Five Bells

SUMMARY

The speaker declares that the kind of time you can measure with clocks isn't the kind of time he experiences: his kind of time is like a motionless sea. Between the ringing of the bells that mark the passage of time on the warship he sees in the water below him, he's been able to live through many lives in his imagination. In particular, he's relived his friend Joe's life. Joe has been dead for some time, and he now only lives between the five-bell alarms that mark the hours on a ship.

The speaker looks out to the sea, where long, wavering streaks of moonlight hit the water. He hears five mechanical bells ringing to mark the hour on a ship. The night sky and the water become one big dark slash; Sydney Harbor seems to be floating in the sky, and the Southern Cross (an important constellation) reflects in the ocean.

Why, the speaker wonders, is he thinking of his dead friend Joe? Why is he dislodging all these random thoughts of Joe's life from the past, where they belong? Joe is gone, so long-gone, in fact, that his name is meaningless. But *something* of Joe still endures, like a ghost trying to speak, banging on the doors of the physical world, bashing them to make the speaker hear his anger.

The speaker asks Joe if he's yelling at him, trying to push up against the silent windows that separate life from death. He tells Joe to keep on yelling, to rattle the windows and shout his name.

But no, the speaker can't hear anything. All he can hear is the bells stupidly marking the mathematical time. The ghostly Joe's cries don't make it through to him; life has put him out like a candle. No dead voice can make its way across the little passage that separates the living and the dead. The only thing that can make it through is the speaker's memory of Joe's bones, buried deep in the mud at the bottom of the Harbor.

The speaker's memories of all the little things Joe once did, or what he *thinks* he remembers, also make it through. But Joe has forgotten all those things now; Joe (being dead) has forgotten everything. The speaker is left alone to remember how Joe looked, what he said, how he drank up the dregs of his beer; to remember Joe's old coat with its missing buttons, his bony chin and his alert eyes, and his angry rants about the great kings of Ireland and the treachery of the English, and of the even-worse treachery of pub owners. Joe used to complain to the heavens from where he sat in Darlinghurst (a neighborhood of Sydney).

Five bells ring out.

Then, the speaker remembered the stormy night when he and Joe made their way to Moorebank (another Sydney neighborhood) in thick darkness. It was so dark that Joe was completely invisible; all the speaker could perceive of him was a thin voice (just like the voice he'd hear now, if he could break the windowpane that separates the living and the dead). He could hear Joe's voice beside him in the countryside, gasping for breath or blown away by the wind, talking about the poet John Milton, the taste of melons, Tom Paine's philosophy, flute music, and ladies of different lands: Joe explained that he'd found girls from Tahiti to be brown-skinned and angry and girls from Sydney to be white-skinned and angry.

But the speaker could barely hear what Joe was saying, so his stories about Milton and melons and girls were all jumbled together. It was as if fifty different people were speaking, and as if every tree were bending an ear to the voices, or to some creeping creature hiding in the grass. Then, stark as a madman's thoughts, lightning exploded in the sky, creating sharp, dangerous snapshots of the landscape. Not too many people, the speaker says, are so poor and desperate that they have to travel five miles through the wilderness on a night like that—but when Joe did, those were the things he thought about.

Five bells ring out.

By the time he and Joe got to Melbourne, the speaker recalls, Joe has lost his appetite and wasn't so angry anymore. The rain and squashy damp had made Joe's sharp mind softer and slower, teaching Joe—who had always been so fiery-tempered—the gentle, moist pleasures of calm and good behavior. Now, the speaker remembers what Joe wrote in his journal—just one of the many useless things Joe left behind after he died, another sign that a living person was gone now. He'd written: "I have a little six-foot-by-eight-foot room at the top of a tower in Labassa. It's cold and dark up here in winter. I've managed to fit 500 books of all descriptions in here, strewn on the floor and windowsills and chairs. I've got some guns, and some photos and souvenirs of the peculiar things I've seen..."

In Sydney, the speaker remembers, he and Joe argued about the end of the world in a pink-wallpapered room lit by faint, watery gaslight. Even then, he thinks, Joe was moving closer and closer toward death. He often talked about people from his past—especially his father, who went blind, and who played the fiddle. He was once a stonecutter for a graveyard; he made monuments and tombstones with hopeful religious messages. These monuments now rest atop thousands of skeletons—skeletons astonished to find they're dead; they'd never really expected to find themselves holding up these elaborate, cake-like stones.

The speaker asks Joe where he went. The ocean's waters, the speaker says, flow over Joe just like time, mystery, and memory

do; memory is a motionless sea. Joe doesn't have a cemetery neighborhood like the dead who lie rotting in their private graves. Instead, the tides and waves roll over Joe's body, their shadows falling down over him like long hair. But those shadows are water. The oceanside flowers that grow like lilies between Joe's teeth are really just seaweed. Joe is no longer anything but an idea. The speaker remembers feeling what Joe must have felt the night he drowned: feeling the water drive its thumbs into Joe's body, feeling Joe's eardrums breaking, feeling the brief pain of death and the long dream that came afterward. He imagines the timeless nothingness of death. But he couldn't follow Joe down; he couldn't see Joe, and he couldn't hold his hand. He wonders: if he could only work out the meaning of Joe's life, why he lived and why he died, would he then maybe be able to hear Joe's voice again?

The speaker looks out his window at the patterns of light on the waves, which dive like fish onto the sand under the broad wash of the moonlight. He looks at faraway ships, and the flashing buoys in the Harbor seeming to pass one ball of fire between each other. He tries to hear Joe's voice, but all he can hear is a boat whistle, the calls of seabirds, and five cold bells.

Five bells ring out.

THEMES

DEATH AND GRIEF

In "Five Bells," a speaker remembers his long-drowned friend, Joe, as vividly as if he'd seen him yesterday, noting details from his "coat with buttons off" to his "gaunt chin." But he also feels as if Joe were separated from him by an impassable "strait" (a narrow channel of water). The dead, the poem suggests, feel both painfully near and painfully out of reach: death makes Joe more vivid in the speaker's mind even as it separates these two friends forever.

The speaker feels that his friend Joe is still with him years after Joe drowned. Even the "unimportant things" Joe used to do feel vivid and memorable: the speaker remembers nights he and Joe spent chit-chatting, a long and dangerous journey the two of them made in a storm through "talons of rain," and simple things like the way Joe looked when he used to tell his "raging tales." The smallest of details stay clear and present, even taking on special importance now that Joe is gone.

Because the speaker's memories of Joe are crystal clear, he feels Joe's absence all the more painfully. In one sense, he feels as if Joe is *right there*, banging on the other side of separating "ports" (that is, doors) or the "speechless panes" of windows. At the same time, he knows that neither he nor Joe can beat those doors down; he'll never hear Joe's voice breaking through. No one can cross the "strait" that separates the living and the dead.

Grief, the poem thus suggests, means being agonizingly and perplexingly separated from someone who in some sense still feels alive. The great pain of mourning a friend is that it seems *impossible* they should be gone; they're still present in one's memory, just out of reach. Perhaps death even makes a person *more* vivid in some ways, loading every little memory with significance.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-129

TIME VS. MEMORY

"Five Bells" is at once an elegy for the speaker's dead friend, Joe, and a meditation on how the passage of time works differently when it comes to memories. The poem's speaker reflects that ordinary clock time, counted out by ticking gears, is "not my time," not the kind of time he lives through. In mourning his friend Joe, the speaker experiences time differently; it's as if, through his memories of his friend, he can travel *outside the bounds* of clock time and into a time when Joe was still alive. Memory, the poem suggests, can often feel deeper and more real than the present moment, carrying people away into the past or allowing them to relive "many lives" in a flash.

The speaker feels this especially keenly as he thinks back on Joe's life, which now only exists in memory. Joe, he reflects, "lives between five bells," in the spaces between the chimes that measure out the hours on a ship. His life is no longer taking place in ordinary time (which always ticks steadily forward at the same rate), but rather in the timelessness of the remembered past. The speaker can fit every memory he has of Joe into the time it takes those five bells to ring.

In fact, the speaker is so carried away by his memories that he spends the bulk of the poem living more in the past than the present, revisiting old memories of how he and Joe used to drink, argue, and travel together. The repeated refrain, "five bells," reminds readers that almost no *clock* time is going by in the present moment: the same boat is marking the same half-hour all through the poem, even as the speaker relives "many lives."

For that reason, the "bumpkin calculus" (that is, the crude math) of a ticking clock can't accurately measure the years the speaker revisits. Both by compressing "many lives" into a few seconds and by leaping effortlessly into the past, the speaker's memory overpowers ordinary clock time.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-129

MEANING AND MEANINGLESSNESS

After the speaker's friend Joe drowns in Sydney Harbor, the speaker finds himself facing terrible questions. Coming to terms with his friend's arbitrary and accidental death, he feels as if "find[ing] an answer" to his questions about why Joe lived at all is the only way he might have a chance of "hear[ing Joe's] voice" ever again. In other words, Joe's senseless death makes the speaker fear he's living in a meaningless world—and worry that he can only recover a belief in an afterlife or a purposeful universe if he can scrape together *some* sense of meaning. Ultimately, the poem suggests that the speaker's huge questions might be unresolvable.

When the speaker asks the dead Joe, "Where have you gone?" only one part of the answer is clear to him. Joe's *body* is certainly lying at the bottom of Sydney Harbor; the "tide is over [him]." But the Joe the speaker remembers is now "only part of an Idea." The notion that the person Joe was has become nothing more than a memory strikes the speaker as almost absurd. He feels he needs to "find / [Joe's] meaning," to understand why it was that Joe lived at all if he was only going to die in an accident as a young man. That is, the speaker feels that he needs answers from the universe (or perhaps God) about why what happened, happened.

If the speaker received such an answer, he thinks, he just might "hear [Joe's] voice" again: he might be able to believe that he and Joe could meet or communicate again, perhaps in an afterlife. Struggle though he might, however, he *can't* "find [the] answer" he's looking for. Nothing on earth can explain why Joe lived and died, or identify "what purpose gave [Joe] breath / Or seized it back." The speaker can only hypothesize that such an answer, if it existed, "might" allow him to believe that he and Joe will meet again.

Dealing with tragedy, the poem thus suggests, can force people to grapple with the idea that life might not *have* a meaning, a purpose, or a design. Mourning can make people long for meaning and doubt its existence at exactly the same time.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 98-108
- Lines 115-118

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-7

Time that is ...
... between five bells.

This poem begins with a reflection on two kinds of time: time as the clock measures it, and time as the speaker experiences it. Clock time, "moved by little fidget wheels" (fussy little gears), is "not my time," the speaker firmly declares. Rather, he's in a kind of time he describes as "the flood that does not flow," a metaphor that suggests a supernaturally still ocean. ("Flood" here means "sea," not "overflowing water.") Unlike clock time, this kind of time doesn't "flow," doesn't move relentlessly forward at a steady rate; unlike clock time, this kind of time isn't "little," but vast as the sea.

In this unmoving "flood," the speaker says, he can live "many lives" in the space "between the double and the single bell / Of a ship's hour"—in other words, in the half-hour interval that marks out a watch (a period of work) on a ship. That image occurs to him as he looks out at a "dark warship" down "below" him in the water of what readers will discover is Sydney Harbor. As this ship's bells ring out, he seems to be in a pensive mood, lost in this mysterious kind of infinite-but-motionless time.

In particular, he's living out "one life" over again, and it isn't his own. It's the life of "Joe, long dead." Readers who are familiar with Kenneth Slessor's life story will know that this "Joe" is a real person: Joe Lynch, a friend of Slessor's who accidentally drowned in Sydney Harbor. No wonder, then, that the speaker is brooding over Joe's life as he looks out over the waters.

This poem will become an elegy for Joe, written in dignified blank verse—lines of unrhymed iambic pentameter. (That means that its lines are built from five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "Between | the dou- | ble and | the sin- | gle bell.")

Joe, the speaker goes on, now "lives between five bells"—a line that suggests that Joe's "life" only goes on in the kind of time that clocks can't measure. He's not even in the half-hour interlude between "a round of bells," but in the space *between* each individual chime that makes up "five bells," the signal that marks either 6:30 p.m., 10:30 p.m., or 2:30 a.m.

Joe, in other words, only lives on in *memory*, which isn't bound by the rules of clock time.

LINES 8-12

Deep and dissolving ...
... upside-down in water.

The speaker turns from his reflections on time to observe the scene before him. He's looking out at Sydney Harbor, perhaps from a bedroom window, noticing "deep and dissolving verticals of light"—wavering moonbeams—casting a dim glow over the scene. There's not enough light here for him to tell the water from the sky; both "pour to one rip of darkness," one big slash of dark.

In this murk, water and sky even seem to switch places. The Harbor itself seems to float "in the air," and the "Cross"—that is, the Southern Cross, a major constellation in the southern hemisphere—"hangs upside-down in water."

All of this imagery suggests reversals and blurred boundaries. Lost in thoughts of "Joe, long dead," the speaker seems to enter

a kind of mirror-world, stepping outside ordinary reality and into his memory.

He notices, too, "Five bells / Coldly rung out in a machine's voice": the electronic bells marking the half-hour on that "dark warship" he mentioned in the first stanza. Their coldness suggests that this kind of clock time—the kind "moved by little fidget wheels"—is emotionless, maybe even unkind. Personified here, those five bells speak out relentlessly, telling the speaker that every second moves him further and further away from the past.

Perhaps these cold bells also speak symbolically of death. Like John Donne's famous bell, they might remind the speaker that everyone is mortal. Every tick of a clock moves everyone alive closer to death.

LINES 13-19

Why do I ...
... its fury heard.

Disoriented by the dark night, chilled by those "five bells," the speaker suddenly reaches out directly to his dead friend Joe in an apostrophe. He sounds almost frustrated as he asks, "Why do I think of you, dead man [...]?" Such thoughts, he feels, are "profitless," just stirring up odd "flukes of thought" from where they should be "anchored in Time." But even his metaphor suggests that being "anchored in Time" can't stop these thoughts from bothering him: if you can drop an anchor into this kind of time, it must be the "flood that does not flow," the vast sea of the past.

In other words, the speaker's thoughts of Joe take him out of clock time and into his memory. Joe is "anchored in Time" in that he's dead—he lived in a specific span of time and no longer takes part in the kind of time that ticks forward, he's stuck in one place. But that stuck-ness doesn't stop him from rising to the speaker's mind.

In fact, Joe doesn't even seem all that stuck! He might be "gone from earth, / Gone even from the meaning of a name" (as the speaker points out, stressing that gone-ness with some emphatic anaphora). "Yet," the speaker feels, "something's there." Some remnant of Joe still seems present to him; like a ghost, it "hits and cries against the ports of space," banging the doors that separate the living and the dead. It even "forms its lips" to shout; in the speaker's imagination, whatever remains of Joe still somehow has a human form, even though he's so completely "gone."

LINES 20-26

Are you shouting ...
... the pygmy strait—

The idea that Joe is both completely "gone" and still "there" captures the speaker's imagination. Now, he wonders if he's thinking of Joe because, somewhere beyond the grave, Joe is thinking of *him*, trying to break through. The imagery he uses here creates something like a scene out of *Wuthering Heights*:

> Are you shouting at me, dead man, squeezing your face
> In agonies of speech on speechless panes?
> Cry louder, beat the windows, bawl your name!

In this vision, the dead Joe is shouting and banging on the other side of "speechless panes," windows that let absolutely no sound through. The speaker wants Joe to go on banging, to make himself heard, to reach out in some way; his intense parallelism on "cry louder, beat the windows, bawl your name" exhorts Joe to do whatever it takes to break through, and makes it sound as if the speaker himself is banging on those windows pretty hard.

But, he goes on, he hears "nothing, nothing" in reply (and note that sad epizeuxis, suggesting that he keeps straining to hear and getting nothing back). Those "speechless panes," in a pun, are also speechless *pains*, the "agonies" of speechlessness.

The only sound is those "five bells," still ringing out the "bumpkin calculus" (or crude math) "of Time." Once again, clock time and memory-time clash. The speaker has been able to make this desperate inner cry to Joe while the original "five bells" were still ringing out. These bells, and the ongoing "life" they mark, "dowse[]" (or snuff out) Joe's "voice."

They snuff out the speaker's cries, too: he can no more reach Joe than Joe can reach him. "There's not a mouth can fly the pygmy strait," the speaker says, using a metaphor that presents the distance between the living and the dead as a tiny ("pygmy") passage of water. It's tiny, of course, because it's perfectly easy to slip between life and death. As Joe's own drowning proved, the journey takes only a moment. But while it's easy to *cross* that passage, it's impossible to *communicate* over it.

LINES 27-37

Nothing except the ...
... Five bells.

Over here on this side of the "speechless windows" that separate the living and the dead, the speaker knows that all that's left of Joe is "the memory of some bones / Long shoved away, and sucked away, in mud." His phrasing here suggests that both Joe's literal bones *and* the speaker's memory of those bones have been "shoved away" into the mud at the bottom of Sydney Harbor—until now, that is. Perhaps the speaker has been doing his best *not* to remember Joe in the years Joe's been rotting away at the bottom of the sea.

Now, though, the speaker is visited by a surge of memories. They're not big memories, just reminders of "unimportant things [Joe] might have done"—or things the speaker "thought [Joe] did," anyway. These are things that Joe himself would have

"forgotten," just as most of the world has forgotten him now: little details of his "looks and words" and the "slops of beer" he drained.

Take a look at the speaker's imagery and repetitions in this miniature portrait of Joe as he once was:

> [...] your coat with buttons off,
> Your gaunt chin and pricked eye, and raging tales
> Of Irish kings and English perfidy,
> And dirtier perfidy of publicans

- The physical details the speaker gives of Joe are just a sketch, an impression of a bony, alert-looking man who didn't pay too much attention to whether his coat had buttons or not.
- Joe's "raging tales," though, get a little more specific. They cast Joe as a rowdy, cantankerous Irishman, remembering the glory days of "Irish kings" and the "perfidy" (or treachery) of the English oppressors.
- When the word "perfidy" returns again a line later, it's even "dirtier perfidy," and it's the perfidy of "publicans"—pub owners who presumably Joe felt cheated him, or perhaps just wouldn't let him have another drink. The only thing worse than the English is an unfriendly bartender.

These memories are vivid, but they're also general. The speaker gives an impressionistic portrait of his spiky, funny friend. But these relatively broad impressions, it will transpire, aren't the only ones down in the mud of the speaker's memory.

This stanza ends with another reminder of time. Those "five bells" are still ringing out; all of these memories of Joe, as the speaker said at the beginning, fit right in "between" five bells, in the little silences between chimes that are still chiming.

LINES 38-49

Then I saw ...
... so you'd found.

The speaker has just finished painting his impressionistic portrait of Joe. Now, with a jolt, he finds himself back in a *specific* memory: "the night we came to Moorebank in slab-dark," the night they made a journey through a terrible storm. The "tumble" of the thunder and the "talons of the rain" come back to the speaker as suddenly as that storm's flashing lightning.

It was, he remembers:

> So dark you bore no body, had no face,
> But a sheer voice that rattled out of air
> (As now you'd cry if I could break the glass),

Perhaps part of the reason he's remembering this journey now is because of what it has in common with his current experience: with "no body" and "no face," the Joe who walked beside him that night was a lot like the Joe who haunts him. The difference was, that Joe had a voice—the voice the speaker imagines he might hear if he could "break the glass" of the "speechless panes" that separate them. In fact, Joe's "sheer" and "rattl[ing]" voice even seems to sound a lot like the noise it makes when one pounds on a window.

Alongside the memory of this specific night come more memories of what that voice said. Take a look at the way the speaker uses alliteration and repetition as he describes how Joe spoke of:

> [...] Milton, melons, and the Rights of Man,
> And blowing flutes, and how Tahitian girls
> Are brown and angry-tongued, and Sydney girls
> Are white and angry-tongued, or so you'd found.

The /m/ sound that links "Milton, melons, and the Rights of Man" puts all these different topics on a level, and sounds rather jaunty besides. Joe seems to have been equally cheery talking about John Milton, Thomas Paine, and the delight of a good melon. (This line also hints at Joe's preoccupations: poetry, politics, and pleasure.)

Joe's tales of "girls" similarly tell readers something about him. The parallelism in these lines suggests that no matter where he went, Tahiti or Sydney, he got to know the ladies—and made them mad, sooner or later.

More and more, Joe comes to life in the speaker's memory as a man of the world, a pleasure-loving, rambling intellectual who didn't take anything terribly seriously.

LINES 50-62

But all I ...
... Five bells.

While the speaker remembers what Joe had to say on their long stormy walk fairly well, he also remembers his confusion at the time. The storm was blowing so loudly, he recalls, that "Milton became melons, melons girls": all Joe's favorite subjects blended into each other until it was as if "fifty mouths [...] were out that night," all shouting at once.

In fact, that night seems to have felt rather confused generally, and perhaps haunted, too. The speaker also recalls feeling as if "in each tree an Ear was bending down," or as if some mysterious creature had just scurried "behind the grass." That capitalized "Ear" might hint at a listening deity of some kind, whereas the unknown scuttling creature feels more like weird wildlife. Either way, there's a sense that Joe and the speaker weren't totally alone out there.

Perhaps most vivid, though, is the speaker's memory of a lightning flash. Listen to the figurative language here:

> When blank and bone-white, like a maniac's thought,
> The naphtha-flash of lightning slit the sky,
> Knifing the dark with deathly photographs.

This image of the lightning-lit landscape suggests wild danger. The simile of the "maniac's thought" evokes the weird, uncanny speed of a lightning flash; the metaphor of the "deathly photographs" captures how lightning seems to freeze a split-second snapshot of a dark landscape. That metaphor also reminds readers that what the speaker describes *now* is something like a photograph, a snapshot of this one wild night out on the road with Joe.

In total, then, this memory unites a clearer picture of Joe—his good humor, his wit, his intelligence—with imagery of mystery, danger, and darkness. No wonder that this memory comes to the speaker: it's not so different from what he's experiencing as he remembers Joe now. Then as now, Joe was just a fractured voice in darkness; then as now, the speaker can only see him in flashes.

The speaker closes out this stanza reflecting that few would have been brave or crazy enough to make this journey. It's only those with "so poor a purse" that they have no other options who'd choose to go "five miles in darkness on a country track" in a thunderstorm. "But when you do," he says, "that's what you think": words that might equally be an apostrophe to Joe or a general statement of what one does in this kind of situation.

His reflections are interrupted by what's almost becoming the poem's refrain. Those same "five bells" are still ringing out. In the world beyond the speaker's memory, no time has passed at all.

LINES 63-69

> *In Melbourne, your ...*
> *... ecstasies of rectitude.*

Now the speaker makes another jump in time and space. He remembers that he and Joe spent time in Melbourne, and that Joe seemed changed then. The way he describes it, Joe had softened somehow; his "appetite" and his "angers" were both gone. The "soft archery of summer rains" had sunk into his very "bones," making them no longer "sharp with rage" but "sodden."

There's a faint hint here that summer rains might not have been all that soaked through Joe. The "wetness" the speaker describes created in Joe a kind of:

> [...] slow damp
> That stuck the leaves of living, snailed the mind,

Joe, in other words, was no longer so quick or so sharp, but squashy, slow, and moist as a snail. These images of wet slowness might draw on the traditional metaphor of wetness as drunkenness: drunken people are said to be "sloshed," alcoholics are sometimes called "soaks."

Perhaps, though, the opposite is true. Maybe Joe was just worn out from hard travels and a long wet summer. He may have just been enjoying the "sodden ecstasies of rectitude" (that is, the soaking-wet delights of upstanding behavior) after a time of fiery, angry, rowdy energy, slowing down and enjoying an unusual-for-him period of quiet.

LINES 70-82

> *I thought of ...*
> *... that I obtained..."*

During Joe's time in Melbourne, he seems not just to have slowed down and softened, but to have gotten a little more reflective. The speaker recalls a journal Joe kept recording his time at "Labassa," a boarding house where he had a cold, dark little room "on top of the tower." He seems to have made the best of it, filling it with:

> [...] 500 books all shapes
> And colours, dealt across the floor
> And over sills and on the laps of chairs;
> Guns, photoes of many differant things
> And differant curioes that I obtained..."

This record of the things Joe collected—books, photos, guns, and curios (or exotic souvenirs)—paints a picture of an inquisitive, adventurous person, interested in learning from both books and the wide world. Notice the misspellings of "photoes," "curioes," and "differant" here, which help to give this diary an authentic tone. This was a dashed-off, personal record, never meant for public consumption. (In fact, Slessor was directly quoting from a diary the real-life Joe showed him here, though whether Joe wrote it or just found it Slessor wasn't sure.)

The diary's private, casual quality is part of what the speaker finds so poignant as he remembers it now. This diary, it turns out, was one of the possessions Joe left behind when he died; its "sawn-off lock" suggests that the speaker had to break into it to read it. He doesn't seem to have gotten much out of the experience besides pain. The journal, he says:

> [...] stayed behind
> With other things you left, all without use,
> All without meaning now, except a sign
> That someone had been living who now was dead:

The parallelism highlighted above, readers might think, protests a little too much in emphasizing just how meaningless and useless Joe's possessions were. The words the speaker quotes clearly *do* have meaning for him, speaking to him in Joe's voice—the voice he laments not being able to hear through the "speechless panes" that separate the living and the dead.

LINES 83-97

In Sydney, by ...
... and sculptured stone.

Yet another time jump carries Joe and the speaker to Sydney, where they used to sit around and "argue[] about blowing up the world" in a dingy room with "pink wallpaper" lit by "penny gaslight." The imagery here reminds readers that the memories the speaker describes are, in a sense, as ghostly as Joe is. By the time Slessor published this poem in 1939, the "gaslight" he remembers was almost completely phased out, replaced by electricity.

By then, the speaker says, Joe was "living backward," inching a little closer to the "breast" every day. This image might suggest either that Joe was moving toward death without knowing it (with the "breast" suggesting a personified Death's embrace), or that Joe was getting so nostalgic that he was regressing, wishing he could return to his mother's breast. Maybe both were true.

Whatever the case, Joe was living in his own memory, vividly and deeply (not unlike the speaker is living now). Joe's family, the speaker remembers, seemed to be "living, all of them"—words that might equally suggest that Joe's stories brought Joe's family to life for the speaker, or that many of Joe's family members were dead.

The most vivid of all these characters was Joe's father, a fiddle-playing stonemason who went blind. Before he lost his eyesight, Joe's father worked in a graveyard, carving "fair monuments / And tablets cut with dreams of piety": that is, tombstones inscribed with hopeful religious messages. In a rather grotesque metaphor, the speaker pictures these tombstones as "funeral-cakes of sweet and sculptured stone," the grimmest possible confections. They must have been beautiful, yes, but they tasted only of death.

Countless examples of Joe's father's elegant art "rest on the bosoms of a thousand men," dead people lying there "in quiet astonishment" that they're dead. The dead, the speaker thinks, never really expect to die; it's just too hard to imagine. Looking at a pretty "funeral-cake" of a tombstone, who can truly imagine their own body down there in the dirt?

Readers might smell an irony in Joe's father's profession. Joe himself never got a tombstone; his body, as the speaker has already said, lies at the bottom of Sydney Harbor.

By presenting Joe as living in his memory with dead family members, this stanza connects the speaker's predicament to Joe's. It also starts to transform this elegy into a *memento mori*, a reminder that death comes to everyone:

- The poor "astonish[ed]" souls lying under their tombstones;
- the man who carved the tombstones;
- the man who remembered the man who carved the tombstones;
- the man who remembers the man who remembered the man who carved the tombstones:
- all are dead now, or will be dead one day, no matter how hard that is for the living to believe or remember.

LINES 98-108

Where have you ...
... of an Idea.

The speaker begins the next stanza with another apostrophe to Joe, asking him, "Where have you gone?" In one sense, he can answer his own question: Joe's *body*, or what's left of it, is certainly at the bottom of Sydney Harbor. In another sense, he truly doesn't know where Joe is. He's lost in "mystery" and "memory"—which the speaker again calls "the flood that does not flow" here.

That repetition draws a symbolic connection between the state of Joe's body (lost, who knows where, at the bottom of the sea) and the state of Joe's remembered life (sunk in that motionless "flood"). The shape of the lines here suggests that both the physical and the intangible parts of Joe are tossed around by waves:

> [...] The tide is over you,
> The turn of midnight water's over you,
> As Time is over you, and mystery,
> And memory, the flood that does not flow.
> [...]
> The tide goes over, the waves ride over you

The parallelism and polysyndeton here give these words a wave-like rhythm, mimicking the turning tides the speaker describes. All these repetitive shapes suggest that there's something relentlessly puzzling about the fact of Joe's death: the speaker just keeps chewing over the mystery of where Joe could have gone, how he can be alive in memory but so completely lost to the world.

Unlike the dead who rest under Joe's father's monuments, the speaker reflects, Joe has "no suburb," no cozy cemetery neighborhood, no "private berth[] of dissolution"—that is, no separate, private grave to rot in. He's all alone down at the bottom of the sea.

Now, the speaker tries to stretch his imagination down to where Joe's body lies:

- Under the water, he imagines, the waves "let their shadows down like shining hair"—a haunting simile that he undermines a moment later by insisting, "but they are Water."
- Similarly, he imagines that "sea-pinks"—a kind of coastal flower—grow between Joe's teeth "like

lilies," then corrects himself again: "but they are Weed." This triple-layered vision cuts away at *two* illusions. Not only do no funereal lilies lie with Joe's body, no flowers do, period—not even fittingly watery ones. Seaweed is all he has.

- Notice, too, the way the speaker capitalizes "Water" and "Weed," giving them an uncompromising weight. Those delicate similes are all well and good, but these are the Facts.

These lines suggest the speaker is struggling against a comforting fantasy. *Perhaps it's beautiful down there*, he seems to hope, before refusing to let himself romanticize the bare, physical reality of Joe's resting place.

He also draws a sharp distinction between where Joe's *body* is and where *Joe* is. That seaweedy corpse isn't Joe, exactly: the Joe the speaker remembers and has been addressing all through this poem is "only part of an Idea." (Note that capitalized "Idea," too: it's as much a fact as the Weed and Water.)

All together, these lines suggest that the speaker is struggling with the sheer strangeness (and gruesomeness) of death. Joe's body is just a bare skeleton wrapped in seaweed under fathoms of water. The "real" Joe, the remembered Joe, is also trapped at the bottom of a sea—the sea of memory.

LINES 109-114

I felt the ...
... feel your hand.

Now, the speaker turns his imagination from Joe's dead body and living memory to the very *moment* of Joe's death, remembering his frantic visions of what Joe must be going through as he drowned. His parallelism here stresses his involuntary empathy for his dying friend:

> I felt the wet push its black thumb-balls in,
> The night you died, I felt your eardrums crack,

These images focus on the terrible *pressure* of the water and even personify it as a cruel and relentless force driving its thumbs into Joe's body.

Beyond those visceral details, the speaker even imagines what it must have been to move from the "agony" of that crushing pressure to the "longer dream" of unconsciousness, and then at last into a "Nothing" beyond time, "neither long nor short"—that is, into the timeless "flood that does not flow," into death and therefore into memory.

Imagine as hard as he can, though, the speaker knows he can't really follow Joe into that experience. Listen to his anaphora here:

> But I was bound, and could not go that way,
> But I was blind, and could not feel your hand.

Those repeated "but"s suggest just how helpless the speaker feels as he tries to reach after Joe. There's no way for a living person to fully imagine death. "Bound" by the limits of his own imagination, the speaker seems to feel almost as if he were physically flailing in the water, trying to "feel [Joe's] hand" to pull him back up again. No rescue, alas, is possible.

LINES 115-118

If I could ...
... hear your voice?

Over the course of this stanza, the speaker has struggled with the idea that he couldn't and can't rescue Joe from oblivion, neither by saving him from drowning nor by remembering him back to life. Now, he tries a final, last-ditch rescue mission.

What if, he asks Joe, he could figure out *why* Joe lived, or why he died? If he could find a "meaning" for Joe's life, "say why [Joe was] here" in the first place, or—biggest question of all—discover "what purpose gave you breath / Or seized it back"—*then* could he "hear [Joe's] voice" again?

These poignant questions suggest that Joe's death leaves the speaker in a serious existential crisis. He's groping for answers to questions that humanity has asked as long as humanity has been around, wondering whether there's a "purpose" that guides human life: perhaps Fate, perhaps a god or gods. If he manages to crack *that* little riddle, he thinks, there's a chance he might be able to break the "speechless panes" that separate him from Joe.

Perhaps part of what he's suggesting here is that he's looking for some kind of *faith*, a belief in a pattern or purpose that might also imply an afterlife, a place where he and Joe could meet again. At any rate, he's searching for any answer that might make Joe's death seem like something more than a meaningless accident.

Of course, there's no way the speaker is going to unravel these questions and his final apostrophe to Joe—"might I not hear your voice?"—will go forever unanswered.

LINES 119-129

I looked out ...
... Five bells.

The poem's final stanza begins with an abrupt change of tense. While the poem has spent a lot of time in the speaker's past-tense memories, it's also been essentially *set* in the present. The speaker began the poem describing what he sees in front of him in the moment: "the Harbour floats / In the air," "Night and water / Pour to one rip of darkness."

Now, he looks out on that same scene again—but in the past tense. Once more, he paints a detailed picture of the scene, but a remembered one:

> I looked out my window in the dark
> At waves with diamond quills and combs of light
> That arched their mackerel-backs and smacked the sand
> In the moon's drench,

These lines suggest that the speaker is now *looking back* on the night he sat and remembered Joe. He's been jolted not just out of his fruitless attempts to reach Joe, but out of that evening itself.

His imagery here suggests that, in spite of all his pain and confusion, this was a beautiful night. He describes the waves as something like elegant fish, patterned with "diamond quills and combs of light" and leaping with arched backs like "mackerel" to land on the sand—a metaphor that suggests that the endless movement of the waves is *lovely* as well as sad.

The speaker personifies the whole remembered landscape here, imagining that the ships in the Harbor are "asleep," and that the buoys are "tossing their fireballs wearily each to each" (an evocative way to describe the way their lights flash in sequence). All these oddly lively (if sleepy) visions might offer some consolation to a speaker who'd been agonizing over whether the world has any guiding "purpose." The world itself seems alive and purposeful here.

But if the speaker feels consoled, it's only faintly. He's still "tr[ying] to hear [Joe's] voice"—and all he's getting back is normal Harbor sounds, from a "boat's whistle" to the "squeal" of seagulls. The last thing he remembers hearing, in fact, is those persistent "five bells," which get the poem's emphatic last word:

> [...] bells,
> Five bells. Five bells coldly ringing out.
> *Five bells.*

The whole poem has taken place, these concluding repetitions insist, in the time it takes for those five bells to ring. All the speaker's memories of Joe, all his big questions about the meaning of life, went past "between five bells."

However, the movement into the past tense here at the end of the poem suggests that the kind of time those bells measure out, the "time that is moved by little fidget wheels," can't be evaded forever. Finally stymied by impossible questions, the speaker falls back into clock time here at the end of the poem—the time that will eventually carry *him* across the "strait" that separates the living and the dead, to the only place where his questions might finally be answered.

SYMBOLS

THE RINGING BELLS

The ship's bells that ring out all across the poem symbolize both time and mortality. Used to mark out the clock time, this bell reminds the speaker that, through the power of his memory, he can live "many lives" in a few seconds: the kind of steady, forward-moving time this bell records is "not [his] time."

In another sense, though, there's no escaping the bell's kind of time. Every time those bells ring, the speaker is a little closer to joining Joe in the land of the dead. Here, the poem is drawing on old, old symbolism. Because of their association with both time and churches (where bells might be rung to mark a funeral), bells are traditional images of death.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-7:** "Between the double and the single bell / Of a ship's hour, between a round of bells / From the dark warship riding there below, / I have lived many lives, and this one life / Of Joe, long dead, who lives between five bells."
- **Lines 9-10:** "Five bells / Coldly rung out in a machine's voice."
- **Lines 23-24:** "only bells, / Five bells, the bumpkin calculus of Time."
- **Line 37:** "Five bells."
- **Line 62:** "Five bells."
- **Lines 127-128:** "bells, / Five bells. Five bells coldly ringing out."
- **Line 129:** "Five bells."

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

Much of this poem takes the form of an apostrophe to the speaker's dead friend, Joe. By speaking directly to someone who can't answer, the speaker suggests the almost surreal frustration and confusion of grief.

Joe remains a vivid presence in the speaker's memory. The speaker recalls how Joe used to rant and rave about "Irish kings," "English perfidy," and the "dirtier perfidy of publicans": the English might have been treacherous, Joe felt, but there was no one more treacherous than a pub owner refusing you one last drink. Joe's rowdy, funny character comes through in the speaker's memories of his "coat with buttons off" and his "gaunt chin and pricked eye," too. This was clearly an alert, intelligent man with a good sense of humor—and a person who didn't bother too much with little details like whether or not his

coat buttoned shut.

With this detailed portrait in his memory, it's no wonder that the speaker feels he should be able to address Joe directly. But whenever he calls out to that long-lost "you," he's frustrated to find that there's no answer—only the persistent question of whether Joe's spirit is still out there somewhere. He even starts goading that imagined spirit into speaking louder:

> Are you shouting at me, dead man, squeezing your face
> In agonies of speech on speechless panes?
> Cry louder, beat the windows, bawl your name!

Joe, of course, never answers. By presenting this elegy as a conversation with someone who can't reply, the poem suggests that there's something *absurd* about death: how, the speaker seems to wonder, can he picture everything Joe said and did so clearly, but not be able to reach him?

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-16:** "Why do I think of you, dead man, why thieve / These profitless lodgings from the flukes of thought / Anchored in Time? You have gone from earth, / Gone even from the meaning of a name;"
- **Lines 20-22:** "Are you shouting at me, dead man, squeezing your face / In agonies of speech on speechless panes? / Cry louder, beat the windows, bawl your name!"
- **Line 25:** "Your echoes die, your voice is dowsed by Life,"
- **Lines 29-31:** "And unimportant things you might have done, / Or once I thought you did; but you forgot. / And all have now forgotten"
- **Lines 33-36:** "Your gaunt chin and pricked eye, and raging tales / Of Irish kings and English perfidy, / And dirtier perfidy of publicans / Groaning to God from Darlinghurst."
- **Lines 40-49:** "The night we came to Moorebank in slab-dark, / So dark you bore no body, had no face, / But a sheer voice that rattled out of air / (As now you'd cry if I could break the glass), / A voice that spoke beside me in the bush, / Loud for a breath or bitten off by wind, / Of Milton, melons, and the Rights of Man, / And blowing flutes, and how Tahitian girls / Are brown and angry-tongued, and Sydney girls / Are white and angry-tongued, or so you'd found."
- **Lines 58-61:** "There's not so many with so poor a purse / Or fierce a need, must fare by night like that, / Five miles in darkness on a country track, / But when you do, that's what you think."
- **Lines 63-74:** "In Melbourne, your appetite had gone, / Your angers too; they had been leeched away / By the soft archery of summer rains / And the sponge-paws of wetness, the slow damp / That stuck the leaves of living, snailed the mind, / And showed your bones, that had been sharp with rage, / The sodden ecstasies of rectitude. / I thought of what you'd written in faint ink, / Your journal with the sawn-off lock, that stayed behind / With other things you left, all without use, / All without meaning now, except a sign / That someone had been living who now was dead:"
- **Lines 86-87:** "But you were living backward, so each night / You crept a moment closer to the breast,"
- **Lines 98-108:** "Where have you gone? The tide is over you, / The turn of midnight water's over you, / As Time is over you, and mystery, / And memory, the flood that does not flow. / You have no suburb, like those easier dead / In private berths of dissolution laid— / The tide goes over, the waves ride over you / And let their shadows down like shining hair, / But they are Water; and the sea-pinks bend / Like lilies in your teeth, but they are Weed; / And you are only part of an Idea."
- **Lines 110-111:** "The night you died, I felt your eardrums crack, / And the short agony, the longer dream,"
- **Lines 114-118:** "But I was blind, and could not feel your hand. / If I could find an answer, could only find / Your meaning, or could say why you were here / Who now are gone, what purpose gave you breath / Or seized it back, might I not hear your voice?"

IMAGERY

The poem's imagery follows the speaker as he travels between the present and the past.

For instance, listen to how the speaker describes the stormy night he and Joe spent on the road to Moorebank:

> When blank and bone-white, like a maniac's thought,
> The naphtha-flash of lightning slit the sky,
> Knifing the dark with deathly photographs.

Here, the speaker captures the way a flash of lightning seems to create a frozen "snapshot" in the dark, lighting everything up for a fraction of a second, like a strobe. This is at once a vivid image of what lightning looks and feels like in the moment *and* an acknowledgment that this image itself is a kind of photograph, a record of something that happened long ago. The speaker's memory of this moment might be sharp and lively as if he were still there, but it's still a memory.

His memories of Joe himself have a similar snapshot-like quality. He recalls Joe's "gaunt chin and pricked eye" (two details that help to paint a picture of Joe as a lean, sharp character), and recalls an argument they had "by the spent aquarium-flare / Of penny gaslight on pink wallpaper." These images illuminate both Joe and the world he and the speaker used to live in: by the time Slessor wrote this poem, "gaslight" was long gone.

When the speaker pulls himself away from his memories and back into the present, his imagery is just as evocative and ghostly:

> Deep and dissolving verticals of light
> Ferry the falls of moonshine down. Five bells
> Coldly rung out in a machine's voice. Night and water
> Pour to one rip of darkness, the Harbour floats
> In the air, the Cross hangs upside-down in water.

Here, the present moment feels eerie and dreamlike. In the night, the sea and sky seem to blend into each other, Sydney Harbor looks as if it's floating in the resultant mass of darkness, and the constellations are turned upside-down in their reflections. On the one hand, this is just a precise picture of a dark night. But it also gets at the speaker's feeling that he's a little bit unstuck in time, disoriented and turned around, as he thinks of his dead friend. The boundaries in this scene are as fuzzy as the boundary between past and present in his memory.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-12:** "Deep and dissolving verticals of light / Ferry the falls of moonshine down. Five bells / Coldly rung out in a machine's voice. Night and water / Pour to one rip of darkness, the Harbour floats / In the air, the Cross hangs upside-down in water."
- **Lines 32-34:** "your coat with buttons off, / Your gaunt chin and pricked eye, and raging tales / Of Irish kings and English perfidy,"
- **Lines 38-42:** "I heard the thunder / Tumble, and felt the talons of the rain / The night we came to Moorebank in slab-dark, / So dark you bore no body, had no face, / But a sheer voice that rattled out of air"
- **Lines 44-45:** "A voice that spoke beside me in the bush, / Loud for a breath or bitten off by wind,"
- **Lines 55-57:** "When blank and bone-white, like a maniac's thought, / The naphtha-flash of lightning slit the sky, / Knifing the dark with deathly photographs."
- **Lines 64-69:** "they had been leeched away / By the soft archery of summer rains / And the sponge-paws of wetness, the slow damp / That stuck the leaves of living, snailed the mind, / And showed your bones, that had been sharp with rage, / The sodden ecstasies of rectitude."
- **Lines 70-71:** "what you'd written in faint ink, / Your journal with the sawn-off lock"
- **Lines 83-84:** "by the spent aquarium-flare / Of penny gaslight on pink wallpaper,"
- **Lines 109-110:** "I felt the wet push its black thumb-balls in, / The night you died, I felt your eardrums crack,"
- **Lines 120-128:** "At waves with diamond quills and combs of light / That arched their mackerel-backs and smacked the sand / In the moon's drench, that straight enormous glaze, / And ships far off asleep, and Harbour-buoys / Tossing their fireballs wearily each to each, / And tried to hear your voice, but all I heard / Was a boat's whistle, and the scraping squeal / Of seabirds' voices far away, and bells, / Five bells. Five bells coldly ringing out."

METAPHOR

Metaphors help to create the poem's eerie, dreamy atmosphere.

Perhaps one of the most important metaphors here is the speaker's image of the "flood that does not flow," which paints memory as a deep and unmoving sea. Unlike the kind of "time that is moved by little fidget wheels"—that is, clock time, marked by the ticking of gears—this kind of time doesn't move at all. The speaker can revisit the deep waters of his past any time he chooses, and he'll find it exactly where he left it.

This image also connects memory to Sydney Harbor itself, where Joe's body lies drowned. In more ways than one, the metaphor suggests, Joe remains at the bottom of a still sea.

The speaker also resorts to metaphor as he tries to describe the separation between the living and the dead:

- The "ports of space" (that is, mysterious celestial doors) and the "speechless panes" of sound-deadening windows lie between him and Joe, he says, and no matter how hard either one of them bangs on those doors and windows, they can't communicate with each other.
- Only a "pygmy strait" (a tiny channel of water) separates the living from the dead, he reflects. But even though one can cross this strait easily, traveling from life to death in an instant, it's impossible to *communicate* across it.
- The best the speaker can do is to imaginatively empathize with Joe, feeling in his own body how the "wet push[ed] its black thumb-balls in" to Joe's flesh—a creepy moment of personification that suggests he almost feels the Harbor *murdered* Joe.

Other metaphors, meanwhile, simply bring the speaker's experiences to life. When he and Joe made a risky journey through a storm, for instance, they felt "the talons of the rain" clawing at them, as if the rain were a raptor. And now, as he looks out his window, he sees personified waves "arch[ing] their mackerel-backs" to land on the shore, diving like fishes.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "my Time, the flood that does not flow"
- **Line 7:** "who lives between five bells."
- **Lines 8-12:** "Deep and dissolving verticals of light / Ferry

the falls of moonshine down. Five bells / Coldly rung out in a machine's voice. Night and water / Pour to one rip of darkness, the Harbour floats / In the air,"

- **Line 18:** "the ports of space"
- **Lines 20-21:** "squeezing your face / In agonies of speech on speechless panes"
- **Line 24:** "Five bells, the bumpkin calculus of Time."
- **Line 25:** "Your echoes die, your voice is dowsed by Life,"
- **Line 26:** "There's not a mouth can fly the pygmy strait—"
- **Line 39:** "felt the talons of the rain"
- **Lines 52-53:** "And fifty mouths, it seemed, were out that night, / And in each tree an Ear was bending down,"
- **Lines 55-57:** "When blank and bone-white, like a maniac's thought, / The naphtha-flash of lightning slit the sky, / Knifing the dark with deathly photographs."
- **Lines 64-69:** "they had been leeched away / By the soft archery of summer rains / And the sponge-paws of wetness, the slow damp / That stuck the leaves of living, snailed the mind, / And showed your bones, that had been sharp with rage, / The sodden ecstasies of rectitude."
- **Lines 83-84:** "the spent aquarium-flare / Of penny gaslight on pink wallpaper,"
- **Lines 86-87:** "But you were living backward, so each night / You crept a moment closer to the breast,"
- **Line 97:** "These funeral-cakes of sweet and sculptured stone."
- **Line 101:** "And memory, the flood that does not flow."
- **Lines 102-103:** "You have no suburb, like those easier dead / In private berths of dissolution laid—"
- **Line 109:** "I felt the wet push its black thumb-balls in,"
- **Lines 113-114:** "But I was bound, and could not go that way, / But I was blind, and could not feel your hand."
- **Lines 120-124:** "At waves with diamond quills and combs of light / That arched their mackerel-backs and smacked the sand / In the moon's drench, that straight enormous glaze, / And ships far off asleep, and Harbour-buoys / Tossing their fireballs wearily each to each,"

PARALLELISM

Dense parallelism makes the speaker sound thoughtful and reflective, as if he's turning ideas over carefully in his head.

For example, the speaker often uses parallelism to build on or revise his first thoughts. Listen to what happens when he wonders why he's thinking of Joe, for instance:

> [...] You have gone from earth,
> Gone even from the meaning of a name;
> Yet something's there, yet something forms its lips

Here, parallelism intensifies the speaker's first point: Joe isn't just "gone from earth," he's so far "gone" that his name doesn't even exactly apply to him anymore. When the speaker speaks to "Joe," in other words, he's speaking to someone who in a sense doesn't exist at all.

"Yet something's there," the speaker says. The anaphora on "yet" in line 17 makes it feel as if the speaker is concentrating hard, trying for a glimpse of what might remain of Joe beyond this world. First he can imagine only a "something"; then just a little more clearly, a something with "lips."

Begging this ghostly Joe to contact him, he uses a series of parallel calls:

> Cry louder, beat the windows, bawl your name!

All those violent verbs in a row encourage Joe to *fight* to be heard through the locked "ports" that separate the living and the dead.

It's all to no avail, of course. The speaker can imagine his way into Joe's experiences, but can't follow him past the boundaries of death, no matter how far he stretches:

> I felt the wet push its black thumb-balls in,
> The night you died, I felt your eardrums crack,
> And the short agony, the longer dream,
> The Nothing that was neither long nor short;
> But I was bound, and could not go that way,
> But I was blind, and could not feel your hand.

The intense parallelism and anaphora in this passage evoke the speaker's empathy with Joe, stressing that he "felt" what Joe did on the night he drowned, from dying "agony" to unconscious "dream" to deathly "Nothing." None of this empathy, however, lets him follow Joe into that Nothing: "bound" and "blind," he's stuck where he is.

The emphatic anaphora of those last two lines in particular feels as formal as a repentant prayer, suggesting that the speaker feels a little guilty that he couldn't save his friend—and that his friend arbitrarily died while he lives on.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Between"
- **Line 4:** "between"
- **Lines 10-12:** "Night and water / Pour to one rip of darkness, the Harbour floats / In the air, the Cross hangs upside-down in water."
- **Lines 15-16:** "gone from earth, / Gone even from the meaning of a name"
- **Line 17:** "Yet something's there, yet something forms its lips"
- **Line 22:** "Cry louder, beat the windows, bawl your name!"
- **Line 28:** "shoved away," "sucked away"

- **Lines 30-31:** "you forgot. / And all have now forgotten"
- **Line 32:** "your"
- **Line 33:** "Your"
- **Line 38:** "I saw," "I heard"
- **Line 41:** "bore no body, had no face"
- **Lines 47-49:** "how Tahitian girls / Are brown and angry-tongued, and Sydney girls / Are white and angry-tongued,"
- **Line 67:** "stuck," "snailed"
- **Line 68:** "showed"
- **Lines 72-73:** "all without use, / All without meaning"
- **Lines 81-82:** "different things / And differant curioes"
- **Lines 98-100:** "The tide is over you, / The turn of midnight water's over you, / As Time is over you,"
- **Line 104:** "The tide goes over, the waves ride over you"
- **Line 109:** "I felt"
- **Line 110:** "I felt"
- **Lines 111-112:** "And the short agony, the longer dream, / The Nothing that was neither long nor short;"
- **Lines 113-114:** "But I was bound, and could not go that way, / But I was blind, and could not feel your hand."

REPETITION

Repetitions reflect this poem's interest in memory, suggesting that the steady forward tick of the clock isn't the only way that people experience time.

The most distinctive repetition here evokes the ringing of a ship's bells out in Sydney Harbor. The whole poem takes place at "five bells"—a marker of nautical time that rings out at 18:30 (6:30 p.m.), 22:30 (10:30 p.m.), and 02:30 (2:30 a.m.). The speaker's depiction of the darkly moonlit harbor suggests that the poem must begin with either the 10:30 or the 2:30 chime. Besides lending the poem its title, this chime recurs and recurs as a kind of refrain at the end of lines, reminding readers that everything the speaker thinks and describes here can fit "between five bells":

- Perhaps all the poem's thoughts and feelings fit into a single five-bell chime—a matter of seconds.
- And perhaps the speaker is sitting and thinking for longer—between the 10:30 and 2:30 chimes, say.

Either way, the speaker says, "many lives" can fit into those small gaps of time. His repetition of the word "five bells" itself evokes the insistent chime of the bell (and reminds readers that this bell, symbolically speaking, tolls for the speaker just as it tolled for Joe: he'll join Joe in death one day).

Another important repetition similarly draws attention to the speaker's ideas about memory. He metaphorically refers to memory as "the flood that does not flow" twice in the poem, driving home the point that memory doesn't obey the law of the bells. Clock time always flows forward; memory "does not flow" at all, but holds still.

Other moments of repetition are either comical or emphatic:

- When Joe curses "English **perfidy** / And dirtier **perfidy** of publicans," for instance, the diacope suggests that he sees unfriendly pub owners as even worse than the treacherous English who oppressed his Irish ancestors.
- And when the speaker hears "**nothing, nothing**," his epizeuxis makes it clear that no matter how much he cries out to the dead Joe, he knows he's never going to get an answer.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Time that is moved by little fidget wheels / Is not my Time, the flood that does not flow."
- **Line 3:** "bell"
- **Line 4:** "bells"
- **Lines 6-7:** "I have lived many lives, and this one life / Of Joe, long dead, who lives between five bells"
- **Line 9:** "Five bells"
- **Line 23:** "nothing, nothing"
- **Lines 23-24:** "bells, / Five bells"
- **Line 34:** "perfidy"
- **Line 35:** "perfidy"
- **Line 37:** "Five bells."
- **Line 40:** "dark"
- **Line 41:** "dark"
- **Lines 62-62:** " / Five bells."
- **Line 101:** "the flood that does not flow."
- **Lines 127-128:** "bells, / Five bells. Five bells coldly ringing out."
- **Line 129:** "Five bells."

VOCABULARY

Fidget wheels (Line 1) - In other words, the tiny gears that run a clock.

Flood (Line 2, Line 101) - The ocean.

The Cross (Line 12) - That is, the Southern Cross, one of the most prominent constellations in the southern hemisphere.

Profitless lodgings (Line 14) - Useless things lodged in the speaker's memory.

Flukes of thought (Line 14) - That is, arbitrary, chance-driven moments of thought.

Bawl (Line 22) - Howl, cry out.

Bumpkin (Line 24) - Here, the speaker uses a word that's usually a noun ("bumpkin" typically means a rustic, countrified kind of person) as an adjective, meaning rude, crude, or

unrefined.

Dowsed (Line 25) - That is, "doused," quenched or put out (like a candle flame).

Pygmy strait (Line 26) - That is, the tiny passage of water. "Pygmy," used as an adjective, means "very small" (though as a noun it's also a term for a group of African tribespeople); a "strait" is a channel linking two larger bodies of water.

Slops (Lines 31-32) - Dregs, remnants.

Your gaunt chin and pricked eye (Line 33) - That is, "Your bony chin and alert eye."

Perfidy (Lines 33-35) - Deceit; treacherous behavior.

Publicans (Line 35) - People who run pubs.

Slab-dark (Line 40) - This invented term suggests a darkness as thick as a slab of rock—or perhaps the kind of darkness you'd find in a room sealed off with a slab of rock, like a tomb.

Naphtha-flash (Line 56) - "Naphtha" is a kind of volatile, flammable oil; this metaphor compares lightning to a sudden explosion.

Leeched (Line 64) - Gradually drained.

The sodden ecstasies of rectitude (Line 69) - Taking this line word by word:

- "Sodden" means soaked through.
- "Ecstasies" means trance-like frenzies of joy, madness, or strong feeling in general.
- "Rectitude" means good, upstanding behavior.

Put it all together, and this line suggests that the speaker's friend was calmed by the rain, but perhaps a little maddened, too—behaving *too* well.

"Photoes of many differant things" (Lines 81-82) - The misspellings of "photos" and "different" here captures the speaker's friend's own language in his journal.

Curioes (Line 82) - That is, "curios," interesting or exotic souvenirs.

The spent aquarium-flare / Of penny gaslight (Lines 83-84) - This metaphor describes the light of a gas lamp as low and watery, like light seen through an aquarium.

Graveyard mason (Lines 92-94) - That is, a stonecarver who works in a graveyard, making tombstones and monuments to the dead.

Private berths of dissolution (Lines 102-103) - That is, graves of their own. A "berth" is a bunk; "dissolution" means decay.

Sea-pinks (Lines 106-107) - A kind of flower that grows near the ocean.

Thumb-balls (Line 109) - The fleshy pads of the thumbs.

Quills (Line 120) - Feathers, or fabric folded into a feathery shape. Either way, the speaker is describing a feathery pattern of light on the waves.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Five Bells" is an elegy, a lament for the speaker's dead friend Joe. It's written in 12 irregular stanzas of stately blank verse (unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter), interrupted by an occasional short line of what could almost be stage directions, indicators that "Five bells" have rung out.

Blank verse has a long pedigree; readers might recognize this rhythm from Shakespeare or Milton. Choosing this form, Slessor gives Joe's accidental drowning dignity and gravity. As the speaker desperately tries to find some kind of meaning in his friend's death, this traditional form gently reminds readers that mourners have struggled with this same dilemma for centuries.

METER

"Five Bells" is written in blank verse—unrhymed iambic pentameter. That means that each of its lines uses five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in line 18:

> And hits | and cries | against | the ports | of space,

Plenty of poems written in iambic pentameter vary this pulsing rhythm to create a more conversational tone—or, on the other hand, to create drama. Slessor uses such a variation in the very first lines. Listen to the difference in lines 1 and 2:

> *Time that | is moved | by lit- | tle fid- | get wheels*
> *Is not | my Time, | the flood | that does | not flow.*

The poem begins with a trochee, the opposite foot of an iamb, with a DUM-da rhythm. That means that the poem's important first word—"Time"—hits hard. That first trochee also disrupts the steady meter just as the speaker's memories slice against the mechanical tick-tock of clock time.

In line 2, there's (arguably) a spondee on the second foot, or two stressed beats in a row: "my Time." This second disruption calls attention the poem's idea that there are different kinds of time, and the speaker is experiencing something different from regular clock time here.

Variations like this appear throughout the poem, adding interest, intensity, and emphasis to important moments.

RHYME SCHEME

"Five Bells" is written in blank verse and thus doesn't use a rhyme scheme. Besides making this poem part of a grand tradition of blank verse poetry, the lack of rhyme here fits with the speaker's grief-stricken reflections on his lost friend. A rhyme scheme might feel a little too neat and orderly in a poem

about the way that memory works against the steady march of clock time.

SPEAKER

The speaker is a representation of Kenneth Slessor himself. This poem is an elegy for Slessor's real-life friend, a man named Joe Lynch whom Slessor got to know when the two worked as journalists. At the height of the Roaring '20s, the two became drinking buddies and stalwart companions. The speaker's tales of Joe's fiddle-playing stonemason father and Joe's drunken rages against the perfidious English are all true.

Joe accidentally drowned in Sydney Harbor in 1927. As this pained, autobiographical poem suggests, the waste and arbitrariness of Joe's death left the grieving Slessor struggling with unanswerable questions about whether life had any meaning at all.

SETTING

This poem is set around Sydney Harbor—and under it. The speaker sits in his room looking out on this important Australian port. In the moonlight, he sees a vista so dark that the sea and the sky blend into "one rip of darkness." "Five bells" ring out three times over the course of the poem, marking the passing hours on the moored ships. Readers with a little nautical know-how can thus even figure out what time the poem takes place: it must be either 10:30 at night or 2:30 in the morning.

Looking out on the water, the speaker imagines what he knows is down there: Joe's bare bones, now lying beneath the moving "shadows" and "weed" of the dark harbor. The speaker travels to the past, too, remembering Joe's abandoned lodgings and the room where he and Joe used to have friendly arguments by "penny gaslight."

The mind, the poem's setting suggests, isn't bound by time or space; memory allows the speaker to travel beyond the kind of mechanical clock time measured by those echoing "five bells."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Kenneth Slessor (1901-1971) was one of Australia's most influential poets, known for steering Australian poetry away from the "bush ballads" (a genre of poetry that depicted life in undeveloped parts of Australia in simple, rhyming verse) and towards the experimental verse of modernism.

Modernism, which arose in response to the rapidly shifting landscape of the early 20th century, celebrated artistic experimentation and moved away from rigid formal constraints. Slessor's evocative imagery and experimental techniques are in keeping with modernist poet Ezra Pound's injunction to "make it new."

While Slessor often wrote about world-weariness and disillusionment, he also celebrated the beauty of living in the moment. Even his heaviest subject matter is often tempered by irony and an insistent love of life.

Slessor spent most of his life living near the sea in Sydney, Australia, and his poems frequently feature ocean imagery. This poem is an elegy for his friend Joe Lynch, who died in a freak accident, falling overboard on a stormy night. Collected in Slessor's 1939 book *Five Bells: XX Poems*, it quickly became famous and beloved across Australia.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Slessor got to know Joe Lynch when the two of them worked as journalists for the magazine *Smith's Weekly*. Lynch was a rowdy, lively man, an artist and writer, the son of a family of artistic Irish immigrants. (He's even immortalized in more than one work of art: his brother used him as a model for this statue of a smirking satyr.)

Lynch and Slessor became fast friends and drinking buddies, and all the anecdotes that Slessor records in this poem are based on fact. He and Joe indeed made a perilous night journey to Moorebank, talked of Joe's blind stonemason father, and "argued about blowing up the world" in Sydney (Lynch was, Slessor recalled, a bit of a nihilist).

Lynch died when he fell off a ferry crossing Sydney Harbor one May night in 1927. It's speculated that bottles of beer he'd stashed in his coat pockets weighed him down. His body was never found.

This sudden, shocking loss troubled Slessor for a long time. Still grieving and chewing over what had happened, he'd begin writing what would become "Five Bells" eight years later in 1935. He would stash the poem unseen in a desk drawer for some years after that yet. This intimate poem, readers might imagine, was as haunting to write as to read.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Slessor's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/kenneth-slessor)
- The Poem Set to Music — Listen to a musical version of the poem. (https://youtu.be/8zh43kAvu7c)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/3z65SJx4A-I)

- Slessor's Legacy — Learn about how Slessor's work continues to influence Australian artists. (https://www.theguardian.com/culture/australia-culture-blog/2013/sep/06/poetry-classicalmusicandopera)
- The Story of Joe Lynch — Learn more about Joe Lynch, the friend Slessor addresses in this elegy. (https://quadrant.org.au/magazine/2012/10/the-life-and-death-of-joe-lynch/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER KENNETH SLESSOR POEMS

- Beach Burial
- Sleep
- William Street

HOW TO CITE

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