Song to the Men of England

POEM TEXT

Men of England, wherefore plough
For the lords who lay ye low?
Wherefore weave with toil and care
The rich robes your tyrants wear?

Wherefore feed and clothe and save
From the cradle to the grave
Those ungrateful drones who would
Drain your sweat—nay, drink your blood?

Wherefore, Bees of England, forge
Many a weapon, chain, and scourge,
That these stingless drones may spoil
The forced produce of your toil?

Have ye leisure, comfort, calm,
Shelter, food, love's gentle balm?
Or what is it ye buy so dear
With your pain and with your fear?

The seed ye sow, another reaps;
The wealth ye find, another keeps;
The robes ye weave, another wears;
The arms ye forge, another bears.

Sow seed—but let no tyrant reap:
Find wealth—let no imposter heap:
Weave robes—let not the idle wear:
Forge arms—in your defence to bear.

Shrink to your cellars, holes, and cells—
In halls ye deck another dwells.
Why shake the chains ye wrought? Ye see
The steel ye tempered glance on ye.

With plough and spade and hoe and loom
Trace your grave and build your tomb
And weave your winding-sheet—till fair
England be your Sepulchre.

SUMMARY

People of England! Why should you work for the upper classes who are keeping you down? Why should you spend so much effort weaving the beautiful clothing your oppressors wear?

Why should you take care of a bunch of selfish, useless aristocrats for their whole lives, people who want to use every last ounce of your energy—no, worse than that, to gobble up your very life force?

Why, oh worker bees of England, do you fashion weapons, chains, and whips so that the otherwise helpless aristocrats can steal all the wealth they force you to you create?

Do you have rest, security, peace, housing, food, and the pleasures of love? And if not, what exactly are you getting from this arrangement—what here is worth suffering for?

The crops you plant, someone else harvests; the money you earn, someone else takes; the clothing you make, someone else wears; the weapons you make, someone else wields.

So plant crops, but don't let your oppressors harvest them; make money, and don't let any freeloader take your earnings; make clothing, but don't give it to those who do no work; make weapons, and use them to defend yourselves!

The alternative is to creep away into your sad, cramped little dwellings, while other people live in the beautiful houses you decorate. Why should you rebel against the very chains you forged? You'll only feel the weapons that you made hitting you.

But if you don't rebel, then all your tools for farming and weaving will become tools for digging your own grave, building your own tombstone, and weaving your own shroud—until, at last, lovely England is nothing more than a mausoleum.

THEMES

INEQUALITY, EXPLOITATION, AND REVOLUTION

Shelley's "Song to the Men of England" is a revolutionary call to arms. The poem's speaker cries out to all of England's laboring people, asking them: why do you keep working yourselves to the bone to enrich an upper class that gives you nothing in return? By pointing out the dreadful inequalities that plague the country, the speaker suggests that power should be in the hands of working people and encourages workers to revolt against the oppressive "tyrants" who keep them down.

The English working class, the speaker argues, is in a terrible

predicament: all their "toil" (or hard work) only enriches the upper class. All the material wealth the working class produce, from the "seed" they sow (that is, the crops they farm) to the "rich robes" they weave, gets funneled directly to a ruling class of "tyrants" who do no work themselves. Meanwhile, working people themselves have nothing: "leisure, comfort, calm, / Shelter, food" and even "love" are denied them.

But the speaker sees a solution: if working people would simply refuse to agree to this system anymore, they'd be perfectly self-sufficient. "Wherefore plough / For the lords who lay ye low?" the speaker asks; in other words, *"Why work for the nobility who crush you underfoot?"* The speaker advocates that the workers not only keep the "wealth" they produce rather than passing it along to bosses and aristocrats, but that they also "forge arms" (or fashion weapons) to rise up against their oppressors.

Through observing that working people are the source of the country's wealth—and thus could easily seize it for themselves—the speaker thus suggests that England's true power is in the hands of the oppressed lower classes, and all that they need to do is reach out and take it.

But there's a warning here, too: if the people *don't* rise up against their oppressors, the speaker concludes, England will become their "Sepulchre" (or tomb). In other words, they'll be worked into early graves! Revolution, this poem argues, is a matter of life and death.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Men of England, wherefore plough
For the lords who lay ye low?
Wherefore weave with toil and care
The rich robes your tyrants wear?

Right away, it's clear that the "Song to the Men of England" is a polemic—that is, a piece of writing with a serious and angry point to make about the way society works. More than that, the poem is a call to arms, an invitation to revolution. And the people the speaker wants to inspire to revolt are no less than all the "Men of England."

This doesn't actually mean every single Englishman, however. Rather, the speaker addresses those who "plough" and "toil": the working classes, the laborers on whose backs English farming and manufacturing rest.

The speaker has some rhetorical questions for this group of people. Listen to the anaphora here:

Men of England, wherefore plough
For the lords who lay ye low?
Wherefore weave with toil and care
The rich robes your tyrants wear?

That repeated "wherefore" (or "why") makes it clear that the speaker has *a lot of questions* about the way the world currently works. Does it make sense, the speaker wonders, that one group of people should do all the work and another should enjoy all the profit (and "lay" the workers "low," treading them underfoot, for that matter)? The implied answer is *absolutely not*.

The speaker's musical language in this first stanza suggests that this poem is intended as a battle cry, the sort of thing that rebellious workers could chant from a barricade. Besides the insistent alliteration of phrases like "the lords who lay ye low" and "rich robes," the poem uses memorable, chant-worthy rhymed couplets: *plough / low, care / wear.*

Listen, too, to the meter in these first lines:

Men of | England, | wherefore | plough
For the | lords who | lay ye | low?

This punchy, stress-first pattern is trochaic tetrameter—that is, lines of four trochees, metrical feet with a DUM-da rhythm. The speaker even cuts off the last unstressed syllable of these lines, so each line both begins and ends with a stress (and a bang). This is a poem made for yelling.

LINES 5-8

Wherefore feed and clothe and save
From the cradle to the grave
Those ungrateful drones who would
Drain your sweat—nay, drink your blood?

In the first stanza, the speaker introduced the poem's theme: the exploitative cruelty of the English class system and economy. In the second, the speaker drives the point home with yet another rhetorical question—this one spiced up with some vivid metaphors.

"Wherefore," the speaker goes on (continuing the pattern of emphatic anaphora the first stanza established), should the working classes take care of the upper classes their whole lives through, "from the cradle to the grave"? This system, those words suggest, is a lifelong proposition for everyone involved. And it makes the lower classes into little more than livestock.

Listen to the metaphors the speaker uses to describe the sponging, useless upper classes here:

Those ungrateful drones who would
Drain your sweat—nay, drink your blood?

Calling the upper crust "ungrateful drones," the speaker resorts to an old metaphor: the idea of society as a beehive. "Drones" are the male bees whose only job is to fertilize the queen's eggs. With this image, the speaker thus suggests that the aristocracy lead lives of lazy pleasure while the worker bees, the lower classes, do all the work and produce all the "honey" of wealth.

But the "drones" aren't just useless and lazy here: they're parasites and vampires. Not only do they want to "drain" the sweat (that is, the hard work) of the lower classes, the speaker declares, they'd drink their very "blood" if they could, sucking away their very life force. And take a look at the caesura the speaker uses here:

> Drain your sweat— || nay, drink your blood?

That strong dash suggests that the speaker is doubling down, having a second and even more serious thought. *It's not just your work they want*, this line says, *it's your life itself.*

LINES 9-12

> *Wherefore, Bees of England, forge*
> *Many a weapon, chain, and scourge,*
> *That these stingless drones may spoil*
> *The forced produce of your toil?*

By the third stanza, readers will have fallen into the swing of the speaker's argumentative style. Once again, a bold rhetorical question (introduced by anaphora on the word "Wherefore") introduces a new angle on English societal injustice. This time, the speaker both returns to the metaphor of society-as-beehive and starts to ask some even more dangerous questions about why the workers allow the upper classes to rule them.

The working "Bees of England," the speaker notes, don't just produce crops and clothing. They're also responsible for "forg[ing]" the country's arsenal: the "weapon[s], chain[s], and scourge[s]" (or whips) with which England maintains its military power.

For that matter, the speaker observes, these are the very weapons that the upper-class "drones" use to keep the "Bees of England" down! On their own, the ruling classes are "stingless," defenseless. They need the weaponry the workers make in order to maintain their power.

These lines might help readers to understand why this poem was considered too inflammatory for Shelley to publish during his lifetime. The speaker here is not-so-subtly advocating for armed rebellion! For, if the "drones" need the "stings" of weapons to extract "the forced produce" of the lower classes' "toil" (that is, the fruits of their enforced labor), and the workers are the ones who *make* those weapons... the implication is clear. Not only do the workers have the power to create wealth, they have the power to mount their own defense.

LINES 13-16

> *Have ye leisure, comfort, calm,*
> *Shelter, food, love's gentle balm?*
> *Or what is it ye buy so dear*
> *With your pain and with your fear?*

After those first three blazing stanzas of outrage, the speaker changes tack slightly. The fourth stanza still uses rhetorical questions, but those questions change shape. The anaphora on "Wherefore" goes away. Rather than asking *why* the "Bees of England" work for their oppressors, the speaker starts to investigate *what* they're getting out of this arrangement. The implied answer, readers might be unsurprised to learn, is "nothing good."

Listen to the way the speaker uses asyndeton in these lines:

> Have ye leisure, || comfort, || calm,
> Shelter, || food, || love's gentle balm?

Lining all these everyday pleasures up without so much as an "and" or an "or" to connect them, the speaker suggests that the list of things the workers should have (and by implication, don't have) could go on forever.

And notice that the speaker feels the workers aren't just deprived of material necessities like "food" and "shelter," but of the things that make life worth living, from "calm" to "leisure" to "love" itself. The workers' constant toil doesn't just fail to earn them a comfortable living, the speaker suggests: it eats away at their ability to live full lives and form meaningful connections. Even the "gentle balm" (or soothing, healing power) of love is denied them.

If you *don't* earn any of these things through your labor, the speaker goes on, with some emphatic parallelism:

> [...] what is it ye buy so dear
> With your pain and with your fear?

Again, the implied answer here is "nothing": that "pain" and "fear" serve no purpose.

Here, readers might be able to sniff out some of the difficulties the speaker needs to overcome. If the workers' conditions are indeed this bad, then they must be pretty frightened of *something* if they're not already rising up against their oppressors. Perhaps the "scourge" (or whip) of the previous stanza provides a hint: the threat of violence might be enough to make lots of people prefer the comparatively low-key "pain" of thankless toil to the danger and fear of an uprising.

The speaker's self-appointed task in the second half of the poem, then, will be to coax the workers past that fear.

LINES 17-20

The seed ye sow, another reaps;
The wealth ye find, another keeps;
The robes ye weave, another wears;
The arms ye forge, another bears.

The second half of the poem begins with a bang. Once more, the speaker stresses the idea that the "Bees of England" produce all the country's wealth and get nothing in return. But now, intense anaphora (and broader parallelism) make the juxtaposition between the workers and the oppressors unforgettably clear:

The seed ye sow, another reaps;
The wealth ye find, another keeps;
The robes ye weave, another wears;
The arms ye forge, another bears.

These strong repetitions also pick up on all the images of work the speaker has used above: the "seed" picks up on the farmer's "plough[ing]" in the first line, the "robes" return from line 4, the "arms" are the "weapon, chain, and scourge" of line 10, and the general "wealth" sums it all up.

And notice the effect of the caesura that splits each of these lines in two, like this:

The seed ye sow, || another reaps;

Here, labor and rewards, workers and bosses, are literally split apart on the page.

Readers might see these urgent lines as a summation of everything that's come before: this is the take-away message of the first half of the poem. The next stanza will suggest exactly what there is to be done about this exploitative situation.

LINES 21-24

Sow seed—but let no tyrant reap:
Find wealth—let no imposter heap:
Weave robes—let not the idle wear:
Forge arms—in your defence to bear.

The sixth stanza marks the poem's persuasive pinnacle. Here, the speaker says aloud what the poem has been implying all along: it's time for a revolution.

Both the language and the structure here mirror stanza 5. The parallelism and the caesurae work almost identically:

Sow seed— || but let no tyrant reap:
Find wealth— || let no imposter heap:
Weave robes— || let not the idle wear:
Forge arms— || in your defence to bear.

The juxtaposition between stanzas 5 and 6 makes the speaker's argument very clear. "Since you're the ones who *make* all these things," the speaker suggests, "keep them for yourselves—and use the weapons you forge to defend what's yours!"

Alert readers, however, might notice that one of these lines is not like the others. Line 24 breaks from the pattern of parallelism in its second half to introduce a direct call to arms. If the workers are going to "let no tyrant reap" the rewards of their labor, then they're going to have to do something new: "forge arms" to "bear" in their own "defence."

Notice that the speaker advocates here for "defence," not offense—an attitude in keeping with Shelley's pacifism. The poem isn't suggesting that the workers make like French revolutionaries and march the aristocrats off to the guillotine. But the speaker also knows that the upper classes will not calmly accept the workers' decision to keep what's theirs.

Even a would-be peaceful revolution, the speaker thus suggests, is no small thing. The rest of the poem will thus argue that the costs of rebellion are far less than the costs of complacency.

LINES 25-28

Shrink to your cellars, holes, and cells—
In halls ye deck another dwells.
Why shake the chains ye wrought? Ye see
The steel ye tempered glance on ye.

After the memorable, chant-like call to arms in stanza 6, the poem takes a sharp turn from inspiration to warning. If the workers of England "shrink" from rebellion in fear, the speaker says, they might avoid feeling the sting of the weapons they made on their own backs—but they'll also lose something more important than safety.

If, rather than rising up against their oppressors, the "Bees of England" try to "shrink" from danger, retreating to their pitiful homes in "cellars, holes, and cells," things will never change. Instead, the same inequality will persist. The grand homes the workers "deck" (or decorate) will still be inhabited only by those lazy, useless "drones."

These lines pick up on phrasings from stanzas 5 and 6:

Shrink to your cellars, holes, and cells—
In halls ye deck another dwells.

The command "shrink" echoes the verb-driven parallelism of stanza 6 ("Sow seed," "Find wealth," and so on). And "In halls ye deck another dwells" echoes the phrasings of stanza 5: "The seed ye sow, another reaps," for example. In other words, the speaker uses the same language here to provide a counterexample.

But the speaker knows that rebellion is a lot to ask. Revolution demands that people put their very lives on the line. The poem addresses that concern in lines 27-28 with a rhetorical

question:

> Why shake the chains ye wrought? Ye see
> The steel ye tempered glance on ye.

The speaker seems to sympathize with the workers' fear of revolution; the basic sense here is, *"Why rock the boat? People will get hurt."* The speaker also implies a different unspoken answer, however. Feeling "the steel ye tempered glance on ye"—that is, feeling the blow of the very weapons the workers themselves forged—should be answer enough in itself. The pain of revolt, the speaker suggests, will be temporary; the suffering the current system creates, meanwhile, could go on forever.

LINES 29-32

> *With plough and spade and hoe and loom*
> *Trace your grave and build your tomb*
> *And weave your winding-sheet—till fair*
> *England be your Sepulchre.*

Much of the "Song to the Men of England" has been a rallying cry. The poem concludes, however, not with the carrot of a bright future for the rebels but with the stick of a grim future if they *don't* revolt. If things go on the way they are, the speaker declares, all the workers' skill and energy will only be the death of them.

Listen to the polysyndeton in this dire warning:

> With plough **and** spade **and** hoe **and** loom
> Trace your grave **and** build your tomb
> **And** weave your winding-sheet [...]

All those "and"s make it clear that every last bit of the workers' ingenuity will only be turned against them if they don't rebel. The "plough," "spade," and "hoe" are all agricultural tools; the "loom" is for weaving. But these instruments of creativity and production will only "dig" their owners' "graves" and help them to "weave [their] winding-sheet[s]" (or shrouds).

In other words, the real crime of English society, in the speaker's eyes, isn't just that it steals from the poor to give to the rich. It also makes the workers' own useful, wholesome skills into instruments of their own destruction.

If the workers don't do something about their predicament, the speaker concludes, what could have been a beautiful land—"fair England"—will only be a "Sepulchre," a tomb. This closing metaphor points out that the question here isn't just the suffering of individuals. It's also about what the speaker hopes for from the *country*. England, this poem suggests, could be a rich, fruitful, generous place. But before that happens, the country's laborers will have to take matters into their own hands, no matter the cost.

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The poem's central metaphor presents England as a beehive and its working classes as honeybees oppressed by useless aristocratic "drones."

It's not too unusual to see workers represented as bees; the cliché "busy as a bee" underscores how closely people tend to connect bees with hard, productive work. The "Bees of England" to whom the speaker cries out here fit right into this mold. They're the honest, skilled working people who create the country's wealth with their "loom[s]" and their "plough[s]."

What *is* a little different here is the way the poem presents the upper classes. Rather than suggesting that the aristocracy are the "queen bees," as people often do when they're using a society-as-beehive metaphor, the speaker calls them "stingless drones": that is, the male bees whose only job in a beehive is to fertilize the queen's eggs. While the "Bees of England" toil away, the speaker suggests, these "drones" live carefree lives of pleasure. But if they're "stingless," they're defenseless, and nothing should stop the worker bees from rising up against them.

The poem also uses a handful of smaller incidental metaphors:

- The upper classes, the speaker tells the workers, "drain your sweat—nay, drink your blood." These images present England's upper crust as parasites or vampires, feasting on the bodies of the laboring poor.
- The laborers, meanwhile, get nothing back—not even "love's gentle balm," a metaphor that depicts love as a soothing, healing ointment.
- If the people don't rise up against their oppressors, the speaker finally warns, then England will become nothing more than their "Sepulchre": in other words, not just their literal grave, but the tomb of their hopes, dreams, and dignity.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "ungrateful drones who would / Drain your sweat—nay, drink your blood?"
- **Line 9:** "Bees of England"
- **Line 11:** "stingless drones"
- **Line 14:** "love's gentle balm"
- **Lines 31-32:** "till fair / England be your Sepulchre."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The entire first half of the poem is built from a series of pointed rhetorical questions, asking, in sum: "Why on earth should England's workers continue to let the upper classes reap all the

rewards of their labor?" The implied answer, of course, is: "They shouldn't."

The first stretch of rhetorical questions here (framed with anaphora on the word "Wherefore," or why) ask about the specific kinds of labor the workers are doing: why do they "plough" and "weave" for the "tyrants" who rule over them? Why do they "feed" those "ungrateful drones"—and why, above all, do they "forge" the very weapons with which their oppressors keep them down? All of these questions have a pointed subtext. *It's you, workers, who make all the country's wealth*, the speaker seems to say—*so who really has the power here?*

The next questions dig deeper into the reasons for revolution. In the fourth stanza, the speaker asks what exactly is it that workers get out of this arrangement. *Do you earn "leisure, comfort, calm / Shelter, food, love's gentle balm" from the work you do? And if not, "what is it ye buy so dear"?* Here, the speaker invites the laboring "Bees of England" to reflect that, not only are they giving all they create away to people who do nothing, they're not even getting anything in return.

These pointed rhetorical questions thus set the stage for the poem's call to revolution. None of the logic here, the speaker suggests, adds up!

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-16:** "Men of England, wherefore plough / For the lords who lay ye low? / Wherefore weave with toil and care / The rich robes your tyrants wear? / Wherefore feed and clothe and save / From the cradle to the grave / Those ungrateful drones who would / Drain your sweat—nay, drink your blood? / Wherefore, Bees of England, forge / Many a weapon, chain, and scourge, / That these stingless drones may spoil / The forced produce of your toil? / Have ye leisure, comfort, calm, / Shelter, food, love's gentle balm? / Or what is it ye buy so dear / With your pain and with your fear?"

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposition is one of the poem's most powerful rhetorical tools. By setting the condition of the working classes next to that of the upper classes, the speaker makes it clear that English society is unfair and exploitative.

The poem's first three stanzas make this point over and over by comparing the "toil" of the "Bees of England"—that is, the hardworking laborers—to the luxurious idleness of the "stingless drones," the upper classes. Take a look at lines 3-4, for instance:

> Wherefore weave with toil and care
> The rich robes your tyrants wear?

Here, the poem juxtaposes not just the toiling workers and the "tyrants," but the *labor* and its *products*: the workers do all the, well, work, and the tyrants get all the gravy!

But perhaps the poem's most powerful juxtapositions come in stanzas 5 and 6, in which the speaker first makes a list of all the ways in which the upper classes exploit the workers and then makes a parallel list of all the ways in which the workers should fight this oppression. For example, take a look at lines 17 and 21 side by side:

> The seed ye sow, another reaps;
> [...]
> Sow seed—but let no tyrant reap:

This juxtaposition makes a clear cause-and-effect case for revolution.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 17-24
- Lines 25-26

PARALLELISM

Powerful parallelism helps the speaker to make a firm point: the workers of England need to rise up against their masters.

After the abundant anaphora in the rhetorical questions of the first four stanzas (examined in its own entry below), the speaker really gets down to business in the fifth and sixth stanzas. These stanzas use parallelism internally, in similarly phrased lines like these:

> The robes ye weave, another wears;
> The arms ye forge, another bears.
> Sow seed—but let no tyrant reap:
> Find wealth—let no imposter heap:

But these stanzas also run parallel to each other in their ideas and in their language. Every example the speaker brings up in stanza 5 returns in stanza 6. For instance:

> The arms ye forge, another bears.
> [...]
> Forge arms—in your defence to bear.

These punchy repetitions work alongside grammatical parallelism to give the speaker's call to revolution its rhetorical and sonic power. Besides drawing a clear connection between what's happening now and what the speaker feels *should* be happening, the parallelism here creates memorable, chant-like

sounds, perfect for yelling in an angry mob!

Towards the end of the poem, meanwhile, the speaker uses parallelism to warn of the consequences of inaction:

> With plough and spade and hoe and loom
> Trace your grave and build your tomb
> And weave your winding-sheet [...]

Stringing these active verbs together all in a row, the speaker suggests that all the workers' labors will be for nothing if they *don't* revolt: their skills will only allow them to efficiently dig their own graves.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Wherefore weave with toil and care"
- **Line 5:** "Wherefore feed and clothe and save"
- **Line 9:** "Wherefore, Bees of England, forge"
- **Lines 17-24:** "The seed ye sow, another reaps; / The wealth ye find, another keeps; / The robes ye weave, another wears; / The arms ye forge, another bears. / Sow seed—but let no tyrant reap: / Find wealth—let no imposter heap: / Weave robes—let not the idle wear: / Forge arms—in your defence to bear."
- **Lines 30-31:** "Trace your grave and build your tomb / And weave your winding-sheet"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora helps to make this poem sound like a powerful call to arms.

In the first half of the poem, the speaker supports an insistent series of rhetorical questions (designed to encourage the working "Bees of England" to question their lot) with similar phrasings. The first four questions here begin with a "Wherefore" (that is, "why"): "Wherefore plough," "Wherefore weave," "Wherefore feed and clothe and save," "Wherefore, Bees of England, forge [...] ?"

All that anaphora makes it clear that the speaker feels the answer to every one of these questions is the same: there's no reason at all that England's laborers should keep toiling away to support their selfish overlords. The repeated language here also suggests that the speaker has countless examples of exploitation to choose from!

Another powerful moment of anaphora appears in the fifth stanza:

> The seed ye sow, another reaps;
> The wealth ye find, another keeps;
> The robes ye weave, another wears;
> The arms ye forge, another bears.

The repeated opening phrasings here (alongside the broader parallelism of these lines) again suggests that the speaker could make an endless list of all the "wealth" the workers of England produce and are forced to relinquish. These lines are also just plain sonically powerful: all these similar-sounding lines next to each other sound uncompromising and firm.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "wherefore"
- **Line 3:** "Wherefore"
- **Line 5:** "Wherefore"
- **Line 9:** "Wherefore"
- **Line 17:** "The"
- **Line 18:** "The"
- **Line 19:** "The"
- **Line 20:** "The"

POLYSYNDETON

The poem's two moments of polysyndeton suggest just how much hard work the "men of England" pour into their country (and how little reward they get back).

The first appears at the beginning of the second stanza:

> Wherefore feed and clothe and save
> From the cradle to the grave
> Those ungrateful drones [...]

The string of "and"s here emphasizes the speaker's sense of injustice. The workers, these "and"s suggest, do nothing *but* take care of the upper classes—and those "ungrateful drones" give nothing back. Rather, they're perfectly happy to "drain" the workers of their very life's "blood," metaphorically speaking.

And if the workers don't rise up against their oppressors, the speaker says, they might as well dig their own graves. Listen to the return of polysyndeton in the final stanza, where the speaker spells out what will happen if the workers don't revolt:

> With plough and spade and hoe and loom
> Trace your grave and build your tomb

Here, that sequence of "and"s links all the tools of the workers' trades: "plough," "spade," and "hoe" for the farmers, and a "loom" for the weavers. By connecting these tools with "and"s rather than commas, the speaker creates a feeling of overwhelm: there's an impression here of countless people using countless tools. All that energy and skill, the speaker warns, will be wasted unless revolution comes along.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "and," "and"
- **Line 29:** "and," "and," "and"

ALLITERATION

Forceful alliteration underlines this poem's revolutionary message.

Just listen to all the repeated sounds in the first stanza:

> Men of England, wherefore plough
> For the lords who lay ye low?
> Wherefore weave with toil and care
> The rich robes your tyrants wear?

The alliterative sounds fly as thick as thrown stones here, helping to make the speaker's points feel as memorable as they're urgent. Often, these sounds draw special attention to the speaker's big ideas. For instance, when the speaker decries the "lords who lay ye low," the repeated /l/ sound connects these no-good "lords" to the evil they do. Similarly, the /t/ sound links the working people's "toil" to the "tyrants" who soak up all the profit.

There's another good example of pointed alliteration in lines 7-8:

> Those ungrateful drones who would
> Drain your sweat—nay, drink your blood?

Once more, an alliterative sound links the villainous upper-class "drones" to their dastardly deeds. The strong /d/ here lands like a punch, emphasizing the idea that the aristocracy, vampire-like, *feeds* on the lower classes.

Elsewhere, alliteration also gives force to the speaker's rallying cries:

> Sow seed—but let no tyrant reap:
> Find wealth—let no imposter heap:
> Weave robes—let not the idle wear:

These /s/ and /w/ sounds just plain make this section musical and memorable: these lines sound like a chant for revolutionaries to take up in the street.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "lords," "lay," "low"
- **Line 3:** "Wherefore weave," "toil"
- **Line 4:** "rich robes," "tyrants," "wear"
- **Line 7:** "drones"
- **Line 8:** "Drain," "drink"
- **Line 10:** "scourge"
- **Line 11:** "stingless," "spoil"
- **Line 13:** "comfort, calm"
- **Line 17:** "seed," "sow"
- **Line 19:** "weave," "wears"
- **Line 21:** "Sow seed"
- **Line 23:** "Weave," "wear"
- **Line 25:** "cellars," "cells"
- **Line 26:** "deck," "dwells"
- **Line 31:** "weave," "winding"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, supports the poem's political points with music.

For instance, listen to the vowel sounds that run through the second stanza:

> Wherefore feed and clothe and save
> From the cradle to the grave
> Those ungrateful drones who would
> Drain your sweat—nay, drink your blood?

The insistent long /ay/ sound here (helped along by strong /d/ alliteration in "drones," "Drain," and "drink") gives this unpleasantly visceral portrait of a parasitic (and even vampire-like) ruling class some extra punch.

Assonance works like this throughout the poem, repeated vowel sounds adding emphasis and energy to the speaker's call to action. For another example, note the slew of long /ee/ sounds from lines 17 to 24:

> The seed ye sow, another reaps;
> The wealth ye find, another keeps;
> The robes ye weave, another wears;
> The arms ye forge, another bears.
> Sow seed—but let no tyrant reap:
> Find wealth—let no imposter heap:
> Weave robes—let not the idle wear:

The return to the same sound over and over again lends the poem a sense of building urgency and momentum.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "For," "lords"
- **Line 5:** "save"
- **Line 6:** "cradle," "grave"
- **Line 7:** "ungrateful"
- **Line 8:** "Drain," "nay"
- **Line 17:** "seed ye," "reaps"
- **Line 18:** "ye," "keeps"
- **Line 19:** "ye," "weave"
- **Line 21:** "seed," "reap"
- **Line 22:** "heap"
- **Line 23:** "Weave"
- **Line 25:** "cellars," "cells"
- **Line 26:** "deck," "dwells"

- **Line 27:** “shake,” “chains,” “Ye see”
- **Line 28:** “steel ye”
- **Line 30:** “Trace,” “grave”
- **Line 31:** “weave,” “sheet”

CAESURA

Caesurae help to shape both the poem's rhythms and its logic.

Perhaps the strongest examples of both of those purposes come from stanzas 5 and 6. Here, the speaker first uses caesurae to set up a structure that says, "something's wrong with this picture":

> The seed ye sow, || another reaps;
> The wealth ye find, || another keeps;
> The robes ye weave, || another wears;
> The arms ye forge, || another bears.

Here, caesurae work alongside emphatic parallelism to suggest a literal split between the working classes and the upper classes: those repeated commas keep the workers and those who benefit from their work apart!

The poem goes on to use the same effect even more emphatically in stanza 6, where the speaker declares what should be done about this sorry state of affairs:

> Sow seed— || but let no tyrant reap:
> Find wealth— || let no imposter heap:
> Weave robes— || let not the idle wear:
> Forge arms— || in your defence to bear.

Those heavy dashes invite the workers to separate themselves even more firmly from their rulers, refusing to let the idle rich benefit from their skill and labor.

Elsewhere, caesurae serve other stylistic purposes. Listen to the poem's first lines, for example:

> Men of England, || wherefore plough
> For the lords who lay ye low?

That comma falls in a natural position, just where one would pause in ordinary speech. But it also sets off the words "Men of England," making them feel like a dramatic greeting—or a summons.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “England, wherefore”
- **Line 8:** “sweat—nay,”
- **Line 9:** “Wherefore, Bees,” “England, forge”
- **Line 10:** “weapon, chain, and”
- **Line 13:** “leisure, comfort, calm,”
- **Line 14:** “Shelter, food, love’s”
- **Line 17:** “sow, another”
- **Line 18:** “find, another”
- **Line 19:** “weave, another”
- **Line 20:** “forge, another”
- **Line 21:** “seed—but”
- **Line 22:** “wealth—let”
- **Line 23:** “robes—let”
- **Line 24:** “arms—in”
- **Line 25:** “cellars, holes, and”
- **Line 27:** “wrought? Ye”
- **Line 31:** “winding-sheet—till”

VOCABULARY

Wherefore (Line 1, Line 3, Line 5, Line 9) - Why.

Plough (Line 1) - Prepare fields for planting.

Lay ye low (Line 2) - Overpower you, force you into a lowly position.

Ye (Line 2, Line 13, Line 15, Line 17, Line 18, Line 19, Line 20, Line 27, Line 28) - You.

Toil (Line 3) - Backbreaking work.

Drones (Line 7) - A type of stingless male bee whose job in the hive is to fertilize eggs. Here, the speaker is imagining the upper classes as defenseless parasites getting fat on the labor of the poor.

Scourge (Line 10) - A whip.

Spoil (Line 11) - In this context, "spoil" means "steal" or "loot."

Balm (Line 14) - Comforts, soothing pleasures.

Sow (Line 17, Line 21) - Plant, cultivate.

Reaps (Line 17) - Harvests, benefits from.

Deck (Line 26) - Decorate.

Tempered (Line 28) - Put through a strengthening process of alternate heating and cooling.

Glance (Line 28) - Strike, hit, bounce off of.

Plough and spade and hoe and loom (Line 29) - Agricultural and manufacturing tools:

- A "plough" is a horse-drawn device used to crumble and aerate the soil in fields in preparation for planting.
- A "spade" is a shovel.
- A "hoe" is a kind of rake used for turning up soil.
- A "loom" is a frame used to weave fabric.

Winding-sheet (Line 31) - A shroud, a cloth used to wrap dead bodies.

Sepulchre (Line 32) - Tomb.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Song to the Men of England" uses a straightforward form to convey a powerful message. Shelley intended this poem to be a rallying cry, and over the course of its eight four-line stanzas (or quatrains), it builds a case for revolution using simple, memorable rhymed couplets and a driving, chant-like meter.

In a lot of ways, this poem builds on a popular, working-class art form: the ballad. In Shelley's time (and long before!), folk songs were used to carry news and express political opinions; ballads could even be propaganda, as in the case of the many patriotic English ballads about the defeat of Napoleon, the would-be conqueror of all Europe. Shelley here chooses a simple, songlike form to spread, not patriotic fervor, but revolutionary sentiment.

METER

The meter in "Song to the Men of England" rings like hammer blows on an anvil.

The poem is mostly written in trochaic tetrameter. That means that every line uses four trochees, metrical feet with a DUM-da rhythm. Here's how that sounds in the first two lines:

Men of | England, | wherefore | plough
For the | lords who | lay ye | low?

Alert readers might notice that the speaker leaves off the final unstressed syllable of each line, so that lines both begin and end on a strong stress. This is a meter that's meant to grab readers by the collar! And that makes sense: the speaker's clear goal here is to incite revolution.

But the speaker does introduce some variations later on in the poem. Listen to what happens in the fifth stanza, for example:

The seed | ye sow, | anoth- | er reaps;
The wealth | ye find, | anoth- | er keeps;
The robes | ye weave, | anoth- | er wears;
The arms | ye forge, | anoth- | er bears.

Here, the speaker switches to a steady iambic rhythm. In other words, the lines are built from iambs, feet with a da-DUM rhythm. That choice gives this description of economic injustice a more insidious, warning tone than the earlier trochaic calls to action.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of "Song to the Men of England" is meant to make this poem into a battle cry. Each quatrain uses two rhymed couplets in a row, like this:

AABB

What's more, almost all the rhyme words in the poem are punchy one-syllable words: "grave," "blood," "tomb," and so forth. The only exception is the poem's final, dramatic three-syllable word: "Sepulchre," or mausoleum. This stand-out word delivers a warning that revolution (in the speaker's eyes) is a matter of life and death.

The poem's simple, memorable rhymes are catchy and even chantable; these couplets would sound right at home at a protest march! Note, though, that some of the rhymes here (including the first ones, "plough" and "low") are slant, which helps to give the poem a little texture.

SPEAKER

Readers don't learn anything about the speaker in the poem. Instead, the poem's focus is squarely on the speaker's message "to the Men of England."

That said, the speaker is also a voice for Percy Bysshe Shelley himself. Shelley was no stranger to rabble-rousing. As a young man, he was kicked out of Oxford University for writing a pamphlet called *The Necessity of Atheism*; that was just the beginning of his career as a radical and a revolutionary. Here, his speaker advocates for the rights of working people, another of Shelley's pet causes. Shelley often wrote passionately against class tyranny (and distanced himself from his own wealthy, aristocratic background).

The speaker's argument that the workers, being the people who actually *produce* wealth, hold all of society's real power, was a dangerously radical one in Shelley's time. But the passion in this speaker's voice suggests that this person is much more worried about the consequences of inertia than the consequences of rebellion. To this speaker, working people's rights and dignity demand that they rise up against the class system that keeps them down.

Perhaps the speaker also sees themselves as something of a leader of the rebel forces: this poem places a lot of faith in poetry's power to motivate and inspire.

SETTING

The poem is set in England at the time of its writing: 1819, when the country was suffering from a serious economic depression after Britain's 1815 victory in the expensive, bloody Napoleonic wars. The speaker exhorts the suffering, hungry working "men of England" to rise up against the ruling classes, keeping the wealth their labor produces for themselves rather than passing it along to the aristocrats at the top of the economic food chain.

While this poem has a specific historical context, its message of rebellion and worker's rights means that readers might hear it

as a call to the oppressed working classes of any time and place.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) was one of a group of 19th-century British writers now known as the Romantics. Alongside notable figures like his wife Mary Shelley (the author of *Frankenstein*) and his friend Lord Byron, Shelley helped to transform literature forever.

Shelley's work, like a lot of Romantic poetry, was concerned with deep feeling, the power of the natural world, and a desire for political and personal freedom. Where earlier Enlightenment-era writers like Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift aspired to elegant phrasings and satirical wit, Shelley and many of his contemporaries preferred to write passionate verse that valued the mysteries and terrors of the imagination over crisp rationality.

Shelley wrote "Song to the Men of England" in 1819, when England was going through a serious economic crisis in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars. The poem was considered so inflammatory and dangerous that it didn't appear in print until Mary Shelley brought out the posthumous 1839 collection *Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*.

Shelley is often associated with Byron (a close friend and sometime collaborator) and Keats (a more distant acquaintance), not just because the three men were all important Romantic poets, but because they all died tragically young. Shelley, with particular drama, drowned in a shipwreck in the Bay of Naples after he insisted on sailing out in a storm. His short life, poetic death, radical convictions, and passionate verse all mean he's remembered as the quintessential Romantic hero, and he remains a beloved and widely-read poet to this day.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Shelley wrote this poem in 1819, when England was going through an economic crisis. In the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars (in which Britain struggled against the imperial ambitions of Napoleon Bonaparte, the self-declared Emperor of France), England was left with too many laborers and not enough work—a problem made worse by the early phases of the Industrial Revolution. During this time, factory work began to overtake farming as the country's primary form of labor, many jobs were mechanized, and cities like London and Manchester became bigger and more powerful as people moved there from the countryside, looking for work. To top it all off, the infamous Corn Laws of 1815 taxed imported grain so intensely that many working people simply couldn't afford food.

And these were only some of the reasons that England at this time was full of rebellious energy. The reigning king, George III, had lost his mind, and the people weren't too pleased to be governed by his dissolute young son the Prince Regent (who would become King George IV after his father finally died in 1820).

Shelley, always politically radical, saw in this upheaval, discontent, and injustice an opportunity for an economic and social revolution. He intended "Song to the Men of England," with its simple language and polemical style, to become a rallying cry for the English working classes. While the poem was never published in his lifetime, Shelley still got what he wanted in a way: the poem remains a favorite with labor movements to this day.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Shelley's Rediscovered Political Poetry — Learn more about Shelley's polemical poetry in an article about a recently rediscovered poem he wrote while he was a student at Oxford University. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/nov/10/lost-shelley-poem-execrating-rruling-class-public-poetical-essay-on-the-existing-state-of-things)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a dramatic reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/YUcFP50dqmQ)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Shelley's life and work at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/percy-bysshe-shelley)
- The Keats-Shelley Museum — Visit the website of the Keats-Shelley Memorial Museum to learn more about how Shelley fit into the Romantic movement. (https://ksh.roma.it/)
- Portraits of Shelley — See some images of Shelley at London's National Portrait Gallery. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp04088/percy-bysshe-shelley)
- The Post-Napoleonic Depression — Learn more about the tumultuous period of English history when this poem was written. (https://www.britainexpress.com/History/Post-Napoleonic-Britain.htm)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY POEMS

- England in 1819
- Love's Philosophy
- Mutability
- Ode to the West Wind
- Ozymandias
- Stanzas Written in Dejection, Near Naples

- To a Skylark

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Nelson, Kristin. "*Song to the Men of England*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 8 Feb 2022. Web. 11 Mar 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "*Song to the Men of England*." LitCharts LLC, February 8, 2022. Retrieved March 11, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/percy-bysshe-shelley/song-to-the-men-of-england.