindness, that would be
A dismal thing to do!"
"The night is fine," the Walrus said.
"Do you admire the view?

Once again, the Walrus changes the subject: now, it seems, his mind's on food. He states that the group needs "a loaf of bread," perhaps bolstered by the addition of some seasonings like pepper and vinegar. (As some readers might know from experience, these things tend to pair quite well with oysters; things are starting to look grim for these little mollusks.)

The Walrus remains superficially kind to the Oysters, addressing them with a sweet "Oysters dear" and asking them if they're ready before announcing, "We can begin to feed." But the Walrus and the Carpenter didn't pitch the excursion as a picnic—so what else is on the menu?

The Oysters, understandably fearing that they're the main course, turn "a little blue" and cry out that they don't want to be eaten. They point out that "After such kindness" from the Walrus and the Carpenter, eating them would be "A dismal thing to do"—a hilarious polite, gentle way to frame being devoured!

But the Walrus simply waves them off with an empty platitude. Instead of laying their fears to rest, he comments on the beauty of the night and the view. Perhaps he's trying to distract them from their fate.

LINES 85-96

"It was so kind of you to come!
And you are very nice!"
The Carpenter said nothing but
"Cut us another slice:
I wish you were not quite so deaf—
I've had to ask you twice!"
"It seems a shame," the Walrus said,
"To play them such a trick,
After we've brought them out so far,
And made them trot so quick!"
The Carpenter said nothing but
"The butter's spread too thick!"

In keeping with his characterization as a smooth talker (after all, he was the one who persuaded the Oysters to join them in the first place), the Walrus continues to flatter the Oysters by telling them how kind it was of them to come on this stroll. He lays it on even more thickly by claiming that they are "very nice." He's saying the same thing over and over again without really meaning much at all, especially since what the Oysters really just want to know is whether or not they'll be eaten.

The Carpenter, on the other hand, doesn't even afford the Oysters the Walrus's shallow sympathies. Instead, he rudely requests that the Oysters cut him another slice of bread before complaining that he's had to ask them twice already and wishing they "were not quite so deaf."

Even though the Walrus is clearly a selfish manipulator, he pretends to show some remorse for his duplicity. He remarks that "It seems a shame" to play the Oysters "such a trick" after convincing them to come out for the walk in the first place, bringing them out so far from their home, hurrying them along, and generally controlling the pace and direction of the outing. The heartless (or, maybe, just honest) Carpenter ignores the Walrus's waffling and simply notes, "The butter's spread too thick!"

LINES 97-108

"I weep for you," the Walrus said:
"I deeply sympathize."
With sobs and tears he sorted out
Those of the largest size,
Holding his pocket-handkerchief
Before his streaming eyes.
"O Oysters," said the Carpenter,
"You've had a pleasant run!
Shall we be trotting home again?"
But answer came there none—
And this was scarcely odd, because
They'd eaten every one.

At the end of the poem, the Walrus goes back to his old tricks: he's dramatically crying again, even announcing the fact of his weeping to the Oysters while professing his phony "deep sympathies" for them. Yet even as he's talking about how much he understands their pain and fear (complete with overblown "sobs and tears"), he sorts out "Those of the largest size." That is, he plucks the juiciest Oysters to eat.

He makes such a show of his sorrow that he even has to hold his "pocket-handkerchief / Before his streaming eyes." In a classic display of narcissism, he's making his own cruelty to the Oysters—his and the Carpenter's selfish decision to trick them into going on a walk, then eat them as the main course in a seemingly impromptu picnic—secondary to his (performative) sadness about the whole affair.

After the fact, the Carpenter displays the same apathy and meaningless social "kindness" readers have by now come to expect from the pair: he remarks to the Oysters that they've "had a pleasant run" and asks them if it's time to start "trotting home again." But like all of the Walrus and the Carpenter's empty gestures, he doesn't care about their feelings and isn't really asking for their opinion. This becomes immediately clear when he doesn't receive an answer—how could he, since he and the Walrus have eaten every single one of their companions?

POETIC DEVICES

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

Throughout this poem, several figures are anthropomorphized: the sun, the moon, the Walrus, and the Oysters. This device fits in with the conventions of Victorian "nonsense" verse: talking animals and heavenly bodies make the narrative a lot more

whimsical and surreal.

The poem begins by treating both the sun and moon almost like a bickering brother-sister pair. The sun proudly, boldly, does "his very best" to illuminate the world below—despite the fact that it's nighttime! The moon, rather understandably, is irked by this invasion into her domain. She believes that the sun has "no business" hanging around after dark and says, "It's very rude of him [...] To come and spoil the fun!"

The poet, Lewis Carroll, clearly knows this is all very silly; his speaker seems to repeatedly wink at the reader, pointing out how "odd" it is that the sun is shining in the middle of the night or that the eager little Oysters wear neat and tidy shoes despite not having "any feet."

Still, despite the silliness, this anthropomorphism also serves a thematic point. Anthropomorphizing the poem's non-human figures (in other words, everyone except for the presumably human Carpenter) allows the speaker to introduce some very human-seeming conflicts and power imbalances into the story. The sun shines in the middle of the night without regard for the moon's feelings or boundaries, while the moon "sulkily" criticizes his rudeness. The Walrus is capable of both animal appetite and human subterfuge—able to trick the Oysters into enthusiastically joining him and the Carpenter—but the Oysters are also able to beg for mercy and underscore the unfairness of their condition. The anthropomorphism in this poem allows the sun and the Walrus to knowingly abuse their power, but it also evokes pity for the victims of these abuses.

Where Anthropomorphism appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12
- Lines 19-28
- Lines 31-36
- Lines 37-54
- Lines 55-60
- Lines 61-70
- Line 72
- Lines 73-86
- Lines 91-94
- Lines 97-102

END-STOPPED LINE

The overwhelming majority of the lines in "The Walrus and the Carpenter" are end-stopped. This creates a sense of steadiness and consistency throughout the poem—one that humorously counterbalances the silliness of the story at hand. That is, the speaker presents the story in a clear, straightforward manner despite the "nonsense," of its content (talking animals, Oysters with shoes but no feet, etc.).

This poem is very rhythmically consistent, which—like in a piece of music—makes it dependent on the "beats" of each line. End-stopping grants lines strong "downbeats" that allow the reader to pause and take space between thoughts or phrases.

Note, too, that while its language is whimsical, it's not particularly abstract. The poem follows a conventional structure: it's divided into regular portions (stanzas) and regular lines. Like the linear, clearly marked sentences in a traditional story, end-stopped lines clearly guide the reader through the body of the poem.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Line 4
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 10
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 13-14
- Lines 16-18
- Line 20
- Lines 22-24
- Lines 26-30
- Lines 31-36
- Lines 37-40
- Lines 42-48
- Lines 49-54
- Line 56
- Line 58
- Line 60
- Lines 61-66
- Lines 67-72
- Lines 73-74
- Lines 76-78
- Lines 79-80
- Lines 82-84
- Lines 85-86
- Lines 88-90
- Lines 91-94
- Line 96
- Lines 97-98
- Line 100
- Line 102
- Lines 103-106
- Line 108

ALLITERATION

The poem is filled with alliteration, which makes certain images more vivid and exciting. In the poem's first stanza, for example, repeated /s/ and /sh/ sounds sonically mimic the rise and fall of the ocean waves they're describing:

> The sun was shining on the sea,
> Shining with all his might:

Similarly, the /b/ sounds of line 3 help to convey the force with

which the sun shines down on the beach:

> The billows smooth and bright—

Elsewhere, alliteration simply makes the poem sound more musical. Take lines 63-64, which feature alliteration of the /sh/, /k/, and /t/ sounds (as well as some internal sibilance, as in "ships" and "sealing wax"):

> "To talk of many things:
> Of shoes—and ships—and sealing-wax—
> Of cabbages—and kings—

Alliteration often combines with consonance and assonance to create internal rhyme and fill the poem with music. Take the crucial ninth stanza, when the Walrus and the Carpenter persuade the young Oysters to join them and the shellfish rush up to the pair en masse. Repeated soft consonant sounds like /f/ and /m/ sandwich long vowels like the /aw/ in "followed" and "frothy" or the /o/ of "four"/"more"/"shore" (and, to an extent "Oyster"). The result is a stanza filled with delicious music that helps the reader to understand the Oysters' perspective; it's easy to be suckered in by pretty words!

> Four other Oysters followed them,
> And yet another four;
> And thick and fast they came at last,
> And more, and more, and more —
> All hopping through the frothy waves,
> And scrambling to the shore.

Like the Walrus and the Carpenter's platitudes and persuasion, this poem's pleasant music lulls readers into a false sense of security. That is, "The Walrus and the Carpenter" simply *sounds* nice.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sun," "sea"
- **Line 4:** "billows," "bright"
- **Line 7:** "shining," "sulkily"
- **Line 8:** "she," "sun"
- **Line 9:** "business," "be"
- **Line 10:** "day," "done"
- **Line 13:** "sea"
- **Line 14:** "sands"
- **Line 15:** "could," "cloud"
- **Line 16:** "cloud"
- **Line 21:** "see"
- **Line 22:** "Such," "sand"
- **Line 25:** "seven," "maids," "seven," "mops"
- **Line 26:** "Swept"
- **Line 27:** "suppose"
- **Line 28:** "could," "clear"
- **Line 34:** "briny beach"
- **Line 40:** "his heavy head"
- **Line 49:** "Four," "followed"
- **Line 50:** "four"
- **Line 51:** "fast"
- **Line 53:** "frothy"
- **Line 57:** "rested," "rock"
- **Line 62:** "To talk"
- **Line 63:** "shoes," "ships"
- **Line 64:** "cabbages," "kings"
- **Line 85:** "kind," "come"
- **Line 97:** "weep," "Walrus," "said"
- **Line 98:** "sympathize"
- **Line 99:** "sobs," "sorted"
- **Line 100:** "size"
- **Line 101:** "Holding," "handkerchief"
- **Line 102:** "streaming"

REPETITION

The poem is filled with repetition in many forms (anaphora, diacope, epizeuxis, polysyndeton, and parallelism, to name a few). Broadly, all this repetitive language adds to the poem's humor and absurdity. Take the diacope of "wet as wet" and "dry as dry" in the second stanza. The repetition of the words "wet" and "dry" is an essential part of the absurd similes that help give the poem its "nonsense" quality: calling something "wet as wet" or "dry as dry" defeats the purpose of figurative comparison because it doesn't tell readers anything new or illuminating about that wetness/dryness. Of course water is wet and sand is dry!

The repetition of "cloud" and "birds" in the same stanza works similarly. The poem isn't actually explaining *why* there are no birds or clouds around but rather just making another comically self-evident point: you can't see birds or clouds if there are no birds or clouds. The speaker uses repetition to invert their own language; as if they were reflected in a funhouse mirror, the phrases "You could not see a cloud" and "No birds were flying overhead" become "No cloud was in the sky" and "There were no birds to fly," respectively.

Later, the diacope of the phrase "seven maids with seven mops" calls readers' attention to the specific number of maids and mops, in turn highlighting the absurdity of the Walrus's proposal, Why does the Walrus pick the number seven as opposed to six or eight? There's no logical answer; the number is arbitrary.

Elsewhere, repetition adds emphasis to certain images. Take the epizeuxis/polysyndeton of "And more, and more, and more" in line 52, which evokes the seemingly endless march of Oysters "scrambling to the shore." Likewise, the repetition of "shining" in lines 1-2 highlights just how strongly the sun is

beating down (despite the fact that it's night!):

> The sun was shining on the sea,
> Shining with all his might:

Across the poem, frequent repetition creates some entertaining music and lulling rhythms. Take lines 63-64:

> Of shoes—and ships—and sealing-wax—
> Of cabbages—and kings—

This list is ridiculous, but it *sounds* bouncy and intriguing. The speaker also repeats certain phrases in the poem such as "The Carpenter said nothing but" and variations on "And this was [scarcely] odd, because." Like the repetition found in many nursery rhymes (think "Mary had a little lamb, little lamb, little lamb"), these moments can contribute to a sense of soothing familiarity. This world might be filled with nonsense, but the poem itself follows its own sort of logic.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "shining"
- **Line 2:** "Shining"
- **Line 5:** "And this was odd, because"
- **Line 13:** "wet," "wet"
- **Line 14:** "dry," "dry"
- **Line 15:** "cloud"
- **Line 16:** "cloud"
- **Line 17:** "No birds"
- **Line 18:** "no birds"
- **Line 25:** "seven," "seven"
- **Line 33:** "A pleasant," "a pleasant"
- **Line 37:** "The eldest Oyster"
- **Line 39:** "The eldest Oyster"
- **Line 45:** "Their," "were," "their"
- **Line 46:** "Their," "were"
- **Line 47:** "And this was odd, because"
- **Line 49:** "Four"
- **Line 50:** "And," "four"
- **Line 51:** "And," "and"
- **Line 52:** "And more, and more, and more "
- **Line 59:** "And"
- **Line 60:** "And"
- **Line 63:** "Of," "and," "and"
- **Line 64:** "Of," "and"
- **Line 65:** "And"
- **Line 66:** "And"
- **Line 87:** "The Carpenter said nothing but"
- **Line 95:** "The Carpenter said nothing but"
- **Line 107:** "And this was scarcely odd, because"

PUN

"The Walrus and the Carpenter" is intended to be silly, and the speaker still makes use of a few well-placed puns when describing the Oysters. When the Walrus and the Carpenter invite the Oysters on their walk, the eldest Oyster declines the invitation:

> The eldest Oyster winked his eye,
> And shook his heavy head—
> Meaning to say he did not choose
> To leave the oyster-bed.

There's a pun on the word "oyster-bed" here: these anthropomorphized Oysters might sleep in a bed, but real oysters gather on rocks in clumps literally called oyster-beds.

In the next stanza, the young Oysters show up with "clean and neat" shoes—the narrator immediately notes this as "odd, because, you know, / They hadn't any feet." Oysters, of course, don't have human feet upon which they'd wear shoes. However, oysters in nature actually have a single fleshy "foot" that allows them to grip hard surfaces, like rocks and the seafloor.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Line 42:** "To leave the oyster-bed."
- **Lines 46-48:** "Their shoes were clean and neat— / And this was odd, because, you know, / They hadn't any feet."

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, fills the poem with pleasant, bouncy sounds. Listen to the shared long /ee/ sounds in lines 44 and 46, for example:

> All eager for the treat:
> [...]
> Their shoes were clean and neat—

This assonance makes the lines themselves sound bright and tidy, mimicking the eagerness and fastidiousness of the little Oysters.

Note, too, that assonance and consonance often combine in the poem, creating internal rhymes. For example, there's the tongue-twistery "because it was" in line 5; "a pleasant walk, a pleasant talk" in line 33; "more than four" in line 35; "fast they came at last" in line 51; and "'A loaf of bread,' the Walrus said" in line 73. These frequent internal rhymes make the poem intensely musical and memorable.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Shining," "might"
- **Line 5:** "because," "was"

- **Line 25:** “seven,” “seven”
- **Line 26:** “Swept”
- **Line 33:** “walk,” “talk”
- **Line 34:** “Along”
- **Line 35:** “more,” “four”
- **Line 40:** “heavy head”
- **Line 43:** “four,” “young,” “Oysters,” “hurried”
- **Line 44:** “eager,” “treat”
- **Line 46:** “clean,” “neat”
- **Line 49:** “Four,” “Oysters”
- **Line 51:** “fast,” “last”
- **Line 53:** “hopping,” “frothy”
- **Line 57:** “on,” “rock”
- **Line 63:** “wax”
- **Line 64:** “cabbages”
- **Line 66:** “pigs,” “wings”
- **Line 73:** “bread,” “said”
- **Line 74:** “we chiefly need”
- **Line 76:** “very,” “indeed”
- **Line 77:** “ready,” “dear”
- **Line 78:** “feed”
- **Line 82:** “dismal thing”
- **Line 83:** “night,” “fine”
- **Line 87:** “said nothing but”
- **Line 88:** “Cut us another”
- **Line 90:** “had,” “ask”
- **Line 95:** “said nothing but”
- **Line 96:** “butter's”
- **Line 97:** “weep”
- **Line 98:** “deeply”

VOCABULARY

Billows (Line 4) - A billow is another word for a wave. In this case, the sun is trying to shine down upon the ocean as hard as possible—making the waves "smooth and bright"—even though it's the middle of the night.

Sulkily (Line 7) - This means that the moon is being pouty as she shines.

Grand (Line 24) - Here meaning wonderful or delightful.

Briny (Line 34) - Salty.

Frothy (Line 53) - If something is frothy, it's foamy and covered in/made up of countless small bubbles. Although waves on a beach are literally frothy, the word can also be used figuratively, to describe something of little substance (like, for example, the Walrus and Carpenter's superficial kindness to the Oysters).

Sealing-wax (Line 63) - In Victorian England, this special kind of wax (usually dripped and then pressed with a ring/stamp that would verify the sender's identity) was used to seal envelopes.

Chiefly (Line 74) - The word "chiefly" means above all, or mainly. In this line, the Walrus is illustrating the central importance of bread to their meal.

Dismal (Line 82) - "Dismal" usually means dreary or depressing, although it can just be used as a synonym for bad: to do a dismal thing can be to do something that's morally objectionable.

Streaming (Line 102) - In this case, the word "streaming" refers to the tears running quickly down the Walrus's face.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Walrus and the Carpenter" consists of 18 sestets, or six-line stanzas. Each stanza alternates between lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter and follows an ABCBDB rhyme scheme. As such, these sesters look a lot like ballad stanzas, albeit with two extra lines at the end (ballad stanzas are quatrains).

The ballad stanza is a common, musical form, often seen in nursery rhymes or hymns. The poem's steady, familiar rhythms make it sound musical and memorable while also helping to maintain some order within this nonsensical world.

METER

"The Walrus and the Carpenter" alternates between lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. An iamb is a poetic foot with an unstressed-**stressed** syllable pattern; tetrameter means there are four such feet per line (eight syllables total) while trimeter means there are three (six syllables total).

Although there are subtle deviations from this meter throughout the poem, they don't disrupt the overall sense of nursery rhyme-like security that the poem's predictable rhythm provides. Take lines 1-2:

> The **sun** | was **shi-** | ning **on** | the **sea**,
> **Shi**ning | with **all** | his **might**:

Line 1 features perfect iambic tetrameter, but the first foot of line 2 is a trochee (**stressed**-unstressed). This opening stress evokes the force of the sun's rays before the poem falls back into a steady iambic pattern.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Walrus and the Carpenter" follows a consistent rhyme scheme across its 18 sestets (six-line stanzas):

ABCBDB

The specific rhyme sounds change in each stanza (in the first stanza, for example, the "B" end rhyme is set by the word "might," while in the second stanza, it's set by the word "sun"). This is an expansion of the rhyme scheme of a ballad stanza,

which has just four lines (ABCB). The pattern is common in both hymns and nursuery rhymes, its familiar cadence filling the poem with easy, memorable music.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Walrus and the Carpenter" doesn't seem to be particularly invested in the events of the poem: rather, they narrate everything as if they were watching it happen from a distance. Although they don't explicitly comment on the character of any of the figures who appear, the speaker does intersperse some of their own subtle opinions/sets the poem's tone through their specific word choices. For example, the use of a word like "sulkily" in describing the moon's reaction to the sun's invasion of her space might suggest that the speaker finds the whole conflict ridiculous. The speaker's description of the Walrus and the Carpenter's overdramatic reaction to the amount of sand on the beach captures a similar sense of ironic distance.

It's also important to note that the speaker doesn't seem to be shocked by any of the absurd goings-on in their world (they casually note the midnight sun and the Oysters' feet-free shoes as "odd"). They're aware that this world is very strange, and they say as much to the reader. This creates a kind of intimacy, encouraging the reader to trust the speaker and just go along with the story without getting caught up in the parts of it that don't make sense.

SETTING

This poem is set in an absurd, "nonsense" world that bears some similarities to Victorian England (e.g., the existence of "sealing-wax" and "kings"). This is a world where animals and celestial objects can talk, a Walrus can befriend a Carpenter, and mollusks wear freshly-brushed coats and clean little shoes.

The poem more specifically takes place on a sandy, salty beach where the sea is, predictably, "wet" and the sand is "dry." The sun is somehow shining in the middle of the night and, apart from the sun and the moon, the sky is otherwise empty; there are no birds or clouds in sight.

The Walrus and the Carpenter are walking along this beach together, dramatically lamenting the vast "quantities of sand." There's so much sand that not even "seven maids with seven mops" sweeping "for half a year" could get rid of it all—a fact that makes the Carpenter "shed a bitter tear." There are also plenty of "Oysters" on this beach, who scurry "through the frothy waves" of the sea to join the Walrus and the Carpenter on their walk along the shore. The silliness and strangeness of the beach add to the poem's humor and lighthearted tone.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Walrus and the Carpenter" originally appeared in Lewis Carroll's novel *Through the Looking-Glass* (the sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*). *Through the Looking-Glass* is a whimsical children's book famously centered around the protagonist Alice's fantastical adventures in a world called Wonderland. She encounters a series of strange characters upon her journey, including the twins Tweedledum and Tweedledee, who recite "The Walrus and the Carpenter" to her in the fourth chapter of the novel.

Alice tries to figure out which of the selfish protagonists she prefers but is confused when the twins question the motivations and meanings behind both the Walrus and the Carpenter's behavior. After analyzing the poem, she quickly realizes that both of the characters are intended to be self-serving and unlikeable. But like the Walrus and the Carpenter themselves, the twins engage Alice in confusing, nonsensical, and even disturbing "philosophical" conversation to distract her!

This poem is an example of Victorian "nonsense" verse. Broadly, nonsense literature is characterized by whimsical humor, eccentric characters, and the use of poetic elements that both facilitate and hinder meaning. For example, while this poem is a kind of narrative ballad with a strict meter and rhyme scheme, the actions it describes are extremely silly—even random-seeming. Along with his contemporary Edward Lear, Carroll pioneered the nonsense genre in the mid-1800s. His mixtures of prose and poetry are conventionally structured but packed with wordplay, absurd characters, and logically impossible situations.

Although many scholars have attempted to question or "debunk" the symbolism of the Walrus and the Carpenter's species and profession respectively (with some theorizing that the Carpenter represents Jesus, or that the pair functions collectively as a representation of British imperial invasion upon the helpless Oysters), the ridiculousness and whimsy of Carroll's *Alice* series muddles these potential deep readings of the poem. The truth is that Carroll's illustrator, Sir John Tenniel, was allowed to choose between the words "butterfly," "carpenter," and "baronet"—all three options fit the poem's meter and rhyme scheme.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Lewis Carroll (1832-1898) wrote in mid-19th-century England, during the Victorian era (1837-1901). This was a time of rapidly accumulating wealth and economic progress, as a result of both the British Empire's colonial expansion and the Industrial Revolution. Population increased almost everywhere in the British Isles (except in Ireland during the Great Famine),

and London became a booming metropolis. Conditions for the working class, however, remained awful. Many poorer people, including children, worked long hours in unsanitary factories and mines, which were often breeding grounds for infectious diseases.

Although literature thrived thanks to the general increase in wealth and population, much of it focused on the social problems connected to both, particularly income inequality and the widening gap between social classes. The idea that literature could include nonsensical humor was still a foreign concept to many people, yet it was in the realm of whimsy and laughter that Carroll thrived—perhaps partly in reaction to the struggles of the time.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Lewis Carroll (Poetry Foundation) — An overview of Carroll's life and work with particular attention paid to his relationship with Victorian traditions. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/lewis-carroll)
- "Nonsense, or Anti-Capitalist Allegory?" — In its "Poem of the Week" series, The Guardian dives into some potential meanings behind the nonsense of "The Walrus and the Carpenter." (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2007/oct/29/poemoftheweek14)
- The Poem Out Loud. — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CWOp5cqA10)
- A Brief Biography of Lewis Carroll — Learn more about Carroll's life, as well as his interest in logic and satire. (https://poets.org/poet/lewis-carroll)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LEWIS CARROLL POEMS

- Jabberwocky
- You Are Old, Father William

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