The Mower to the Glow-Worms

POEM TEXT

Ye living lamps, by whose dear light
The nightingale does sit so late,
And studying all the summer night,
Her matchless songs does meditate;

Ye country comets, that portend
No war nor prince's funeral,
Shining unto no higher end
Than to presage the grass's fall;

Ye glow-worms, whose officious flame
To wand'ring mowers shows the way,
That in the night have lost their aim,
And after foolish fires do stray;

Your courteous lights in vain you waste,
Since Juliana here is come,
For she my mind hath so displac'd
That I shall never find my home.

SUMMARY

You fireflies are the living lamps who provide the precious light by which nightingale stays up late, studying all through the summer night, to craft her incomparably beautiful song.

You are the comets of the countryside, except you don't predict some terrible event like war or the death of a prince. Instead, you shine with no greater high purpose than to signal that the grass is about to be cut.

Your enthusiastic light guides wandering mowers who got lost in the night while drifting off toward other, more foolish flames.

Yet your thoughtful lights are wasted on me ever since Juliana came around because she has disoriented my mind so badly that I'll never find my home again.

THEMES

THE BEAUTY AND GENEROSITY OF NATURE

"The Mower to the Glow-worms" presents the natural world as a place filled with both beauty and kindness. The poem's speaker is a "mower," someone employed to cut grass with a scythe. Despite his heartbreak over a lost love, the speaker appreciates the local glow-worms (a.k.a. fireflies) for providing the precious light that helps mowers like him find their "way" through night's darkness. Nature is not just lovely, the poem implies, but also helpful and generous.

The speaker, mowing a dark field, calls the glow-worms "living lamps," nodding to the fact that they cast a beautiful bioluminescent light. The speaker doesn't need to fumble about with an *actual* lamp; nature provides what he needs. Beyond being beautiful, then, the glow-worms' light is *useful*. In illuminating the fields, it helps "wand-ring mowers" see where they are going and know where to swing the scythe.

The speaker also says that the glow-worms look like "country comets"—that is, dazzling illuminations set against the darkness of the fields. Unlike real comets, though, they don't "portend" that something bad is going to happen (a common belief about comets in Marvell's day). Instead, they just "presage," or predict, that the grass is about the be cut down.

The glow-worms are thus not just beautiful, but also uncomplicated; they simply and generously offer their light without stipulations or caveats. The little fireflies don't just help the *speaker*, either; it's by their light that the nightingale stays up all "summer night" perfecting "Her matchless songs."

The mower recognizes nature's reassuring generosity and its potential to comfort the human world, describing the glow-worms' light as "dear," "officious," and "courteous." In other words, the mower presents nature as precious, dependable, and giving. He senses that nature seems to be trying its best to take care of him. This doesn't *quite* trump his heartbreak, but the speaker acknowledges nature's efforts nonetheless.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-13

THE PAIN OF HEARTBREAK

The poem's speaker praises the beauty and helpfulness of the lovely glow-worms that illuminate the night while does his job. Ultimately, however, the speaker says that the creatures offer him their lovely, comforting light "in vain": the speaker can't *really* appreciate the generous beauty of nature because he's too distracted by the brute fact that a woman named Juliana has rejected him. The poem thus demonstrates the power of love and heartbreak, which can make it difficult to see beyond your own pain.

The speaker presents nature as beautiful, lovely, kind, and reassuring. After all, he's standing in a field lit by insects and soundtracked by the melodious, "matchless" song of a nightingale. The glow-worms are "living lamps," an expression of nature's ability to create magic and beauty. This light is "dear" and "courteous," qualities the poem implies deserve to be appreciated. They even help him see what he's doing while he works.

Yet this magnificent light is "waste[d]" on the speaker because he can't think about anything except his unrequited love for Juliana. In fact, his heartbreak shapes how he sees the whole world—and a closer look at the poem's language reveals the depth of the speaker's pain. That "matchless" song of the nightingale, for example, might subconsciously refer to the speaker's own "matchless[ness]" (i.e., the fact that he's single). The speaker praises the glow-worms for looking like comets without heralding some great catastrophe like a war or the death of a prince, yet even *thinking* they look like these doom-laden symbols hints at the way heartbreak has devastated his life. And though the glow-worms illuminate the field for "wand'ring" mowers at night, the speaker is not just "lost" in a spatial sense. He's lost in the *metaphorical* darkness of his own emotional pain.

In fact, Juliana "hath so displac'd" the speaker's mind that he feels he "shall never find [his] home" again. That is, he feels his life has been ruined. Whether that's true or not is another matter, but the poem shows how heartbreak provokes dramatic and drastic emotions. Not even nature's spectacular beauty can soothe the raw pain of heartbreak. Nature can put on its best show, but this mower has been cut down by Juliana—and he's not getting back up anytime soon.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 13-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Ye living lamps, by whose dear light
The nightingale does sit so late,
And studying all the summer night,
Her matchless songs does meditate;

The poem's speaker is the titular mower, someone who, in poet Andrew Marvell's day, would cut grasses with a scythe. This mower, apparently working at night, addresses some glow-worms (a.k.a. fireflies) directly. This is an example of apostrophe; the glow-worms can't respond to the speaker, but this direct address conveys a sense of kinship and intimacy.

Right from the start, the mower is full of praise for these little creatures. He deems them nature's own "living lamps" and calls the bioluminescent light they cast "dear," or precious. The gentle alliteration of "living lamps" and "light" lends delicate beauty to the poem, those lilting /l/ sounds like pretty sparks brightening up this opening line.

The glow-worms, the speaker continues, provide the light for the "nightingale" to stay up late, studying her music. The humble bugs illuminate the summer evening, and in doing so allow the bird to sing her "matchless song." Nature, in this scene, exists in exquisite harmony, its diverse creatures coming together to create peerless beauty.

Note how sound patterning works almost like a melody here, with hushed sibilance and humming /m/ consonance and alliteration deftly woven throughout the lines:

> The nightingale does sit so late,
> And studying all the summer night,
> Her matchless songs does meditate;

The nighttime scene is filled with lush, delicate beauty.

And yet, already, the speaker subtly foreshadows the poem's melancholy ending. When he calls the nightingale's song "matchless," he means, on the one hand, that her music is beautiful beyond compare. But "matchless" might also mean that the bird has no *partner*, no beloved with whom to share her song. The speaker's word choice might subconsciously reflect his own broken heart.

This opening quatrain also establishes the poem's form. The poem is written in iambic tetrameter, meaning its lines contain four iambs: poetic feet that follow an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern, as follows:

> Ye liv- | ing lamps, | by whose | dear light
> The night- | ingale | does sit | so late,
> And stud- | ying all | the sum- | mer night,
> Her match- | less songs | does med- | itate;

It's arguably possible to hear that first foot as a spondee (two stressed beats in a row, "Ye liv-"). For the most part, though, the meter is steady, its gentle da-DUM rhythm creating a soothing, even hypnotic atmosphere. The alternating ABAB rhyme scheme adds to the poem's familiar, predictable music. It's almost like there is a misty, moonlit spell cast over the poem.

LINES 5-8

Ye country comets, that portend
No war nor prince's funeral,
Shining unto no higher end
Than to presage the grass's fall;

The speaker calls out to the glow-worms again, continuing the poem's use of apostrophe. The language here parallels that of the first stanza as well, the speaker again beginning a stanza

with "Ye." This creates a sense of building momentum and anticipation.

This time, the speaker metaphorically refers to the glow-worms as "country comets"—that is, comets flashing across the rural night sky. The crackling alliteration of "country comets" is almost like the fizz and pop of rock burning up in the earth's atmosphere, conveying the brilliance of the glow-worms' light.

In Marvell's 17th-century England, comets were thought to be omens of great disaster. The poem subverts that symbolism, however. These little comet-bugs don't predict anything terrible; they "portend / No war nor prince's funeral." Instead, they humbly signal that it's time for the mower to do his job. They shine "unto no higher end"—with no loftier goal—than to signal that the grass is about to be cut. Through "presage[ing] the grass's fall"—that is, by working like an agricultural alarm clock—the glow-worms prove that nature isn't just beautiful, but *helpful* too.

Once again, the poem's sounds enhance its imagery. For example, the trochee at the start of line 7—"Shining"—emphasizes the bold brightness of the glow-worms. The plosive alliteration of "portend," "prince's," and "presage" add yet more force to the stanza and the speaker's praise of the glow-worms, which, though humble, are nevertheless a sparkling, comforting presence in the darkness.

LINES 9-12

Ye glow-worms, whose officious flame
To wand'ring mowers shows the way,
That in the night have lost their aim,
And after foolish fires do stray;

Three stanzas in, and the speaker *still* has plenty of good things to say about the glow-worms! As with the previous quatrains, this one opens with apostrophe and anaphora (the repetition of "Ye"). Once again, the repetitive language creates a sense of building momentum and anticipation.

Now, the speaker personifies the glow-worms as diligent assistants to mowers in the fields. The speaker describes the creatures' light as an "officious"(or useful, effective) "flame" that "shows the way" to "wand'ring mowers" who have gotten lost. Not only do the glow-worms signal that it's time to cut the grass, then, but they also help the mowers navigate the fields.

Of course, the reader might reasonably question how many other mowers are out there, wandering aimlessly and straying after "foolish fires." Though he's talking in the general sense about "mowers," it's hard not to feel that he refers specifically to himself: the speaker is the one getting lost, distracted by the "foolish fires" of passion and heartbreak.

Spoiler alert: the last stanza reveals that the speaker feels *emotionally* lost because he's suffering from heartbreak. He's thus a "wander[er]" in the sense that his mind can't stay focused on the job at hand, and he's lost his aim because, well, his aim was to be with Juliana. There aren't *really* many "foolish fires" out there on the fields—these are the metaphorical flames of love and lust that have led the speaker astray.

The fricative consonance and alliteration of "officious flame" and "foolish fires" calls readers' attention to these images, emphasizing the brightness and power of both the glow-worms guiding light and the flames of the speaker's passion and heartbreak.

LINES 13-16

Your courteous lights in vain you waste,
Since Juliana here is come,
For she my mind hath so displac'd
That I shall never find my home.

The fourth stanza marks a dramatic twist. The poem isn't *really* about the splendor of nature—or, at least, not exclusively. The winding sentence that began in the first line finally receives its main verb (technically speaking, the poem is one long sentence connected by semi-colons). For all the beauty of their light, the glow-worms efforts' are wasted on the speaker. Those lights might be "courteous"—that is, helpful and generous—but the speaker can't focus on anything but a woman named Juliana.

The speaker's precise relationship with Juliana remains ambiguous. It's not clear if they're ex-lovers, in some kind of relationship limbo, or were never together at all. Yet Juliana's effect on the mower is clear enough: she's messed with the speaker's "mind," perhaps by rejecting him or sending mixed signals. Now, he's all over the place, doomed to wander eternally in the overgrown fields of unrequited love. the kindly glow-worms might do their best to "show the way," but the speaker declares that he'll "never find [his] home." Nature's best efforts, then, are no match for the speaker's lovesickness.

SYMBOLS

THE GLOW-WORMS

The glow-worms represent the beauty, kindness, and comfort of nature. It is by their "dear," or precious, light that the nightingale stays up perfecting her beautiful song. They also light the way for mowers who "have lost their aim" and strayed from the path.

What's more, they do all this selflessly; the glow-worms don't have any ulterior motives. They shine "unto no higher end," or without any greater purpose, than to "presage the grass's fall." Their simple courteousness contrasts with the actions of Juliana, who has thoroughly "displac'd" the speaker's mind. Where the "foolish fires" of passion have led the speaker astray, the glow-worms seek only to guide mowers like him "home." The natural world, in the poem, is a place filled with wondrous, nourishing loveliness—if only the speaker weren't too lovelorn

to appreciate it!

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Ye living lamps, by whose dear light / The nightingale does sit so late,"
- **Lines 5-10:** "Ye country comets, that portend / No war nor prince's funeral, / Shining unto no higher end / Than to presage the grass's fall; / Ye glow-worms, whose officious flame / To wand'ring mowers shows the way,"
- **Line 13:** "Your courteous lights in vain you waste,"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration fills the poem with gentle music, evoking the beauty of the natural world that surrounds the speaker. In the opening line, for example, the lilting /l/ sounds of "living lamps" and "light" conjure the delicate, flickering beauty of the glow-worm's precious light. Those /l/ sounds are themselves like little flashes of light on the page.

Frequent sibilance, meanwhile, casts a hush over the poem, conjuring the quiet of the night. Just listen to all the /s/ alliteration in lines 2-4 (plus the consonance of "matchless"):

> The nightingale does sit so late,
> And studying all the summer night,
> Her matchless songs does meditate;

The humming /m/ alliteration of "matchless"/"meditate," along with the consonance of "summer," adds to the soothing, gentle tone of these opening lines. The natural world seems like a lovely, comforting place to be.

In the next stanza, alliteration evokes the crisp crackle and sparks of "country comets" soaring across the sky. The firm, plosive /p/ sounds of "portend," "prince's," and "presage" add yet more energy and excitement to these lines, conveying the speaker's strong admiration for the glow-worms' beauty.

Later, note the fricative /f/ alliteration "flames" and "foolish fires" (plus the consonance of "officious"). The poem's sounds call attention to the juxtaposition between these two very different kinds of light: the warm, guiding "flames" from the glow-worms and the misleading "fires" of love and lust.

Note, too, how this sonic prettiness falls away in the final stanza. It's no coincidence that when Juliana arrives in the poem, the lovely alliteration almost entirely disappears.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "living lamps,," "light"
- **Line 2:** "sit so," "late"
- **Line 3:** "studying," "summer"
- **Line 4:** "matchless," "songs," "meditate"
- **Line 5:** "country comets," "portend"
- **Line 6:** "No," "nor," "prince's"
- **Line 8:** "presage"
- **Line 9:** "flame"
- **Line 10:** "wand'ring," "way"
- **Line 12:** "foolish fires"
- **Line 15:** "my mind"

APOSTROPHE

The speaker calls out to the glow-worms directly at the start of each stanza, an example of apostrophe. In fact, the entire poem is addressed to these creatures, the grand "Ye" at the start of each stanza making the poem feel more epic. The speaker might be talking to humble fireflies, but he calls out to them as though they were deities or spirits.

This apostrophe creates a sense of intimacy and respect as the speaker heaps praise on the glow-worms, creatures he clearly feels are remarkably lovely and kind. Of course, the glow-worms can't respond to the speaker. In a way, then, the use of apostrophe ultimately emphasizes the speaker's isolation; he might be surrounded by the beauty of nature, but that beauty can't rescue him from his pain.

The use of apostrophe also leads to parallelism and anaphora throughout the poem, as the speaker begins three stanzas in a row with the word "Ye" (meaning "You") followed by a reference to the glow-worms:

> Ye living lamps,
> [...]
> Ye country comets,
> [...]
> Ye glow-worms,

The repetitive language creates a sense of building anticipation as readers await the completion of the sentence begun in line 1.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Ye living lamps"
- **Line 5:** "Ye country comets"
- **Line 9:** "Ye glow-worms"
- **Line 13:** "Your courteous lights in vain you waste"

JUXTAPOSITION

The mower juxtaposes the glow-worms—and, to a lesser extent, the nightingale—with himself. This comparison reflects the contrast between the simple kindness and beauty of nature and the complications and agonies of the human world.

Everything about the natural world in the poem is graceful, lovely, and uncomplicated. The glow-worms, those "living lamps," fill the night with precious light. This light, in turn, aids the nightingale as she stays up singing her "Her matchless songs," and it also guides "wand'ring mowers" through the grass. The glow-worm's have no ulterior motive; nature gives beauty and guidance freely. They shine "to presage the grass's fall," further evidence of nature's simple harmony.

The speaker, by contrast, is all out of sorts. Though he can praise nature's beauty, he can't really feel it because he's so distracted by Juliana. Where nature seems perfectly in tune, the speaker has lost his "aim" and feels he'll "never find [his] home." Where nature offers guidance, love spins the speaker's head around.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-16:** "Ye glow-worms, whose officious flame / To wand'ring mowers shows the way, / That in the night have lost their aim, / And after foolish fires do stray; / Your courteous lights in vain you waste, / Since Juliana here is come, / For she my mind hath so displac'd / That I shall never find my home."

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors bring both the beauty of nature and the speaker's lonely pain to life.

The first three stanzas all open with metaphors meant to capture the brilliance of the glow-worms' light. The speaker calls the creatures "living lamps" and "country comets," and he also says that they cast an "officious flame." Of course, none of these descriptions are literal:

- "Living lamps" emphasizes the glow-worms' vitalty and utility. They're a living marvel; the speaker doesn't have to lug around a bulky lamp because nature provides all the light he needs.
- "Country comets," meanwhile, suggests that the glow-worms' beauty is both brilliant and other-worldly. While actual comets were bad omens in Marvell's day, these bug-comets don't harbor bad news; instead, they just "presage" that it's time to cut the grass.
- Their light isn't an actual "flame," either. Describing it as such, however, again emphasizes its warmth and intensity. Officious here means effective and helpful; the speaker is simply praising the glow-worms for offering such useful aid.

Note, too, that the speaker personifies the glow-worms throughout the poem. Their light seems specially designed to help him do his job, as though nature *wants* to perform kind acts for the human world. The speaker personifies the nightingale too, studying the "summer night" in order to come up with ever-better—and "matchless"—melodies for her songs. Nature, this language suggests, is filled with wonder and intelligence.

Finally, the speaker's descriptions of losing his way can be read as metaphors for his emotional state. Readers can assume he knows the fields pretty well (that's his job after all!). Yet he feels lost in a kind of *emotional* darkness that the glow-worms can't illuminate. He says he'll never "find [his] home," by which he means he'll never feel the comfort and reassurance that come with being loved back by the woman he loves.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-10
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 16

VOCABULARY

Ye (Line 1, Line 5, Line 9) - Archaic form of "you."

Dear (Line 1) - Precious.

Matchless (Line 4) - Unrivalled.

Meditate (Line 4) - Practice/develop.

Portend (Line 5) - Foreshadow.

Unto no higher end (Line 7) - To no greater purpose/goal.

Presage (Line 8) - Predict or signal.

Officious (Line 9) - Useful, efficient, and hard-working.

Hath (Line 15) - Archaic form of "has."

Displac'd (Line 15) - Displaced; put out of joint.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Mower to the Glow-Worms" contains four quatrains (four-line stanzas) that follow the same meter and rhyme scheme. Despite his heartache, the speaker's praise for the glow-worms remains steady and constant.

Note that the poem is also a single, sprawling sentence. The anaphora of "Ye" at the start of the first three stanzas creates momentum, the poem seeming to build to a rhetorical height that then comes crashing back down to earth in the poem's final moments.

METER

"The Mower to the Glow-Worms" uses iambic tetrameter: lines

of four iambs, poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed pattern of syllables (da-DUM). Here's how that looks in the first stanza:

> Ye liv- | ing lamps, | by whose | dear light
> The night- | ingale | does sit | so late,
> And stud- | ying all | the sum- | mer night,
> Her match- | less songs | does med- | itate;

There are a few variations here and there. For example, some readers might argue that the opening foot is a spondee ("Ye liv-"), and "studying" has to be scanned as "stud'ing" to fit the meter as well. Line 7's "Shining" is also a trochee, emphasizing the illuminating brilliance of the glow-worms' light. Overall, though, the pattern is steady. It creates a gentle, lulling rhythm that evokes the comfort and guidance offered by the glow-worms.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Mower to the Glow-Worms" uses an alternating rhyme scheme: ABAB CDCD EFEF and so on. The pleasant chime of these rhymes works with the poem's steady meter to evoke the serenity of the natural world.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a mower: someone whose job is to cut the grasses in a field using a scythe or other sharp tool (the poem was written a long time before the invention of the lawnmower!). This is one of four poems by Andrew Marvell to feature this mower, in fact, whose name elsewhere is revealed to be "Damon."

The speaker clearly respects the natural world that surrounds him, praising both the helpful light from those glow-worms and the "matchless" beauty of the nightingale's song. Ultimately, however, he's too distracted by a woman he loves named Juliana to fully appreciate all that nature has to offer. He says that the glow-worms' guiding lights are wasted on him because he's far too lost to find his way home again. Juliana has so addled his mind that he can see nature's beauty but he can't really *feel* it.

SETTING

The poem takes place on a summer night in a field filled with glow-worms (a.k.a. fireflies). The speaker, whose job it is to cut down the grass, praises these creatures for their sparkling light, which illuminates the darkness and shows "wand'ring mowers [...] the way." The scene is serene and lovely, but the speaker can't fully appreciate its beauty; he's too distracted by thoughts of Juliana. This speaker's body might be in the field, but his mind is elsewhere.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Andrew Marvell belonged to a literary group known as the "metaphysical poets," a coin termed by the later writer Samuel Johnson to describe a set of 17th-century English writers who penned witty, passionate, cerebral poetry about love and God. Metaphysical poetry is marked by its philosophical intensity: it often takes up big topics and tries to think through them in verse. It's also marked by its playfulness and its willingness to use irony, everyday language, and elaborate, strange metaphors and similes. The most famous metaphysical poet is John Donne, who died when Marvell was 10. Marvell belongs to the second generation of metaphysical poets, alongside writers like Abraham Cowley, Richard Crashaw, and Henry Vaughn.

"The Mower to the Glow-Worms" is one part of four poems that make up a single sequence about the titular mower, revealed by another poem to be named Damon. The other poems—"The Mower Against the Gardens," "Damon the Mower," and "The Mower's Song"—further demonstrate Damon's heartbreak; he is "With love of Juliana stung" and complains that she does to him what he does to the grass (that is, cut it down).

This poem also interacts with the pastoral tradition in poetry—that is, writing that idealizes the countryside. This tradition can be traced all the way back to Hesoid, a contemporary of Homer's in ancient Greece. Of course, the speaker of Marvel's poem can't fully appreciate the beauty of the natural world because of his emotional pain.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Some critics hypothesize that Marvell took inspiration for "The Mower to the Glow-Worms" from Pliny's *Natural History*, which dates from around the year 77. Folk wisdom in Britain dictated that the light of glow-worms in the fields signaled that it was time for the harvest.

Marvell wrote the poem itself around 1651 or '52, during a period of significant political turmoil in English society. In the 1640s, the nation endured a bloody civil war provoked by religious and political tensions, especially between radical Protestants and more conservative Anglicans. But it quickly became a broader conflict over the nature of government itself, with Royalists—who supported the monarchy and the Anglican Church—pitted against Parliamentarians—who supported a democratic form of government and a Puritan church. The war culminated with the execution for treason of King Charles I in 1649. Oliver Cromwell, a Parliamentarian, assumed control of the government for most of the 1650s—a period called the "Interregnum."

Marvell himself was an active participant in these events.

Though he spent the war in Italy and France, he returned to England in the early 1650s, living for several years at Lord Halifax's Nun Appleton House near York (where he wrote his famous poem "Upon Appleton House") and later served as Latin Secretary, alongside the poet John Milton—an important role in Cromwell's national government. He joined Parliament in 1659, representing Kingston-Upon-Hull. After the restoration of the monarchy in the 1660s, Marvell managed to escape punishment for his participation in the revolutionary government, and he worked to prevent the new king, Charles II, from executing John Milton.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Mower's Song — Read a Guardian article about another of the Mower poem (and the sequence more generally). (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/jan/03/poem-of-the-week-the-mowers-song-by-andrew-marvell)
- Marvell's Life and Work — Dive into a Marvell-ous set of resources from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/andrew-marvell)
- Secrets of the Glow-worm — Learn more about the creatures at the heart of the poem—which aren't really worms at all! (https://www.countrylife.co.uk/nature/secrets-glow-worm-179762)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ANDREW MARVELL POEMS

- To His Coy Mistress

HOW TO CITE

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