Stanzas Written in Dejection, Near Naples

POEM TEXT

The Sun is warm, the sky is clear,
The waves are dancing fast and bright,
Blue isles and snowy mountains wear
The purple noon's transparent might,
The breath of the moist earth is light,
Around its unexpanded buds;
Like many a voice of one delight,
The winds, the birds, the Ocean-floods;
The City's voice itself is soft, like Solitude's.

I see the Deep's untrampled floor
With green and purple seaweeds strown;
I see the waves upon the shore
Like light dissolved in star-showers, thrown;
I sit upon the sands alone;
The lightning of the noontide Ocean
Is flashing round me, and a tone
Arises from its measured motion,
How sweet! did any heart now share in my emotion.

Alas! I have nor hope nor health,
Nor peace within nor calm around,
Nor that content surpassing wealth
The sage in meditation found,
And walked with inward glory crowned;
Nor fame nor power nor love nor leisure—
Others I see whom these surround,
Smiling they live and call life pleasure:
To me that cup has been dealt in another measure.

Yet now despair itself is mild,
Even as the winds and waters are;
I could lie down like a tired child
And weep away the life of care
Which I have borne and yet must bear,
Till Death like Sleep might steal on me,
And I might feel in the warm air
My cheek grow cold, and hear the Sea
Breathe o'er my dying brain its last monotony.

Some might lament that I were cold,
As I, when this sweet day is gone,
Which my lost heart, too soon grown old,
Insults with this untimely moan—
They might lament,—for I am one
Whom men love not, and yet regret;
Unlike this day, which, when the sun
Shall on its stainless glory set,
Will linger though enjoyed, like joy in Memory yet.

SUMMARY

The sun is shining and there are no clouds in the sky, and the waves are moving joyously; the sheer purple hues of midday fall over the little blue islands and snow-capped mountains, and the delicate, misty air surrounds flower buds that haven't opened yet. The breezes, the birds, the ocean tide pooling over the land—they're all like one enchanting voice. And even the voice of the city is quiet, like that of loneliness itself.

I see the depths of the ocean where no human feet have stepped, with its green and purple algae scattered all around; I see the waves washing up against the beach like the light of meteors being hurled across the sky; I sit by myself on the shore; the ocean's waves reflect the midday like flashes of lightning all around me, and a sound wells up from the water's steady, rhythmic motion. Oh, how nice it would be if there were anyone else who could feel how I feel!

But unfortunately for me, I'm neither hopeful nor healthy, and I don't have a sense of peacefulness or calm. I don't have the kind of happiness or satisfaction that's even better than having lots of money, the kind that a wise person might discover through meditating and then be able to walk around with an internal glow. I don't have recognition or influence or love or even free time. I see other people who have these things, smiling and thinking it's a joy to be alive. My lot in life has been very different from theirs.

Still, my deep sadness has gotten a little less intense, softening in line with the gentle wind and waves; I could curl up like a sleepy child and cry away the burdens I've carried and must continue to carry until death quietly crept on me like sleep; my skin might grow cold in the warm air, and the last thing I'd hear before I ceased to exist would be the endless rhythm of the sea.

Some people might mourn my death, just as I will mourn the passage of this beautiful day—a day my weary heart does injustice to by whimpering about its unwelcome sorrows. Those people might express sadness over my death because

even though I'm not someone people love, they'll still feel bad that I'm gone. By contrast, when night replaces the flawless beauty of this day, that beauty will carry on in memory, and therefore continue to bring joy.

THEMES

ISOLATION, DESPAIR, AND THE CONSOLATIONS OF NATURE

Sitting at the Italian seaside, the speaker of "Stanzas Written in Dejection, Near Naples" feels desperately sad and alone. The speaker sees the beauty and serenity of nature everywhere he looks, yet readers get the sense that nature's lovely harmony only makes the speaker more aware of his own isolation and suffering. Despite his utter "dejection," however, by the poem's end the speaker *does* seem to find some consolation in the peaceful, lasting beauty of the landscape. The poem ultimately suggests that nature can offer both comfort and perspective: the natural world helps the speaker realize that his own sufferings are only temporary, while the beauty and serenity of nature are everlasting.

The poem's speaker seems to believe at first that *nothing* can comfort him in his sorrow. Even a beautiful Italian seaside scene seems only to hammer home his despair: the day is "warm" and "clear" and the ocean's "waves are dancing fast and bright," yet he's also a mere *observer* of all this enchanting beauty. The speaker seems cut off from the splendor that surrounds him, and the "winds, the birds, [and] the ocean floods" to "[t]he City's voice itself," just remind him of his own solitude.

He thus moves from observing the beauty of nature to lamenting the bad luck he's been "dealt" in life and begrudging those who walk around "smiling" and find being alive pleasant. Not only does the speaker not have anyone to share this scene with, he reflects, but he also has no "hope," "health," "peace," or "calm" to fall back on. In other words, he doesn't have a single friend and feels generally heartsore, unlucky, and hard done by.

Gradually, however, the landscape also makes the speaker's heartache a little easier to bear. Despite his profound sorrow and self-pity, the speaker notes that his "despair" feels more "mild" as he sits by the sea watching "the waves upon the shore." Natural beauty, the poem suggests, has the power to soften or dull even the most stubborn pain. The speaker even starts to feel as if "lying down" and "dying" beside the ocean wouldn't be so bad—as long as he could feel "the warm air" of "the sea" against his cheek as life slipped away. (Of course, an alternative reading works here too: the speaker's despair becomes so unbearable that he'd like to stop living altogether; either way, the image is one of peace, rest, and comfort.)

This talk of death makes the speaker reflect that nature's beauty isn't just consoling and distracting: it's also reassuringly permanent. The lovely rhythm of the day around the speaker reminds him that while people's lives are imperfect and short, the world's beauty is a deathless source of "joy." When imagining his own death, the speaker reflects that he may or may not be "mourn[ed]." Nature, on the other hand, "dies" as beautifully as it lives, leaving only more delight behind it. When this particularly lovely day "dies" at sunset, its memory will "linger" on, creating more "joy" as people recall its beauty. Even nature's endings, these lines suggest, have an enduring loveliness of their own.

The idea that nature's beauty persists forever seems to help the speaker to see beyond his own misery, even if only temporarily. The speaker might die unlamented and alone—but then he'll be dead, and his pain will be over. Nature, meanwhile, will go on and on, providing eternal comfort and joy. In some sense, then, natural beauty always gets the last word: human sorrows and failings are impermanent, but nature endures.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-45

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

The Sun is warm, the sky is clear,
The waves are dancing fast and bright,
Blue isles and snowy mountains wear
The purple noon's transparent might,
The breath of the moist earth is light,
Around its unexpanded buds;

The poem's title tells readers that what follows all takes place "Near Naples," a coastal Italian city. The speaker then begins describing the world around him with simple observations that reveal the loveliness of the day at hand. He begins:

> The Sun is warm, the sky is clear,
> The waves are dancing fast and bright,

Note how the parallelism (bolded above) and asyndeton (or lack of conjunctions) immediately make the speaker's observations feel quick and straightforward. The metaphor of dancing waves, meanwhile, imbues the scene with liveliness and joy.

The next few lines are filled with more colorful imagery as the speaker describes "[b]lue isles," snow-capped mountains, and the "purple" light of midday. The speaker's use of personification also creates the sense that nature is truly alive all around him. The little islands and "mountains" aren't just tinted "purple"—they're "wear[ing]" the day's vibrant colors like clothes; the speaker calls the moist sea air the earth's own

"breath," which is "light" as it surrounds flower buds that have yet to bloom. That those buds are "unexpanded" further suggests their unrealized potential; it's an image of hope and anticipation. And the sibilance of this passage (as in "dancing fast," "its unexpanded buds") subtly evokes the spray of the sea and the gentle hush of those dancing waves.

The poem's title doesn't just tell readers where things take place; it also tells readers that the speaker is feeling dejected, deeply sad, and alone. As such, while the speaker quickly, tenderly catalogs the beauty around him, readers might get the sense that he's trying to distract himself from his own pain and suffering.

This opening stanza also establishes the poem's meter: all these lines are in iambic tetrameter. An iamb is a poetic unit with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern, and tetrameter means there are four iambs per line (for a total of eight syllables). Here's that meter in action in lines 1 and 2:

> The Sun | is warm, | the sky | is clear,
> The waves | are danc- | ing fast | and bright,

The steady iambic rhythm evokes the calm serenity of the day at hand.

LINES 7-9

> *Like many a voice of one delight,*
> *The winds, the birds, the Ocean-floods;*
> *The City's voice itself is soft, like Solitude's.*

The day isn't simply beautiful, the speaker continues, but also in total harmony: everything from "the wind" and "the birds" to "the Ocean-floods" (that is, when the sea temporarily pools onto the land) is "Like many a voice of one delight." This simile again personifies nature, making the world itself feel alive and present. Nature's loveliness manifests in lots of different ways, but all these different elements come together like voices singing a single delightful song.

The speaker also personifies the "City" of Naples itself, saying that its "voice is "soft, like Solitude's." This simile suggests that the speaker hears the thrum of city life off in the distance, yet this only reminds him of his own loneliness and isolation. Were he nearer to Naples, perhaps the loud sounds of the city would distract him from his troubles. But he's far enough away that he can hear only the faint echo of the city's "voice," the sound of which just reminds him of how alone he is. The sounds of both nature and human society are harmonious, interwoven into a single song of which the speaker isn't part.

Again, the poem uses sibilance to cast a hush over the poem:

> The City's voice itself is soft, like Solitude's.

The soft /s/ sounds here evoke the speaker's isolation, the poem itself growing quiet.

Careful readers will notice that the last line of this stanza breaks with the meter that the poem has used so far. While the rest of the stanza is written in iambic tetrameter, using four iambs per line, this is a line of *hexameter*. That means there are six iambs in the line and a total of 12 syllables:

> The Ci- | ty's voice | itself | is soft, | like Sol- | itude's.

Not coincidentally, this is the line where the speaker introduces loneliness and isolation into the poem for the first time with the word "Solitude." The longer line length here seems to separate this line from the rest of the stanza, subtly evoking the way the speaker himself feels separated from his surroundings. The speaker will follow this pattern throughout the poem: the final line of each stanza will be longer than the rest.

LINES 10-14

> *I see the Deep's untrampled floor*
> *With green and purple seaweeds strown;*
> *I see the waves upon the shore*
> *Like light dissolved in star-showers, thrown;*
> *I sit upon the sands alone;*

The speaker turns his attention back to the ocean, saying he can see all the way down to its "untrampled floor"—that is, to the bottom of the sea. Of course, the speaker can't *literally* see this far down! Instead, he seems to be imagining what exists beneath all those dancing waves: an untouched world filled with colorful "seaweeds." That this place is "untrampled" implies that it's beyond human reach and thus distances the speaker from the ocean's beauty.

He then describes the way waves wash upon the shoreline, the water seeming to dissolve much like the "light" of "star-showers" (meteor showers) is "thrown" across the sky and burns out into the darkness. The imagery seems once again to highlight the speaker's stillness as he "sits upon the sands alone." Note how the "waves" and the "star[s]" and even the "sands" are all plural entities, things made up of lots of different parts coming together in harmony; by contrast, the speaker is totally on his own.

The anaphora of these lines emphasizes the contrast between the speaker and his surroundings. The speaker repeats "I see" at the start of lines 10 and 12, calling attention to the fact that he's a mere observer of, rather than a participant in, all this beauty. And that "I see" then becomes "I sit" in line 14. The similarity of the language here (bolstered by the alliteration of "see"/"sit") only highlights how *distant* the speaker feels from what he *sees*:

> I see the Deep's untrampled floor
> [...]
> I see the waves upon the shore
> [...]

I sit upon the sands alone;

These lines are also again filled with sibilance, especially in lines 13-14. Note all the /s/, /sh/, and /z/ sounds here:

Like light dissolved in star-showers, thrown;
I sit upon the sands alone;

The quiet sounds mirror the quietness of the speaker's solitude.

LINES 15-18

The lightning of the noontide Ocean
Is flashing round me, and a tone
Arises from its measured motion,
How sweet! did any heart now share in my emotion.

"The lightning of the noontide Ocean" might refer to the way that the midday sunlight bounces of the waves, creating flashes of "lightning" around the speaker. The imagery is again striking, but also maybe a bit foreboding: the mention of "lightning" suggests the intensity of the speaker's feelings at this moment, and perhaps even suggests that the speaker sees a storm where there is sunshine.

The speaker next describes "a tone" rising up from the "measured motion" of the sea, a reference to the steady, rhythmic sound of the waves and water. The humming /m/ alliteration in "measured motion" evokes the gentle vibrations of the ocean's sounds.

In the stanza's final line, the speaker turns inward, saying that it would be quite "sweet" if only there were some other "heart" that could "now share in [his] emotion." In other words, the speaker is feeling that all this beauty would be comforting if only he weren't so alone—if only he has someone to share his feelings with.

Again, this line is longer than the rest of the stanza. In fact, it has 13 syllables instead of the expected 12 of iambic hexameter—making the speaker lament about his solitude stand out all the more starkly against his descriptions of nature's beauty:

How sweet! | did a- | ny heart | now share | in my | emotion.

That extra unstressed beat dangling at the line's end is called a feminine ending, and it creates the sense of the line simply falling off, the speaker losing steam.

LINES 19-23

Alas! I have nor hope nor health,
Nor peace within nor calm around,
Nor that content surpassing wealth
The sage in meditation found,
And walked with inward glory crowned;

The speaker opens the next stanza with a dramatic "Alas!"—an expression of utter resignation. He longs for someone to "share in [his] emotion," yet he believes that simply isn't in the cards for him. In fact, he says here that he's been dealt an unlucky hand in life in general.

Notice how his repetition of "nor" (a device called polysyndeton) hammers home just how much the speaker *doesn't* have:

[...] I have nor hope nor health,
Nor peace within nor calm around,
Nor that content surpassing wealth

Alliteration, too, adds emphasis to what the speaker lacks, with the /h/ sounds in "hope" and "health" and the sharp /c/ sounds of "calm" and "content." The speaker says he doesn't have the kind of "content" (that is, contentment or happiness) that's even better than wealth, the kind of inner enlightenment that wise men discover through "meditation."

It's possible that the speaker is talking about sages and meditation in general here. It's also possible that he's making a subtle allusion to the *Meditations* of Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, who wrote that things like "health," "wealth," and "fame" are not within one's power to control; all one can do is live by one's principles. This, the speaker suggests, is what allows someone to go around as if "crowned" with an "inward glory." The metaphor of a "crown[]" implies that living life according to one's principles gives one a kind of power and authority, which comes from within and therefore cannot be taken away.

Of course, this speaker says he *doesn't* have this.

LINES 24-27

Nor fame nor power nor love nor leisure—
Others I see whom these surround,
Smiling they live and call life pleasure:
To me that cup has been dealt in another measure.

The speaker continues to use polyptoton while listing the things he does not have, all those "nor"s piling up in a way that suggests the depth of the speaker's misfortune:

Nor fame nor power nor love nor leisure—

Lacking the simple contentment of the sages, the speaker is bothered by the fact that he has none of the material pleasures of life. He reaches a kind of emotional climax with this line, breaking off with an em dash as if there's simply no point in going on.

People around him, meanwhile, seem perfectly happy, "[s]miling" and thinking it a "pleasure" to be alive. To the

speaker, it seems as if everyone else is having a grand old time because they haven't been as unlucky as he has.

The speaker then alludes to the biblical story of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Knowing he must soon die for the sins of humankind, Jesus had a moment of doubt and uncertainty, asking God to "take this cup of suffering away." Like Jesus, the speaker feels he has been given too great a burden to bear—that his "cut has been dealt in another measure."

LINES 28-32

Yet now despair itself is mild,
Even as the winds and waters are;
I could lie down like a tired child
And weep away the life of care
Which I have borne and yet must bear,

The speaker just spent an entire stanza lamenting how unlucky he's been in life. Now, he goes on to say that his "despair itself" has become rather "mild, / Even as the winds and waters are." In other words, the speaker feels his feelings of "dejection" softening somewhat; they haven't gone away, but they're not as sharp or pressing as they seemed before. It seems that the gentleness of the "winds and waters" (notice the rhythmic alliteration here!) has calmed the speaker.

It's also possible to read these lines as the speaker saying that he's so remarkably dejected that it's made him somewhat numb to *all* feeling—including his sorrow. Perhaps he's simply tired of feeling said.

The speaker goes on to say that he could simply "lie down like a tired child," a simile that suggests his vulnerability; like a little kid, he just wants to curl up and give in to his weariness. The simile also suggests that the speaker longs to be soothed and cared for, for someone to come along and make things okay. He'd like "weep away [his] life of care"—that is, cry away the burdens he has long "borne" and must continue to "bear."

The use of polyptoton in line 32 ("borne" and "bear") and the firmness of that "must bear" suggests that the speaker's difficult journey is far from over. He still bears the same heavy burdens as always, even if he does feel momentarily calmed by the mellow sounds of the "winds and waters."

LINES 33-36

Till Death like Sleep might steal on me,
And I might feel in the warm air
My cheek grow cold, and hear the Sea
Breathe o'er my dying brain its last monotony.

Lying on the sand "like a tired child," having wept "away" his cares, the speaker next envisions "Death" coming upon him "like Sleep"—gently, imperceptibly. The simile treats death not as something frightening but rather as a *break*, a respite from the speaker's suffering.

The speaker imagines being able to "feel" his "cheek grow[ing] cold" against "the warm air" of the sea. The sea would be a comforting presence in the speaker's final moments, its endless, repetitive motions lulling the speaker gently into death.

The poem once again personifies the ocean in these lines, referring to its motions and sounds as the sea breathing. While the speaker's body grows cold and lifeless, the sea air will remain "warm" and the sea itself will continue on with its "monotony"—changeless, ever-lasting. The juxtaposition between the speaker and the sea here might suggest that while the speaker's troubles are finite, the beauty and rhythms of nature carry on indefinitely.

Perhaps, then, the speaker is feeling somewhat soothed not only by the consistent rhythm of waves lapping against the shore, but also by the realization that life doesn't begin and end with human beings. There is something more eternal out there than the speaker's own pleasures and sorrows.

LINES 37-42

Some might lament that I were cold,
As I, when this sweet day is gone,
Which my lost heart, too soon grown old,
Insults with this untimely moan—
They might lament,—for I am one
Whom men love not, and yet regret;

The speaker now considers what might happen after he dies. Someone "might lament" his death, he says. That is, someone out there might grieve if he were to die—but they also "might" not! Notice how that "might" contrasts with the "must bear" from the prior stanza; the only thing the speaker seems totally sure about is his own suffering. In any case, the speaker then compares his own death to the death of "this sweet day," suggesting that people might miss him in the same way that he will miss the beauty of this day when it's over.

His "lost heart" has "grown old" much too quickly due to suffering, the speaker continues, and his "moan," or self-pitying despair, is an insult to such a beautiful day. Such beauty ought to be delighted in, the speaker implies here—not observed by a sad, lonely man who can't seem to get over his own sadness enough to fully appreciate it!

And yet, he continues to "moan" about his isolation: people don't "love" him, the speaker says, yet may feel some sadness upon his death—if for no other reason than they feel pity for him, dying unloved on the sands, alone. The speaker seems to get some kind of satisfaction out of knowing that people might "regret" having not "love[d]" him while they had the chance, but there is also bitterness in the speaker's tone.

LINES 43-45

Unlike this day, which, when the sun
Shall on its stainless glory set,
Will linger though enjoyed, like joy in Memory yet.

The speaker continues to compare his own (imagined) death to this perfect day by the beach coming to an end. Where his death will only result in "lament" and "regret" as people feel sorrow or pity for him, the day's joy will "linger" on in people's memories. Thoughts of the day will continue to inspire joy even after "the sun" has "on its stainless glory set."

By concluding with this idea that nature's beauty will "linger" on long after the speaker and his worldly troubles have been forgotten, the poem suggests that the speaker finds at least some consolation in the natural world around him. While he'll one day die, such death means he will no longer be filled with suffering and sorrow. Meanwhile, the natural world will carry on, beautiful as ever.

While it isn't necessary to read the poem autobiographically, the last line does seem to take on a little extra resonance when considering the poem's context. Shelley had recently lost a young daughter when he wrote this poem, which almost certainly reflects the intensity of his grief. The final line might suggest that his daughter's memory remains, allowing the speaker to find enjoyment in her despite her death.

SYMBOLS

THE SEA

In this poem, the sea symbolizes the constancy, vibrancy, and everlasting beauty of nature.

The sea is at first an active, lively presence in the poem: its waves dance, light bounces off its surface like "lightning," and its depths are filled with colorful plants far beyond humanity's reach. These descriptions speak to the joy and loveliness of the natural world that surrounds the speaker, and they also present the natural world as something vividly *alive*.

Yet while at first the speaker is struck by the sea's "fast and bright" beauty and its "voice of [...] delight," he's eventually comforted by just how "mild" (or calm and gentle) its waters are, and the way the sounds of the ocean seem to "breathe" over him with "monotony"—steadily, without changing. The sea isn't striking only for its vivacity, then, but also for its *constancy*: the way that the waves continually move in and out, in and out, day after day. The steadfast, rhythmic movement of the water seems to assure the speaker that even as his own heart, riddled with anguish, will "too soon grow old" and die, the beauty that surrounds him will "linger" on—even if only in the memories of those who've witnessed it.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "The waves are dancing fast and bright,"
- **Lines 10-13:** "I see the Deep's untrampled floor / With green and purple seaweeds strown; / I see the waves upon the shore / Like light dissolved in star-showers, thrown;"
- **Lines 15-17:** "The lightning of the noontide Ocean / Is flashing round me, and a tone / Arises from its measured motion,"
- **Lines 28-29:** "Yet now despair itself is mild, / Even as the winds and waters are;"
- **Lines 35-36:** "and hear the Sea / Breathe o'er my dying brain its last monotony."

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

The poem is overflowing with rich, vivid imagery that evokes the beauty of the shore near the Italian city of Naples. The speaker's detailed descriptions reveal just how closely he's observing the natural world, making his sense of separation from it all the more poignant.

The speaker also often personifies nature within this imagery, making the world around him seem distinctly *alive*: the waves are "dancing fast and bright," while the "Blue isles and snowy mountains wear / The purple noon's transparent might." The rich colors here—"blue," "snowy" white, and "purple"—suggest the vividness of the landscape while also subtly hinting at the speaker's dejected spirits, which seem to cast the world in somber tones.

The imagery here isn't just visual: the speaker also notes the sounds of the wind on the water, of the birds flying overhead, of waves on the shoreline, and even of the city in the distance. These sounds all seem to swirl together, different notes belonging to a singular "voice of one delight." This imagery, in turn, highlights the speaker's isolation: the voice he doesn't mention here is his own, implying that he isn't a part of all this lovely harmony.

Likewise, in the second stanza, the speaker juxtaposes intense imagery of the ocean—from the darkness of its deepest depths to the way sunlight bounces of its surface—with his own position sitting "upon the sands alone." Even as the speaker highlights his separation from the beauty around him, however, he still manages to convey the serene, peaceful beauty of the scene at hand, with the "measured motion" of the waves.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-9:** "The Sun is warm, the sky is clear, / The waves are dancing fast and bright, / Blue isles and snowy mountains wear / The purple noon's transparent might, / The breath of the moist earth is light, / Around its unexpanded buds; / Like many a voice of one delight, / The winds, the birds, the Ocean-floods; / The City's voice

itself is soft, like Solitude's."
- **Lines 10-17:** "I see the Deep's untrampled floor / With green and purple seaweeds strown; / I see the waves upon the shore / Like light dissolved in star-showers, thrown; / I sit upon the sands alone; / The lightning of the noontide Ocean / Is flashing round me, and a tone / Arises from its measured motion,"
- **Lines 34-36:** "And I might feel in the warm air / My cheek grow cold, and hear the Sea / Breathe o'er my dying brain its last monotony."

METAPHOR

The poem uses several metaphors that bring its setting to vivid life and evoke the speaker's state of mind.

In lines 15-16, for example, the speaker calls the midday light bouncing off the water's surface "lightning." On the one hand, the metaphor is simply evocative; it quickly and effectively conveys just how striking the sunlight is. This metaphor might subtly suggest that the speaker's mood is affecting the way he sees the beauty all around him, turning something as innocuous as afternoon light reflecting off the waves into stormy "lightning."

The poem also contains a couple of instances of personification, as in lines 3-5:

> Blues isles and snowy mountains wear
> The purple noon's transparent might,
> The breath of the moist earth is light,

The speaker describes the landscape—the little "[b]lue" islands and the "snowy mountains"—"wear[ing]" the day's vibrant colors as if they were clothes. Next, the speaker calls the moist seaside air the earth's "breath." This personification suggests that the earth itself is a living presence, something more than a simple backdrop to the speaker's troubles.

In line 9, the speaker personifies the "City" of Naples itself, saying that its "voice" is "soft, like Solitude's" (and thereby personifying "Solitude" as well!). This metaphor suggests that the distant sounds of "Naples" remind the speaker of his own loneliness; there's no hubbub to distract him from his quiet, lonely day on the shore.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Blue isles and snowy mountains wear / The purple noon's transparent might,"
- **Line 5:** "The breath of the moist earth is light,"
- **Line 9:** "The City's voice itself is soft"
- **Lines 15-16:** "The lightning of the noontide Ocean / Is flashing round me"
- **Line 23:** "And walked with inward glory crowned;"

SIMILE

The poem uses many similes to describe the beauty and harmony of the natural world that surrounds the speaker. Take lines 7-8:

> Like many a voice of one delight,
> The winds, the birds, the Ocean-floods;

The speaker feels that every sound—from that of the wind to that of birds to that the ocean itself—is part of the same voice, all working to express the same sense of joy. While a beautiful idea, this simile also highlights the speaker's comparative solitude: he's not a part of this "voice of one delight."

In another striking simile, the speaker compares "waves" dissolving along the "shore" to "light dissolved in star-showers" (or meteor showers). There might be a hint of the speaker's loneliness in this beautiful description as readers visualize the light of meteors disappearing into the vast darkness of a night sky and water disappearing along the sand.

The speaker's similes get even more pointed in the fourth stanza, where he says that he "could lie down like a tired child" on the sand and "weep away" his troubles. This simile suggests he'd like to utterly succumb to the difficult emotions he's had to "bear." It also suggests a sense of helplessness, as if all he'd like is for someone to come along and comfort him. He then imagines "Death" creeping up on him "like Sleep," a simile that presents death as a welcome reprieve—a chance to rest and escape all his suffering.

In the final lines of the poem, the speaker describes the beautiful "day" he's been witnessing, saying that when it comes to an end, its beauty will "linger though enjoyed, like joy in Memory yet." In other words, there's no limit to the amount of happiness a single gorgeous day can inspire. It will continue to live on in "Memory" even after it ceases to exist.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-9:** "Like many a voice of one delight, / The winds, the birds, the Ocean-floods; / The City's voice itself is soft, like Solitude's."
- **Lines 12-13:** "I see the waves upon the shore / Like light dissolved in star-showers, thrown;"
- **Line 30:** "I could lie down like a tired child"
- **Line 33:** "Till Death like Sleep might steal on me,"
- **Lines 43-45:** "this day, which, when the sun / Shall on its stainless glory set, / Will linger though enjoyed, like joy in Memory yet."

ALLITERATION

Alliteration adds music and lyricism to the poem, drawing readers' attention to its vivid imagery and also creating sonic links between certain images and ideas.

Much of the alliteration here is sibilant, built around hushed /s/ sounds that evoke gentleness and quiet of the speaker's surroundings (for example: "The City's voice itself is soft like Solitude's"). Other moments of alliteration add urgency and emphasis to the speaker's words, as in line 19. Here, notice the way the repeated /h/ sounds seem to enhance the poem's iambic (da-DUM) meter. The line's final three stressed beats all begin with this sound ("have," "hope," "health"):

> Alas! | I have | not hope | nor health,

Alliteration thus makes the line come across as all the more insistent and emphatic, evoking the speaker's anguish as he lists out all the things he lacks.

Alliteration works like this throughout the poem, adding moments of music and emphasis in lines 24 ("love nor leisure"), 26 ("live and call life pleasure"), 29 ("winds and waters"), 32 ("borne and yet must bear), 33 ("Sleep might steal"), and so forth. Taken altogether, this alliteration might also evoke nature's absorbing beauty.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Sun," "sky"
- **Line 9:** "City's," "itself," "soft," "Solitude's"
- **Line 10:** "see"
- **Line 11:** "seaweeds," "strown"
- **Line 12:** "see," "shore"
- **Line 13:** "Like," "light," "star," "showers"
- **Line 14:** "sit," "sands"
- **Line 19:** "have," "hope," "health"
- **Line 20:** "calm"
- **Line 21:** "content," "surpassing"
- **Line 22:** "sage"
- **Line 23:** "walked with inward"
- **Line 24:** "love," "leisure"
- **Line 26:** "live," "life"
- **Line 29:** "winds," "waters"
- **Line 31:** "weep away"
- **Line 32:** "borne," "bear"
- **Line 33:** "Sleep," "steal"

ASSONANCE

Like alliteration, assonance adds music and emphasis to the poem. Take lines 10-11, with their insistent long /ee/ sounds:

> I see the Deep's untrampled floor
> With green and purple seaweeds strown;

These sounds seem to slow the line, pushing readers to linger on the image of the deep, untouched ocean bed, filled with colorful plants.

Later, the long /i/ sounds of "lie down like a tired child" seem to again stretch the line out and subtly evoke the speaker's immense weariness. Those rhythmic repeating sounds suggest the pull of sleep on the speaker. The same can be said of the long /ee/ sounds in "Sleep might steal on me" in line 33, which also enhances the poem's iambic meter. Note how each of those assonant words receives clear stress when reading the line aloud:

> Til Death | like Sleep | might steal | on me,

The poem's strong, soothing rhythm here is almost like a lullaby, suggesting that "[d]eath" would be welcome to the speaker just as "[s]leep" is welcome to a "tired child."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "soft," "Solitude's"
- **Line 10:** "see," "Deep's"
- **Line 11:** "green," "seaweeds"
- **Line 22:** "sage," "meditation"
- **Line 30:** "lie," "like," "tired," "child"
- **Line 33:** "Sleep," "steal," "me"
- **Line 35:** "hear," "Sea"
- **Line 36:** "Breathe"
- **Line 44:** "glory"
- **Line 45:** "enjoyed," "joy"

SIBILANCE

The poem is bursting with sibilance, soft /s/ and /sh/ sounds evoking the gentle, rhythmic sounds of the sea as well as the hush of the speaker's "Solitude."

Sibilance is particularly common in the first stanza, as the speaker describes the seascape in great detail. Take line 9:

> The City's voice itself is soft, like Solitude's.

All those /s/ sounds make the line *itself* "soft" and quiet. Likewise, the many /s/ and /sh/ sounds in the second stanza feel right at home amid the speaker's description of waves splashing upon the shoreline: "seaweeds strown," "star-showers," etc. This sibilance evokes the beauty and serenity of nature, while also suggesting how the quietness of being out in nature without anyone to "share" in the speaker's "emotion" (two more sibilant words!).

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Sun," "sky"
- **Line 2:** "dancing fast"
- **Line 9:** "City's voice itself," "soft," "Solitude's"
- **Line 11:** "seaweeds strown"
- **Line 12:** "see," "shore"
- **Line 13:** "star-showers"

- **Line 14:** “sit,” “sands”
- **Line 15:** “Ocean”
- **Line 16:** “flashing”
- **Line 17:** “motion”
- **Line 18:** “share,” “emotion”
- **Line 21:** “surpassing”
- **Line 22:** “sage”
- **Line 33:** “Sleep,” “steal”
- **Line 43:** “sun”
- **Line 44:** “Shall,” “its stainless,” “set”

POLYPTOTON

The speaker uses polyptoton in lines 26, 32, and 45. In each case, the device suggests a certain steadfastness or unchangeability—that life is what it is, and people are who they are. Take lines 25-26:

> Others I see whom these surround,
> Smiling they **live** and call **life** pleasure:

The speaker is saying that other people's lives are pleasant and therefore they enjoy them, whereas the speaker's life is filled with sorrows and therefore he's miserable. The link between "live"/"life" tells readers something about the speaker's philosophy: how one lives is inextricable from one's burdens in life. There's a certain resignation here, as though the speaker believes it's impossible to be happy, to find joy in the world, when you're life is marked by misfortune. Thus though there's a distinctly pleasurable scene before him, he can't really experience it as such; he's cut off from the beauty of the day.

The speaker says uses polyptoton again later in the poem:

> And weep away the life of care
> Which I have **borne** and yet must **bear**,

The shift from the past to the present tense here suggests that the speaker's troubles aren't going anywhere. He's had to carry his "care[s]" for some time and will continue to carry them. Again, then, the repetition within the line seems to reflect the speaker's utter resignation to his own sorrow.

The polyptoton in the poem's final line also creates a sense of steadfastness, though to a more positive effect. The speaker says that the beauty of the day "[w]ill linger though **enjoyed**, like **joy** in Memory yet." In other words, even though the day has been "enjoyed," it will continue to create "joy" through memory. The polyptoton here mirrors that of "borne" and "bear," suggesting the enduring power of nature's beauty.

Where Polyptoton appears in the poem:

- **Line 26:** “live,” “life”
- **Line 32:** “borne,” “bear”
- **Line 45:** “enjoyed,” “joy”

ANAPHORA

Anaphora is an important part of this poem, adding rhythm and building momentum throughout. For instance, consider the insistent repetition of the article "the" throughout the first stanza:

> **The** Sun is warm, **the** sky is clear,
> **The** waves are dancing fast and bright,
> [...]
> **The** purple noon's transparent might,
> **The** breath of the moist earth is light,
> [...]
> **The** winds, **the** birds, **the** Ocean-floods;
> **The** City's voice itself is soft, like Solitude's.

This anaphora creates the sense of an endless, ever-building list—of beautiful bits of nature piling up on top of each other. The speaker's lack of conjunctions, a device known as asyndeton, works hand in hand with all this repetition to help the poem flow quickly and smoothly down the page. The repetitive structure of the passages reflects the endlessness of nature's beauty: it is everywhere, always.

The anaphora of the next stanza again suggests just how attention the speaker is to his surroundings, as he repeats "I see the" at the start of lines 10 and 12. This phrase then morphs into "I sit" in line 14. That "I" is another example of anaphora, but "breaking with the "I **see**" pattern highlights the speaker's *separation* from everything that he's observing.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “The,” “the”
- **Line 2:** “The”
- **Line 4:** “The”
- **Line 5:** “The”
- **Line 8:** “The,” “the,” “the”
- **Line 9:** “The”
- **Line 10:** “I see the”
- **Line 12:** “I see the”
- **Line 14:** “I”
- **Line 20:** “Nor”
- **Line 21:** “Nor”
- **Line 24:** “Nor”

POLYSYNDETON

In addition to its frequent anaphora, the poem uses a similar kind of repetition called polysyndeton in the third stanza. Listen to his emphatic string of "nor"s in these lines:

Alas! I have nor hope nor health,
Nor peace within nor calm around,
Nor that content surpassing wealth
[...]
Nor fame nor power nor love nor leisure—

Repeating the word "nor" again and again (and again!) emphasizes just how much the speaker doesn't have. The list feels exhausting, and readers get the sense that the speaker could go on and on talking about what his life lacks.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** "nor," "nor"
- **Line 20:** "Nor," "nor"
- **Line 21:** "Nor"
- **Line 24:** "Nor," "nor," "nor," "nor"

JUXTAPOSITION

The speaker juxtaposes the harmonious beauty of the scene before him with his own sorrow and isolation. Whereas all the different sounds of nature seem to come together in a single "voice," the speaker is utterly alone.

This juxtaposition becomes sharpest in the second stanza, where the speaker contrasts what he *sees* with what he's actually *doing*. He watches as the ocean's glittering waves dissolve along the shoreline like meteor showers and the sea's surface reflects the sun's rays like flashes of lightning. Meanwhile, he himself sits "upon the sands alone"—entirely separate from this scene. His stillness in comparison to all this movement, and his solitude compared to the harmony of nature, highlights just how alienated he feels from the world in this instant. The anaphora and alliteration of these lines further highlight this juxtaposition, moving from "I see" in lines 10 and 12 to "I sit" in line 14.

The speaker also juxtaposes his own situation against that of "Others." The speaker feels like everyone else is blessed with all the things he lacks. His own "cup" is filled with suffering rather than blessings. Not only is he miserable, but he also feels *unique* in his misery, as if he alone is destined to suffer so terribly.

The speaker sets himself against the natural world in the poem's second-to-last stanza. He imagines what it would be like to simply die on the beach, his "cheek grow[ing] cold" in contrast to "the warm air" of the ocean. If he *were* to die, this image implies, nature would continue on as it always has, its "monotony" unchanged by his passing.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "Like many a voice of one delight, / The winds, the birds, the Ocean-floods;"
- **Lines 10-18:** "I see the Deep's untrampled floor / With green and purple seaweeds strown; / I see the waves upon the shore / Like light dissolved in star-showers, thrown; / I sit upon the sands alone; / The lightning of the noontide Ocean / Is flashing round me, and a tone / Arises from its measured motion, / How sweet! did any heart now share in my emotion."
- **Lines 19-27:** "Alas! I have nor hope nor health, / Nor peace within nor calm around, / Nor that content surpassing wealth / The sage in meditation found, / And walked with inward glory crowned; / Nor fame nor power nor love nor leisure— / Others I see whom these surround, / Smiling they live and call life pleasure: / To me that cup has been dealt in another measure."
- **Lines 34-35:** "And I might feel in the warm air / My cheek grow cold,"

VOCABULARY

Isles (Line 3) - Small islands.

Transparent (Line 4) - Clear and/or obvious.

Unexpanded buds (Line 6) - Sprouts or blooms that haven't opened yet.

Ocean-floods (Line 8) - When the tide comes in and submerges areas of land.

The Deep's untrampled floor (Line 10) - The bottom of the ocean, untouched by human feet.

Strown (Line 11) - Scattered about.

Dissolved (Line 13) - Broken down or spread thin; diffused.

Star-showers (Line 13) - Meteor showers.

Noontide (Line 15) - Just another way of saying noon or midday.

Measured (Line 17) - Rhythmic; steady.

Alas (Line 19) - An exclamation used to express a range of negative emotions (sorrow, pity, etc.). The speaker is basically saying, "Woe is me!"

That content surpassing wealth (Line 21) - Contentment or happiness that's even better than having lots of money.

Sage (Line 22) - A person known for being extremely wise or knowledgable.

Borne (Line 32) - Carried.

Monotony (Line 36) - Sameness; uniformity.

Lament (Line 37, Line 41) - Express grief or sorrow about something.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Stanzas Written in Dejection, Near Naples" is made up of 45 lines divided into five stanzas.

Each stanza has nine lines. Based on their rhyme scheme and meter, these are more specifically a riff on something known as Spenserian stanzas (a form popularized by the 16th-century poet Edmund Spenser in his epic "The Faerie Queen").

We'll discuss this more in the Meter and Rhyme Scheme sections of the guide; what's important to note here is that such stanzas lend the poem a sense of structure and consistency that subtly mimics the gentle constancy of the natural world. Spenserian stanzas also feature a final line that's longer than the rest. Here, the final lines in each stanza often focus on the speaker's emotions as they jut out into the blank space of the page, in turn subtly highlighting the speaker's alienation from his surroundings.

Finally, Shelley links his poem to English literary tradition—elevating the language and, in turn, elevating the despair described in the poem itself.

METER

Shelley uses a variation on the meter typically associated with the Spenserian stanza (a form developed by the 16th century English poet Edmund Spenser for his epic poem "The Faerie Queen").

The first eight lines of a Spenserian stanza are written in iambic pentameter (meaning they contain five iambs, feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern, for 10 syllables total). The ninth line is then written in iambic hexameter (six iambs per line, for 12 syllables total). This longer final line is known as an "alexandrine."

Shelley, however, adds his own twist here. Instead of pentameter, he uses tetrameter—meaning he uses just *four* iambs per line. For example, look at lines 1-2:

> The Sun | is warm, | the sky | is clear,
> The waves | are danc- | ing fast | and bright,

These lines are in perfect iambic tetrameter; emphasis falls on every second syllable, giving the poem a soothing, consistent rhythm that might evoke the gentle sound of waves washing ashore.

While Shelley chose to work with tetrameter instead of pentameter in the first eight lines of each stanza, he stuck with the one long line of hexameter at each stanza's end. Take a look at line 9:

> The Cit- | y's voice | itself | is soft, | like Sol- | itude's.

Just as with the traditional Spenserian stanza, the extra syllables at the end of each stanza add emphasis to the final line. However, because Shelley is working with shorter lines overall, this line of hexameter stands out even *more*. Note, too, how those final lines so often turn inward, toward the speaker's feelings of isolation and sadness. In this way, the final lines evoke the speaker's feelings of being utterly alienated from other people.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows the strict rhyme scheme associated with the Spenserian stanza:

ABABBCBCC

For the most part, these end rhymes are exact ("bright"/"might"/"light"), but occasionally the poet uses a slant rhyme instead (such as "clear" and "wear" in lines 1 and 3). Regardless, the overall effect of such a tightly constructed rhyme scheme is that the poem feels very controlled and musical. The musicality of the poem itself mirrors the beauty of the natural landscape it describes.

It's also worth noting that, for Romantic writers like Shelley, the poet's job wasn't just to encounter intense emotions and muse on the beauty of nature; it was to turn these encounters and musings into capital "A" Art. While Shelley was undoubtedly writing from a place of genuine sorrow and heartache, the poem's deft rhyme patterning might suggest that he was never far from thinking about his legacy as a poet!

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is writing from a place of "dejection." Though he's sitting beside the ocean on a beautiful day, he seems unable to fully appreciate nature's charms because his spirits are so low. The speaker considers himself profoundly unlucky, saying he doesn't have money, good health, peace, or satisfaction. He also says that he's utterly alone in this world, cut off from all those "[s]miling" people who have things like "hope" and "health."

Shelley wrote this poem following a string of personal tragedies, including the death of his baby daughter, estrangement from his wife, and poor critical reception of his work. The speaker here is thus almost certainly meant to represent Shelley himself, whose life the poem alludes to throughout. For example, in addition to his familial woes, Shelley was often in debt, he had chronic lung issues, and his poetry was unpopular in his lifetime (hence the reference to lacking things like fame, power, love, and leisure).

That said, readers certainly don't have to take the speaker as being Shelley (or a man, for that matter) to understand the poem. The feelings of isolation and despair described here have certainly been felt by many.

SETTING

The title tells readers where the poem takes place: near the Italian coastal city of Naples. The speaker is more specifically by the seaside on a warm, sunny day, which the speaker describes in great detail: the waves are "fast and bright," there are little islands and snow-capped mountains in the distance, and the moist sea air seems to wraps itself around the still unopened "buds" of trees—suggesting that it's early spring.

Yet the speaker feels distanced from all this natural beauty and serenity. He can "see" natural wonders all around him, yet he remains "upon the sands alone"—sitting by himself without anyone to share the day with. The vibrancy and vivacity of this setting contrast with the speaker's immense sorrow, suggesting how he feels cut off from both humanity and the natural world while "in dejection."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) was a major figure in the artistic and literary movement known as Romanticism. This movement emerged in response to the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and rationality (itself brought about by advances in scientific inquiry, technology, and industry in the 1700s). Romantics, by contrast, concerned themselves with rebellion against authority; connection with nature; the power of the imagination; and the notion of the lone, heroic, and misunderstood artist.

Like other Romantic poets of his generation, including his close friend Lord Byron, Shelley was greatly indebted to the work of early Romantic poet William Wordsworth. As time went on, however, an increasingly conservative Wordsworth fell out of favor with those he had initially inspired. A freethinker, atheist, and political radical, Shelley believed it wasn't enough to write great poems; one had to actively participate in making the world a more equitable place.

Shelley wrote this poem in 1818 while in Italy. This was a profoundly difficult time in Shelley's life: he'd recently lost his baby daughter, Clara, and in the aftermath grown estranged from his wife and fellow writer Mary Shelley. Shelley also struggled with his own poetic reception: despite his posthumous fame, Shelley wasn't a popular or well-reviewed poet during his own lifetime. These issues undoubtedly inform the pain behind "Stanzas Written in Dejection."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Percy Shelley's short life was marked by tragedy. In 1814, he fell in love with Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (daughter of feminist author Mary Wollstonecraft, and the eventual writer of *Frankenstein*), and the couple eloped—despite the fact that Shelley was already married! This, along with Shelley's radical political sensibilities, resulted in the couple's being more or less ostracized in England.

In September of 1816, Mary's youngest sister, Fanny, died by suicide; her death impacted Shelley in part because he believed she had been in love with him. Just three months later, Shelley's first wife, Harriet, also died by suicide. Shelley attempted to get custody of his and Harriet's children but was denied due to his abandonment of the family and subsequent affair (and likely also because of his atheist beliefs). Mary became pregnant with the couple's first child around this time, but the baby died after being born prematurely. The couple was also in near-constant debt due to Shelley's indiscriminate spending habits. Mary gave birth to a second child, Clara, in 1817.

In March of 1818, while traveling in Italy, the 17-month-old Clara fell ill and died. Mary fell into a severe depression after this event and grew distant from Shelley, whom she held partly responsible for their daughter's death. Shelley wrote "Stanzas Written in Dejection" soon after.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- What is Romanticism? — An overview of the Romantic movement. (https://www.britannica.com/art/Romanticism)
- The Shelley-Godwin Archive — A collection of digitized manuscripts by the Shelley-Godwin family. (http://shelleygodwinarchive.org/explore/)
- Tragedy in Italy — Read more about Percy and Mary Shelley's misfortune in Italy. (https://blogs.bl.uk/english-and-drama/2018/08/mary-shelley-in-italy-tragedy-with-a-scene-both-affecting-and-sublime.html)
- Shelley's Life and Work — A biography of the poet and additional poems via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/percy-bysshe-shelley)
- A Reading of the Poem — Listen to the poem read aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1GBc33gb_c)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY POEMS

- England in 1819
- Love's Philosophy
- Ode to the West Wind
- Ozymandias
- To a Skylark

HOW TO CITE

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