In Romney Marsh

POEM TEXT

As I went down to Dymchurch Wall,
I heard the South sing o'er the land;
I saw the yellow sunlight fall
On knolls where Norman churches stand.

And ringing shrilly, taut and lithe,
Within the wind a core of sound,
The wire from Romney town to Hythe
Along its airy journey wound.

A veil of purple vapour flowed
And trailed its fringe along the Straits;
The upper air like sapphire glowed:
And roses filled Heaven's central gates.

Masts in the offing wagged their tops;
The swinging waves pealed on the shore;
The saffron beach, all diamond drops
And beads of surge, prolonged the roar.

As I came up from Dymchurch Wall,
I saw above the Downs' low crest
The crimson brands of sunset fall,
Flicker and fade from out the west.

Night sank: like flakes of silver fire
The stars in one great shower came down;
Shrill blew the wind; and shrill the wire
Rang out from Hythe to Romney town.

The darkly shining salt sea drops
Streamed as the waves clashed on the shore;
The beach, with all its organ stops
Pealing again, prolonged the roar.

SUMMARY

I went for a walk by the Dymchurch sea wall, hearing the south wind blow over the land like a song. The sun's yellow light illuminated the small hills where old churches, built by the Normans, still stand.

And ringing out harshly, tight and thin, from deep inside the wind, was the telegraph wire between Romney and Hythe, running its winding course through the air.

The sky was covered by a mist of purple, the edges of which dragged along behind it through the coastal waters. The air above this mist glowed like a rich blue jewel, and the entrance to the heavens was filled with the rosy hues of sunset.

The masts of ships in the distance fluttered like dogs wagging their tails. The waves swung back and forth against the shoreline, their roar echoing off the yellow beach, which was filled with jewel-like droplets of water and foam.

Walking by that Dymchurch wall, I looked out over the low rides of the surrounding countryside. Deep red light fell in flickers across the earth and then faded away as the sun set in the west.

Then night fell, the stars spilling across the sky all at once in a burst of a silver flame. The wind blew harshly, and the telegraph wire kept making those shrill sounds all the way from Hythe to Romney.

The dark, gleaming droplets of salty sea water streamed through the scene as the waves smashed against the coast. The beach, like some great organ instrument, rang out again, making the roar of the water linger.

THEMES

NATURE AND HUMANITY

"In Romney Marsh" marvels at nature's beauty and power. Throughout the poem, nature creates an awe-inspiring spectacle: the speaker walks over the Romney wetlands in southeast England, struck by the majestic colors of the sunset, the fearsome roar of the sea, and the "silver fire" of the night sky. Even the telegraph wires seem to sing with the wind, while the ships at sea look tiny and tame within this larger scene. Altogether, these images imply that it's nature, not humanity, that really holds all the power in this world.

During the speaker's evening walk, nature puts on an incredible display that the speaker describes in otherworldly terms. "Yellow sunlight" soon turns into "a veil of purple vapour" and a "sapphire" glow. "Roses" seem to fill the sky, which the speaker calls "Heaven's central gates." The beach looks "saffron," and the water like "diamond[s]." When "crimson brands of sunset" give way to the night sky, the view is no less sublime: "like flakes of silver fire / The stars in one great shower came down."

But nature isn't just beautiful in this poem—it's a little frightening, too. This scene offers more than pretty colors: it offers a display of nature's vast power. The wind blows "shrilly":

it's harsh, noisy, and unpleasant. The sea "surge[s]" and "roar[s]"; waves "swing[]" and "clash[]" violently on the shore. The beach seems like some great instrument played by nature's hands.

In short, nature seems to dwarf the human world. Humanity might build its towns and make advances in its technological know-how, but those achievements still seem small on a day like this. The poem begins by mentioning a sea wall ("Dymchurch Wall"): a subtle reminder of nature's power to erode or engulf human creations. The wind makes the telegraph wires ring with a "shrill" sound; nature exerts a form of control over this fragile bit of human infrastructure. Again, the image hints at nature's wider capacity for violence and destruction. The masts of the nearby ships (also human technology) seem to "wag[]" in the wind like dog tails. It's as if they're pets, and nature is their master.

Even though nothing bad happens, then, the speaker's walk demonstrates the contrary sides of the natural world. Nature can be staggeringly beautiful, the poem implies, but it's terrifyingly powerful at the same time.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-28

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

As I went down to Dymchurch Wall,
I heard the South sing o'er the land;
I saw the yellow sunlight fall
On knolls where Norman churches stand.

The poem's speaker is taking an evening walk on the southeast coast of England, specifically across the wetland area of Romney Marsh. It's a beautiful place with quintessentially English features: Norman churches, rolling hills, and a dramatic coastline. For the most part, the speaker aims to capture the awe-inspiring sights, sounds, and sensations of a glorious sunset, making for a poem thick with descriptive imagery.

First, the speaker goes by the Dymchuch sea wall, built to protect against flooding (much of the Romney Marsh lies below sea level). Right away, then, the poem hints at nature's capacity for destruction—and humanity's (perhaps futile) attempts to keep nature's might in check.

Next, the speaker hears "the South"—that is, the wind blowing from the south—"sing[ing]" over the landscape. This personification imbues wind with agency and testifies to its beauty: the wind's movement fills the landscape with music.

The speaker also sees "yellow sunlight." This phrase might sound a bit redundant, but it also conveys just how vivid and bright this light is. The sun's rays illuminate nearby "knolls" (a.k.a. small hills), upon which "Norman churches stand." The Normans conquered England in 1066, bringing with them their style of religious architecture (known as Romanesque). Even though these churches still stand, this reference to distant history hints at humanity's ultimate fragility: the buildings might still be there, but the Normans, once so powerful, no longer rule over England.

The first stanza establishes the poem's form, meter, and rhyme scheme, all of which are typical of the era in which the poem was written. The quatrains (four-line stanzas) use an alternating rhyme pattern (ABAB): lines 1 and 3 rhyme with each other, as do lines 2 and 4. Each line is also written in iambic tetrameter, meaning they contain four iambs (metrical feet that follow an unstressed-**stressed** syllable pattern, da-**DUM**). Here are lines 1-2, for example:

As **I** | went **down** | to **Dym-** | church **Wall**,
I **heard** | the **South** | sing **o'er** | the **land**

Both the rhyme and the meter provide momentum, keeping the poem moving at a regular pace (just like the speaker on their walk).

LINES 5-8

And ringing shrilly, taut and lithe,
Within the wind a core of sound,
The wire from Romney town to Hythe
Along its airy journey wound.

The speaker encounters a strange acoustic phenomenon: a telegraph wire that seems to be vibrating in the wind and making a "shrill" ring. This wire runs from one nearby town to another (Romney to Hythe) through the air (making this an "airy journey").

Through this image, the poem juxtaposes nature with human infrastructure. The word "shrilly" conveys that this sound is unpleasant; it's almost as though the wire shrieks in pain. It's also "taut and lithe"—that is, stretched tight and thin, as though it might snap. The wind seems to play the wire, making the latter a passive partner in this strange duet. On the one hand, the image speaks to human ingenuity: this is vital technology that allows people to communicate with one another across long distances. At the same time, the tight, screaming wire seems pretty fragile; one sharp gust of wind might bring it down.

The sounds of the poem bring the imagery to life. Listen to the thin assonance of "ringing shrilly" and "Within the wind," for example, which evokes the wire's high-pitched wail. Thick /w/ alliteration ("Within," "wind," "wire," "wound") echoes the whoosh of the wind as it blows through the landscape.

LINES 9-12

A veil of purple vapour flowed
And trailed its fringe along the Straits;
The upper air like sapphire glowed:
And roses filled Heaven's central gates.

The imagery of the poem's third stanza evokes the beauty of a glorious sunset over the marsh. The sky, here, seems both lovely and otherworldly, filled with a swirl of intense color and light.

First, the speaker observes "a veil of purple vapour," a kind of misty, purple haze that fills the scene. The word "veil" might also suggest that something is being *hidden* here—that there's more to this scene (and the natural world in general) than human beings can fully perceive or understand.

This "vapour" sweeps across the landscape, "trail[ing] its fringe along the Straits" (that is, the waters between England and France). This purple mist is like a gauzy bridal veil smoothly moving across the water, its tassels gently dragging along behind it. The image is slightly flirtatious, as though the sky beckons the speaker to follow.

The "upper air"—presumably the chunk of sky above that purple—glows like sapphire. Sapphire is a precious blue stone, and this simile emphasizes the value the speaker places on the scene.

The speaker also sees "roses" in the sky: the reddish glow of the sun's rays as it sets. Roses are a flower often synonymous with love and beauty, again conveying the preciousness of the scene before the speaker. In calling the sky "Heaven's central gates," the speaker links the natural world with the spiritual one. Nature's sublime beauty seems to bring the speaker one step closer to heaven itself, providing a little glimpse of an eternal—and perfect—realm of beauty and wonder. In short, the sunset inspires awe.

LINES 13-16

Masts in the offing wagged their tops;
The swinging waves pealed on the shore;
The saffron beach, all diamond drops
And beads of surge, prolonged the roar.

In this stanza, the poem focuses on the sea and the coastline. The speaker observes ships in the distance ("in the offing"). The wind and waves churn up the seawater, making the boats rock and sway. Seen from afar, the rippling masts appear to "wag[]" like the tails of dogs. In this metaphor, nature appears both joyful and mighty, while human infrastructure seems delicate and submissive. It's like the boats are pets, and nature is their master.

Then there are those waves, which "swing" in the sense that they roll back and forth. They "peal[] on the shore," meaning they repeatedly make a loud, reverberating sound. People often use the word "peal" when talking about thunder, laughter, or ringing bells. It's like nature is a conductor presiding over some booming symphony, whose music is both marvelous and, perhaps, a bit frightening. Note how the poem changes up the meter here to make those waves seem all the more loud and impressive:

The swing- | ing waves | pealed on | the shore;

The trochee "pealed on" feels almost violent, disrupting the poem's steady iambic flow (much like a great wave might disturb a beach).

The beach, the speaker continues, is the color of "saffron": an expensive, orange or yellowish spice derived from a type of crocus plant. It's also full of "diamond drops/ And beads of surge," both metaphorical descriptions for the spray of water caused by the crashing waves. The alliteration of "diamond drops" evokes the glittering of precious stones, while "beads of surge" similarly brings to mind jewelry. This scene, the poem implies, is precious to the speaker.

The beach also "prolong[s] the roar" of the waves. Here, the speaker might refers to the sonic effect created by pebbles dragged toward the sea as the water goes out. Or, perhaps, the speaker is simply saying that the sound of the waves echoes as they pound the shore over and over again. Either way, the word "roar" suggests something animal, wild, and untameable.

LINES 17-20

As I came up from Dymchurch Wall,
I saw above the Downs' low crest
The crimson brands of sunset fall,
Flicker and fade from out the west.

Having gone "down" to "Dymchurch Wall," the speaker now comes back "up" and looks out over the surrounding hillside, known as the Kent Downs. The speaker marvels at the "crimson brands of sunset" above the "low crest" (that is, the top) of the hills. Here, "brands" might be read as a metaphor for identifying marks or burns, as though the sun inscribes or stamps these marvelous colors on the sky. The word subtly hints at nature's artistry. ("Brands" is also an archaic word for "swords," which might also suggest nature's capacity for violence—and fits in nicely with the image of a deep red sky.)

These red colors seem to "fall / Flicker and fade" from the west. Notice how this prominent alliteration flecks the line with /f/ sounds, mirroring that way the sky is flecked with the flickering light and color. The shift from "yellow" light to red tells the reader that it's later in the day. "Fade" signals that night is coming on—and, indeed, it arrives in the next stanza.

LINES 21-24

Night sank: like flakes of silver fire
The stars in one great shower came down;
Shrill blew the wind; and shrill the wire

Rang out from Hythe to Romney town.

In the sixth stanza, night falls over Romney Marsh. The speaker describes the scene using vivid imagery:

> Night sank: like flakes of silver fire
> The stars in one great shower came down;

The /f/ alliteration in "flakes" and "fire" echoes the /f/ sounds in line 20, creating a sense of continuity between the stanzas. This reflects the fact that the sun's setting is what allows the sky to fill with stars.

Those stars, meanwhile, look like "flakes of silver fire," a simile that conveys both their brilliance and suggests that they're part of some elemental force beyond the speaker's understanding. The word "silver" also echoes the poem's earlier references to valuable items—"diamonds," "beads," "saffron." Again, the poem makes clear that sight before the speaker is something rare and precious.

The speaker also says that the stars appear "in one great shower." The stars aren't *literally* "showering" down, nor do they *literally* all pop up in the sky at once. This metaphor conveys the stars' intensity and brilliance as they appear in the night sky, a sight that seems to stun the speaker.

Lines 23 and 24 then hark back to the second stanza, focusing once again on the telegraph wire and the wind. Readers might picture the speaker standing transfixed at the sky as the rest of the world continues to swirl, somewhat menacingly, all around:

> Shrill blew the wind; and shrill the wire
> Rang out from Hythe to Romney town.

The repetition of "shrill" (an example of diacope) emphasizes just how piercing this sound is. It's an unsettling moment, almost as if the landscape is full of ghosts trying to make themselves heard.

Note, too, that "Hythe" and "Romney" have swapped places in the line: in stanza 2, the speaker said "Romney town to Hythe." This flip reflects the fact that the speaker is now looking at the wire from the opposite direction while walking back up from the wall.

LINES 25-28

The darkly shining salt sea drops
Streamed as the waves clashed on the shore;
The beach, with all its organ stops
Pealing again, prolonged the roar.

The speaker once more looks out at the sea, where salty "drops" of water glimmer in the darkness as the waves continue to "clash[] on the shore." This imagery conveys the sea's violent might. Again, the poem presents nature not just as beautiful but as immensely powerful. The intense sibilance of these lines conveys the splashing, hissing sounds of the water and waves:

> The darkly shining salt sea drops
> Streamed as the waves clashed on the shore;

The poem's final two lines then echo the fourth stanza, as the speaker once more describes the "roar" of the waves rolling back and forth across the beach. The word "roar" presents nature as something wild and untameable. At the same time, however, the speaker compares the beach to a musical instrument: an "organ" with all its "stops" (or levers) ringing out ("Pealing again"). Nature isn't just wild, then, but also a skilled musician playing a powerful tune.

Although nothing bad happens on the walk, and the speaker's descriptions are mostly positive and awe-struck, the poem nevertheless captures the raw, at times overwhelming natural world. Nothing in the poem gets destroyed, but there's the feeling that it *could*—if that wind blew a little stronger or if those waves "clashed" a little harder. As the speaker's journey draws to an end, those towns in the distance—Hythe and Romney—suddenly seem a little bit smaller and more vulnerable.

SYMBOLS

HUMAN INFRASTRUCTURE

The poem uses human infrastructure to symbolize the tension between human beings and the natural world. Set against the backdrop of a glorious sunset and crashing waves, humanity's creations suddenly seem small and, perhaps, fragile. Things like the "Dymchurch Wall," "Norman churches," and the telegraph wires ultimately reflect both human ingenuity *and* human vulnerability in the face of nature's might.

First, there's that wall, which is a barrier constructed to keep the sea at bay (most of Romney marsh is below sea level). On the one hand, the wall reflects humanity's attempts to curb and control nature. Yet the wall's very presence also conveys the *threat* posed by nature's power; were the wall not there, the sea could surge across the land.

The speaker also walks past "Norman churches." Again, these structures speak both to humanity's attempts to assert dominance over the world *and* human beings' ultimate frailty: though the churches still stand, the people who built them are long gone. Then there's that telegraph wire. It's "taut and lithe," whipping about in the wind. It might represent technological advancement, but it's still subject to nature's whims: a particularly strong gust might sever this communcation link between Romney town and Hythe.

Finally, there are those wagging masts over yonder on the sea.

The stormy environment makes them look like pet dogs that have nature as their great master. All in all, readers might get the sense that though human beings have learned to get along with nature, they'll never fully control it.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "As I went down to Dymchurch Wall,"
- **Line 4:** "On knolls where Norman churches stand."
- **Lines 5-8:** "And ringing shrilly, taut and lithe, / Within the wind a core of sound, / The wire from Romney town to Hythe / Along its airy journey wound."
- **Line 13:** "Masts in the offing wagged their tops;"
- **Line 17:** "As I came up from Dymchurch Wall,"
- **Lines 23-24:** "and shrill the wire / Rang out from Hythe to Romney town."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"In Romney Marsh" uses alliteration to evoke the sights and sounds of the natural world and also to fill the poem with rousing music.

Take the bouncy /d/ sounds in line 1, which open the poem on a jaunty note:

> As I went down to Dymchurch Wall,

Alliteration appears in the next line as well, with the hissing /s/ sounds of "South sing." It's a windy day on the marsh, and these sounds suggest the rustle of the wind blowing across the land. The /w/ sounds of the following stanza work similarly, evoking the whoosh of the wind that rattles the telegraph wire:

> Within the wind a core of sound,
> The wire from Romney town to Hythe
> Along its airy journey wound.

Notice how assonance adds to the imagery of this stanza as well: the short, nasally /ih/ sounds of "Within the wind" and "ringing shrilly" suggests the high-pitch buzz of that wire.

Alliteration continues to build the poem's music in the following stanzas: "veil of purple vapour," "diamond drops," "crest / The crimson," "Pealing again prolonged," and so on. The poem simply *sounds* grand and lyrical, in turn conveying the majesty of the scene at hand.

Listen, too, to the evocative /f/ alliteration in lines 20-21:

> The crimson brands of sunset fall,
> Flicker and fade from out the west.
> Night sank: like flakes of silver fire

Fricative consonants require the obstruction of airflow. As a result, the sounds of the lines seem to "flicker" in and out, mirroring the glimmer of the sunset and the stars.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "down," "Dymchurch"
- **Line 2:** "South sing"
- **Line 3:** "saw," "sunlight"
- **Line 4:** "knolls," "Norman"
- **Line 6:** "Within," "wind"
- **Line 7:** "wire"
- **Line 8:** "wound"
- **Line 9:** "veil," "vapour," "flowed"
- **Line 10:** "fringe," "Straits"
- **Line 11:** "sapphire," "glowed"
- **Line 12:** "central," "gates"
- **Line 13:** "wagged"
- **Line 14:** "swinging," "waves"
- **Line 15:** "saffron," "beach," "diamond drops"
- **Line 16:** "beads," "surge"
- **Line 18:** "crest"
- **Line 19:** "crimson"
- **Line 20:** "Flicker," "fade from"
- **Line 21:** "sank," "flakes," "silver," "fire"
- **Line 22:** "stars," "shower"
- **Line 23:** "Shrill," "wind," "shrill," "wire"
- **Line 25:** "darkly," "shining," "salt sea," "drops"
- **Line 26:** "Streamed," "shore"
- **Line 28:** "Pealing," "prolonged"

SIBILANCE

The poem is brimming with sibilance, which evokes the sounds of this windy, watery setting. Some of this sibilance is also alliterative, as in stanza 1:

> I heard the South sing o'er the land;
> I saw the yellow sunlight fall

The /s/ sounds here subtly mimic the hiss of the wind as it blows across the landscape.

The sibilance gets more intense as the poem moves along. Take lines 13-14, which are filled not just with /s/ sounds, but also with /sh/ and fricative /f/ sounds (considered sibilant in a broad definition of the term):

> Masts in the offing wagged their tops;
> The swinging waves pealed on the shore;

All these sounds help to bring the scene to life: readers can hear those masts swelling with wind and the waves crashing along the shore. The slew of /w/ alliteration and consonance, ("wagged," "swinging," "waves") add to the effect.

Sibilance also fills lines 21-23 and 25-26, where it helps to evoke the swirling rush of those stars, the harsh cry of the wind, and the surging and smashing of the sea:

> Night sank: like flakes of silver fire
> The stars in one great shower came down;
> Shrill blew the wind; and shrill the wire
> [...]
> The darkly shining salt sea drops
> Streamed as the waves clashed on the shore;

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "South sing"
- **Line 3:** "saw," "sunlight"
- **Line 13:** "Masts," "offing," "tops"
- **Line 14:** "swinging," "shore"
- **Line 15:** "saffron," "drops"
- **Line 16:** "surge"
- **Line 21:** "sank," "flakes," "silver," "fire"
- **Line 22:** "stars," "shower"
- **Line 23:** "Shrill," "shrill"
- **Line 25:** "shining salt sea drops"
- **Line 26:** "Streamed," "clashed," "shore"

METAPHOR

The poem is bursting with metaphorical language that makes this seaside scene all the more powerful. The speaker frequently personifies the landscape as well, making it seem alive and wilful.

In line 2, for example, the speaker says that the wind "sing[s] o'er the land." The sounds of the wind are arrestingly beautiful, akin to music. This idea of nature as a musician pops up again in the poem's final lines, where the speaker compares the beach to an "organ" whose "stops" (that is, levers) are pulled out by the waves to make as much noise as possible. The organ reference suggests something skilled, deliberate, and virtuosic; nature is like a great musician playing a concert.

The poem's metaphors also appeal to readers' eyes:

- Describing the swirling colors of sunset, the speaker says that a "veil of purple vapour" fills the air, "trail[ing] its fringe" along the coast. Again, nature seems filled with agency, like a figure wearing a gauzy cloak whose edges drag along the water in their wake. The word "veil" might also suggest that part of the landscape is hidden from human beings, as though nature refuses to reveal all of its secrets.
- The speaker adds that the air glows "like sapphire" (the poem's first simile). A sapphire is a precious stone, so this suggests the rarity and beauty of this sunset.
- The speaker then compares the reddish hues of sunset to "roses" filling the sky, metaphorically deemed "Heaven's gates." This language suggests that nature's beauty is part of, or provides a link to, the divine.
- Looking at the coast in stanza 4, the speaker sees "Masts in the offing wag[] their tops." It's like the ships are pet dogs and nature is their master. In the same stanza, "swinging waves" ring against the shore like great bells, and the seaspray glints like "diamond drops" and "beads of surge." All this figurative language portrays nature as immensely valuable, mighty, and just as (or more) precious than jewelry and gemstones.

This poem's metaphors also create a sense of nature's ferocity and potential for destruction. For example, the speaker describes the "sunset" as a series of "crimson brands." A brand can refer to an identifying burn or mark; the sun's rays seem to sear across the sky, imposing themselves on the world. And when the night comes in stanza six, the stars look "like flakes of silver fire." This image is both stunning and frightening; it suggests just how small and insignificant the speaker feels when looking up at the cosmos.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Line 2
- Lines 5-6
- Line 8
- Lines 9-16
- Line 19
- Lines 21-22
- Lines 27-28

REPETITION

The poem uses repetition throughout, creating a rollicking rhythm and calling readers' attention to specific elements of the poem's setting. Note, for example, how the poem circles back on itself. It opens with:

> As I went down to Dymchurch Wall,

And in line 17, the speaker comes back the other way:

> As I came up from Dymchurch Wall,

This tells the reader that the speaker's walk is a kind of loop, heading away from the town toward the coast and then back again. Indeed, when they come back "up" they take a second look at the telegraph wire. The towns get reversed—"Romney town to Hythe" becomes "Hythe to Romney town"—indicating that the speaker approaches from the opposite side.

That's not the only phrasal repetition in the poem. Note how both lines 16 and 28 end with "prolonged the roar," which describes the sound of the waves dragging along the beach. That the phrase appears twice demonstrates just how loud this roar is and the fact it's a repetitive sound: the waves keep coming in and going out. The repetition of "pealed"/"pealing" and "shrilly"/"shrill" likewise highlights just how *present* the sounds of the wind and waves are; they seem to surround the speaker.

The poem also features repetitive grammar and syntax all the way through. There's plenty of anaphora and parallelism, for example, as in:

> I heard the South sing o'er the land;
> I saw the yellow sunlight fall
> [...]
> And trailed its fringe along the Straits;
> [...]
> And roses filled Heaven's central gates.
> [...]
> The swinging waves pealed on the shore;
> The saffron beach, all diamond drops

This repetitiveness makes the poem feel more rhythmic and energetic. The repetition of "I" phrases also calls attention to the fact that the speaker is alone, and that all these observations are being filtered through their solitary perspective.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "As I went down to Dymchurch Wall,"
- **Line 2:** "I"
- **Line 3:** "I saw"
- **Line 5:** "ringing shrilly"
- **Line 7:** "The wire from Romney town to Hythe"
- **Line 10:** "And"
- **Line 12:** "And"
- **Line 14:** "The," "pealed," "on the shore"
- **Line 15:** "The"
- **Line 16:** "prolonged the roar."
- **Line 17:** "As I came up from Dymchurch Wall,"
- **Line 18:** "I saw"
- **Line 23:** "Shrill," "shrill"
- **Lines 23-24:** "the wire / Rang out from Hythe to Romney town."
- **Line 26:** "on the shore"
- **Line 28:** "Pealing," "prolonged the roar."

IMAGERY

"In Romney Marsh" is bursting with imagery that brings its seaside setting to life. The poem vividly captures both the sights and sounds of Romney Marsh, helping readers experience this sunset right alongside the speaker.

The speaker notes the brilliant swirl of colors that fill the sky as the sun sets:

- First, there's the "yellow sunlight fall[ing]" across hills and ancient churches.
- Next, a gauzy "purple vapor flow[s]" over the water, and the upper sky becomes a deep blue, glowing "like sapphire."
- Rich, rosy hues mark the horizon as the sun's "crimson brands [...] fall" across the sky.
- The colorful light "flicker[s]" and "fade[s]," until, seemingly all of a sudden, it's replaced by a "great shower" of stars, which glitter above "like flakes of silver fire." The imagery conveys the sheer majesty of the cosmos.

The speaker also uses striking imagery when talking about the earth:

- In the distance, the masts of ships seem to wag in the wind, as if they're pet dogs and nature is their master.
- The waves are "swinging," rocking back and forth and sending a spray of sparkling, jewel-like drops of water into the air.
- The beach is "saffron," a deep, yellowish orange, its sand perhaps as fine as a precious spice.

The speaker doesn't just describe what this scene *looks* like, but also what it *sounds* like:

- The southerly wind seems to "sing" and the waves "peal[]," ringing out like a deep, resonant bell as they surge and crash against the shoreline.
- As the wind grows stronger, its cry becomes "shrill," much like that of the "taut and lithe" telegraph wire that runs from "Romney town to Hythe."
- By the poem's end, the seaside seems to "roar."

Altogether, the poem's imagery helps the reader hear the waves, feel the salty spray, and see the wondrous sunset.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-6
- Lines 9-16
- Lines 18-28

VOCABULARY

Dymchurch Wall (Line 1) - A sea wall, built to keep the waves

at bay and prevent flooding, in Dymchurch, a village in England.

The South (Line 2) - That is, a wind blowing from the south.

O'er (Line 2) - A contraction of "over."

Knolls (Line 4) - Small hills.

Norman Churches (Line 4) - Churches built by the Normans, who conquered England in the year 1066 and brought with them a distinctive style of architecture.

Shrilly/Shrill (Line 5, Line 23) - "Shrill" describes a piercing high-pitched sound; "shrilly" is the adverb form of the word.

Taut and lithe (Line 5) - Tight and thin or supple.

Romney town to Hythe (Line 7, Line 24) - Two small towns near the marsh.

Vapour (Line 9) - A mist, haze, or spray.

Fringe (Line 10) - Dangling edge or tassels (if one interprets that "veil" like a metaphorical item of clothing).

The Straits (Line 10) - The sea between England and France.

In the offing (Line 13) - In the distance.

Pealed (Line 14, Line 28) - Rang out loudly, like a bell. People often use the word "peal" in conjunction with resonant sounds like laughter or thunder.

Saffron (Line 15) - This can refer to a valuable, orangey-yellow spice derived from a type of crocus plant, or simply to the deep color of that spice/plant.

Beads of surge (Line 16) - Seaspray from incoming waves.

The Downs (Line 18) - The gentle hills of the surrounding countryside.

Crest (Line 18) - The uppermost part of a hill.

Crimson (Line 19) - Deep red.

Brands (Line 19) - Identifying marks or burns. Could also refer to an archaic word for swords, hinting at nature's potential violence.

Organ stops (Line 27) - Levers on an organ (e.g., a church organ). They change the amount of air flowing through the instrument, affecting the timbre and volume.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"In Romney Marsh" contains seven quatrains (four-line stanzas), each with a very regular meter (iambic tetrameter) and rhyme scheme (ABAB). This dependable, predictable structure is typical of Victorian-era poetry. It also makes the poem both musical and memorable. The poem's steady sounds might subtly mirror the speaker's steady pace while walking around Romney Marsh.

The poem might also be considered a riff on a pastoral: poetry written in praise of the great outdoors. This poem, though, isn't just about the peaceful beauty of the sunset; it also speaks to nature's ferocity.

METER

"In Romney Marsh" uses iambic tetrameter. This means that each line contains four iambs, poetic feet that follow an unstressed-stressed pattern of syllables (da-DUM). Here's that meter in lines 3 and 4:

> I saw | the yel- | ow sun-| light fall
> On knolls | where Nor- | man church- | es stand.

The meter pushes the poem forward at a steady pace, those bouncy iambs appropriate for a poem about a brisk walk on the windy English coast.

Metrical variations keep the poem from sounding too strict and also highlight important moments. For example, lines 20, 26, and 28 all open with a trochee: the opposite of an iamb, stressed-unstressed (DUM-da). Line 26 also contains a second trochee in its third foot, adding power to the word "crashed" and thus evoking the sheer force of the waves:

> Flicker | and fade | from out | the west.
> [...]
> Streamed as | the waves | clashed on | the shore;
> [...]
> Pealing | again, | prolonged | the roar.

These trochees add a little touch of disruption, hinting at nature's power. Nature disturbs the poem's meter, signaling, perhaps, that it also could bring that sea wall crashing down.

RHYME SCHEME

"In Romney Marsh" uses a steady rhyme scheme. In each stanza, lines 1 and 2 rhyme with each other, as do lines 3 and 4:

> ABAB CDCD

...and so on.

This alternating pattern is typical of Victorian-era poetry and also of John Davidson's work in particular. Here, the steady rhymes fill the poem with pleasant music. Fittingly for a poem about a brisk walk by the sea, the expectation—and satisfaction—of rhyme also provides forward momentum. The rhymes are all full, making the speaker sound confident and assured.

SPEAKER

The first-person speaker of "In Romney Marsh" is someone taking a later afternoon or early evening walk by the sea. It's fair to read the poem's speaker as a representation of John

Davidson himself, but readers certainly don't have to do so.

Though the poem is about nature, all of its descriptions are filtered through the speaker's very human perspective: the speaker says "I went," "I saw," "I heard," "I came." That repeated "I" makes the speaker seem somewhat isolated; while they point out *evidence* of other people—the wires and old churches—they never actually mention seeing any other *human beings*. The speaker is a solitary figure contemplating their surroundings, seeming perhaps insignificant in light of nature's overwhelming power and beauty.

SETTING

As the title suggests, this poem is set in Romney Marsh, an area on the southeast coast of England marked by views of the sea and the rolling hills of the nearby countryside.

The speaker's walk takes place on a windy day in the late afternoon or early evening, just as the sun starts to set. In many ways, the setting seems fierce and perhaps even a bit hostile: the wind whooshes through the landscape, telegraph wires ring "shrilly," and waves pound against the shore. At the same time, the setting is filled with immense beauty: the beach is the rich color of "saffron" and the sea spray glitters like diamonds. As the sun sets, the sky fills with ethereal shifting colors: purple, sapphire blue, rosy red, deep crimson. By the time the speaker's walk is over, night has fallen; the sky is awash with flickering stars, shimmering overhead "like flakes of silver fire."

This place isn't untouched: while there are no other people around (at least that the speaker mentions), there's clear *evidence* of humanity. The speaker begins their walk at "Dymchurch Wall," a manmade seawall, points out ancient "Norman churches," sees ships rocking in the distance, and, of course, twice calls out the shriek of the telegraph wires.

It's not clear, exactly, if this setting suggests harmony or discord between humanity and nature. While these pieces of civilization suggest that human beings have, in a way, tamed nature, the speaker's description of the ferocious sea and mesmerizing sky suggest that such security is an illusion.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Davidson was a Scottish poet, playwright, and essayist who lived from 1857 to 1909. He struggled for success during his lifetime and supported his writing through work as a clerk and as a teacher.

"In Romney Marsh" was published in Davidson's 1895 collection *Ballads and Songs*. With its steady meter, rhyme scheme, and stanza structure, "In Romney Marsh" is typical of Victorian-era poetry. In its focus on the Kent coast, the poem also shares common ground with Matthew Arnold's (far more famous) poem "Dover Beach."

While "In Romney Marsh" sounds, on a formal level, like a typical Victorian poem, its atmosphere reflects the influence of the earlier Romantics: those poets who focused on nature's capacity to impress and intimidate. With its depiction of nature as both immensely beautiful and ferociously powerful, "In Romney Marsh" builds the Romantic idea of "the sublime": the feeling of awe and terror evoked when confronting the vast wonder of the natural world.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Davidson wrote "In Romney Marsh" at the tail end of the Victorian era, a time of significant social, political, and scientific upheaval across the British Empire and the world. Geological discoveries cast doubt over the timescale of the world's creation as described by the Bible, while new evolutionary theories unsettled the idea of humanity as the center of a universe created by God. Over the six decades of Queen Victoria's reign, Britain's primarily rural population also made an unprecedented shift to the cities as factory work outpaced farm work, and the invention of the steam engine resulted in new infrastructure like railroads, steamships, and factories. The telegraph and photograph were both invented in this era as well.

With its mention of "shrill" telegraph wires alongside the splendor of a seaside sunset, "In Romney Marsh" reflects the technological realities of Davidson's era and, perhaps, a longing for a simpler past.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Ballads and Songs — Check out the full collection in which "In Romney Marsh" first appeared. (https://archive.org/details/balladssongs00davigoog/page/n3/mode/2up)
- Davidson's Literary Context — Dip into a great collection of Victorian-era poetry, selected by the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/153447/an-introduction-to-the-victorian-era)
- Romney Marsh — Check out the dramatic history of the poem's setting. (https://romneymarshhistory.com)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*In Romney Marsh.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 1 Nov 2022. Web. 1 Dec 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*In Romney Marsh.*" LitCharts LLC, November 1, 2022. Retrieved December 1, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/john-davidson/in-romney-marsh.