The Sea and the Hills

POEM TEXT

Who hath desired the Sea?—the sight of salt water unbounded—
The heave and the halt and the hurl and the crash of the comber wind-hounded?
The sleek-barrelled swell before storm, grey, foamless, enormous, and growing—
Stark calm on the lap of the Line or the crazy-eyed hurricane blowing—
His Sea in no showing the same his Sea and the same 'neath each showing:
His Sea as she slackens or thrills?
So and no otherwise—so and no otherwise—hillmen desire their Hills!

Who hath desired the Sea?—the immense and contemptuous surges?
The shudder, the stumble, the swerve, as the star-stabbing bow-sprit emerges?
The orderly clouds of the Trades, the ridged, roaring sapphire thereunder—
Unheralded cliff-haunting flaws and the headsail's low-volleying thunder—
His Sea in no wonder the same—his Sea and the same through each wonder:
His Sea as she rages or stills?
So and no otherwise—so and no otherwise—hillmen desire their Hills.

Who hath desired the Sea? Her menaces swift as her mercies?
The in-rolling walls of the fog and the silver-winged breeze that disperses?
The unstable mined berg going South and the calvings and groans that declare it—
White water half-guessed overside and the moon breaking timely to bare it—
His Sea as his fathers have dared—his Sea as his children shall dare it:
His Sea as she serves him or kills?
So and no otherwise—so and no otherwise—hillmen desire their Hills.

Who hath desired the Sea? Her excellent loneliness rather
Than forecourts of kings, and her outermost pits than the streets where men gather
Inland, among dust, under trees—inland where the slayer may slay him—
Inland, out of reach of her arms, and the bosom whereon he must lay him—
His Sea from the first that betrayed—at the last that shall never betray him:
His Sea that his being fulfils?
So and no otherwise—so and no otherwise—hillmen desire their Hills.

SUMMARY

Who longs for the sea? For the sight of limitless salty water and a long, curling wave getting violently tossed around by the wind? For the enormous, gray, glossy column of water that swells before a storm and keeps getting larger? For the total calm near the equator or the angry hurricane as it blows? For the sea, which is never the same and yet is always the same; for the sea, whether she's relaxing or exciting? Just like people desire the sea, hill-dwelling people long for their hills.

Who longs for the sea—for its vast, hate-filled surges of water? For the shaking, lurching, and veering of a boat as its mast, pointing at the starry sky, bursts through the surge? For the neat clouds formed by trade winds, and the sharp, thundering, glittering blue waves below them? For the sudden gusts blowing off the cliffs, and the low, booming, thunder-like sound of the ship's headsail? For the sea in which no two wonders are the same, and yet remains constant throughout each wonder? For the sea, whether she's angry or calm? Just like people desire the sea, hill-dwelling people long for their hills.

Who longs for the sea, who is as quick to rage as she is to be kind? For the thick walls of incoming fog and the silvery breeze that blows it away? For the unsteady icebergs traveling south, and the deep, thundering sounds made as large chunks break off of them? For the white water that the sailor can guess is nearby, and the moon that comes out at the just right time to reveal it? For the sea on which generations before have dared to travel, and on which future generations will dare to travel too? For the sea that can serve people as easily as kill them? Just like people desire the sea, hill-dwelling people long for their hills.

Who longs for the sea? Who prefers the sea's wonderful

solitude over the busy courts of kings? The furthest reaches of the sea over busy streets inland among dusty trees, where a killer might kill someone? Inland, the lover of the sea is too far from her arms, from the bosom on which he'd like to rest. The sea betrays people from the start but it never betrays them in the end; the sea makes people feel whole and content. Just like people desire the sea, hill-dwelling people long for their hills.

THEMES

THE POWER, BEAUTY, AND CHAOS OF THE SEA

"The Sea and the Hills" presents the sea as a fearsome, magnificent force that people rightly marvel at but can't predict or master. In illustrating that the sea (and perhaps nature in general) can be utterly ferocious, the poem further suggests that those who attempt to cross it would do well to anticipate and respect the sea's angry moods.

The poem is filled with vivid descriptions that convey the sea's awesome power. For example, its waves are "immense and contemptuous surges"—that is, huge bursts of water seemingly hellbent on destruction. The sea can be full of "menaces" and even "kills" when it "rages"; it violently rocks ships on its waves, which roar like thunder beneath the clouds.

At other times, however, the sea can be lovely, gentle, and even nurturing. There's beauty in its "roaring sapphire," which the speaker argues can be as merciful as it is menacing. Emphasizing this, the poem personifies the sea as a woman, perhaps a mother or a lover, calling people into "her arms" and to lay on her "bosom." Sometimes, the sea provides people with an "excellent loneliness," her "stark calm" and soothing rhythms offering an escape from the interpersonal squabbles of the human world. The sea's vastness, the poem suggests, puts human troubles into perspective.

The sea's contradictions are also what define it. The sea "rages or stills," "serves or kills," betrays people in the beginning but never betrays them in the end. It is in "no showing the same" and yet the same in every "showing." In other words, it's never certain what version of the sea people are going to get. Angry or loving, chaotic or calm, its might dwarfs humanity's own and inspires a sense of overwhelming awe.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 8-13
- Lines 15-20
- Lines 22-27

THE LONGING FOR DANGER AND ADVENTURE

In addition to painting a vivid portrait of the sea, the poem also zooms in on the kind of person the sea appeals to—and the kind of person who'd rather stick to dry land. The speaker repeatedly asks "who hath desired the sea?" That is, the poem wonders who would ever long to set sail on such an unpredictable, powerful entity. The answer, the poem implies, is that the sea's wild, ever-changing nature casts a spell over those with a taste for excitement and exploration. It offers them the chance for adventure that simply doesn't exist on solid ground—but with that adventure comes grave danger, too.

Seafarers, the speaker argues, are born with an instinctive longing for the waves that gets passed down through generations: "Fathers have dared [to sail the Sea]," says the speaker, "his children shall dare it" too. Such people find regular life boring and stifling, choosing the sea's "excellent loneliness rather / Than forecourts of kings." They might be isolated while out on the ocean, but they're also free from political dealings and societal expectations.

The water is liberating, but it also comes at the cost of stability and security. Thus, despite its thrilling allure, some (perhaps most) people *don't* long for the sea. "Hillmen," the speaker definitively declares, "desire their hills"—they prefer a more staid, steady existence of life on land. In fact, the poem says they desire their environment in *the same* way as sea-lovers long for theirs: "So and no otherwise - so and no otherwise - hillmen desire their Hills!" People want what they want, the poem implies; their yearning for safety or adventure are built into who they are, and people are content only when honoring to their true natures.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-28

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Who hath desired the Sea?—the sight of salt water unbounded—
The heave and the halt and the hurl and the crash of the comber wind-hounded?

The poem opens with a question: "Who hath desired the Sea?" That is, what kind of people feel drawn to the sea? This opening question becomes a refrain, heading up all four stanzas almost like a call to arms to any and all who love the ocean. The speaker follows the question with vivid imagery that conveys the sea's enormity and its capacity for violence. Right away, readers sense that the sea is a force much more powerful than any

human being.

Who longs for "the sight of salt water unbounded," the speaker asks—that is, who wants to look out at the vast expanse of the open ocean? The sea is "unbounded" as far as the eye can see (no pun intended); it seems to go on forever, in turn suggesting a sense of freedom and possibility perhaps not available back on land. Hissing sibilance ("sight of salt") evokes the salty sea spray being described.

Next, the speaker describes a long, curling wave—a.k.a. a "comber"—in minute detail: there's the "heave" (the rising up of the water); the "halt" (the strange pause that occurs when the wave climbs to its peak); the "hurl" (the wave as it's thrown down); and finally the "crash" as the wave breaks against the surface. The speaker personifies the wind here as a kind of "hunter" chasing the waves, making the scene seem all the more primal and frightening.

The huffing /h/ alliteration of "heave," "halt," and "hurl" suggests the great effort/power it takes to create this incredible sight, while the sharp alliteration of "crash" and "comber" is striking and violent. The line features polysyndeton as well:

> The heave and the halt and the hurl and the crash of the comber wind-hounded?

The actions just seem to keep going and going, piling on top of each other and making the whole image seem positively overwhelming.

These two opening lines form a long, sprawling couplet. They stretch across the page like waves about to break, creating a sense of building tension that's released by the rhyme of "unbounded"/"wind-hounded."

The poem's meter isn't regular, but there's a clear, rollicking rhythm at work. Most of the feet here are anapests, meaning they follow an unstressed-unstressed-stressed syllable pattern (da-da-DUM) or dactyls (the opposite of anapests: DUM-da-da).

> Who hath desired the Sea?—the sight of salt water unbounded—
> The heave and the halt and the hurl and the crash of the comber wind-hounded?

There are some iambs (unstressed-stressed; da-DUM) as well. It's possible to break the feat up in various ways; whatever terminology readers use, however, the poem's meter evokes galloping horses—or, perhaps, the cyclical rise and fall of waves. The rough meter mirrors the roughness of the sea's waters, its booming, forceful rhythms conjuring the sea's power onto the page.

LINES 3-4

> *The sleek-barrelled swell before storm, grey, foamless,*
> *enormous, and growing—*
> *Stark calm on the lap of the Line or the crazy-eyed hurricane blowing—*

The speaker offers more imagery that captures the mind-boggling power and variety of the sea.

Line 3 describes the eerie, threatening "swell" before a storm: the huge waves that rise "foamless" and signal a tempest in the distance. These waves move slowly and without breaking; they lack the white foam of the crashing, cresting wave mentioned in the previous line. The speaker calls them "sleek-barrelled," and there's something mysterious and monstrous about their glossy smoothness—perhaps because it belies just how violent the coming storm may be. These swells are already "enormous"—and they're also "growing," getting ever larger.

Once again, the poem uses sibilance to create the watery, windy, stormy atmosphere: "sleek," "swell," "storm," "foamless, enormous." The growling alliteration of "grey" and "growing" and the round, moaning assonance of "foamless" and "growing" add to the scene's intensity as well.

The sea isn't all violence and storms, however. In line 4, the speaker calls readers' attention to the "Stark calm on the lap of the Line." This is an area of calm water near the equator. That calm is "stark," sudden and perhaps even a bit shocking on the heels of the stormy weather mentioned in the previous lines. The sea, the poem makes clear, is capable of both chaos and calm.

Indeed, right after mentioning the calm at the equator, the speaker notes "the crazy-eyed hurricane blowing." "Crazy-eyed" is a pun:

- It refers to the "eye" of a hurricane, or the region of calm weather at its center.
- It personifies the storm as insane, mad with a lust for destruction. The harsh /k/ sound in "crazy" and "hurricane" evokes this violent power.

In just one line, then, the reader sees the contradictory, ever-changing character of the sea.

LINES 5-7

> *His Sea in no showing the same his Sea and the same 'neath each showing:*
> *His Sea as she slackens or thrills?*
> *So and no otherwise—so and no otherwise—hillmen desire their Hills!*

In each septet (seven-line stanza), the fifth line states a philosophical paradox about the sea. These use the device antimetabole, in which the words in the first half of the sentence get repackaged in a different order in the second:

> His Sea in no showing the same his Sea and the same

'neath each showing:

These pithy moments try to capture the essential, contradictory quality of the sea. Here, the speaker points out that the sea is always in a state of change and yet never fundamentally changes ("'neath" might mean "under the surface," but could also mean something more like "at the core of its being"). The sea is different every time you look at it—sometimes calm, sometimes violent—and no parts of it are ever exactly the same. And yet, it's all the sea/ocean, part of the same vast body of water. It's different every time, yet somehow timeless and unchanging.

Note how this line (and the following) also use the personal possessive pronoun: "His sea," not "the sea." This suggests a sense of ownership and belonging—that is, this hypothetical "him," the person who loves to sail on the sea, feels such deep kinship with the sea that it is, in a sense, a part of him—and he a part of it.

In the following line, the poem genders the sea as female:

> His Sea as she slackens or thrills?

This ties in with the use of "desired" in the first line, suggesting an almost sexual thrill between man and sea.

This line also once again depicts the sea as a paradoxical entity, an environment where contradictory experiences can take place. It can "slacken" (grow loose and relaxed), but it can also create adventure (it "thrills" people). Note, too, that this sixth line (and the sixth line of every stanza in the poem) is markedly shorter than the rest. This creates an ebb and flow on the page that evokes the movement of the tides and waves.

Finally, the last line of the opening stanza introduces some new characters: "hillmen." This line will become another refrain in the poem, restated at the end of every stanza:

> So and no otherwise—so and no otherwise—hillmen desire their Hills.

Epizeuxis (the repetition of "so and no otherwise") adds weight and emphasis to the speaker's point: this is simply the way things are. Just as some people are drawn to the sea, with all its dangers and contradictions, other people long for dry land. Perhaps these hills offer safety, security, and a more stable, predictable kind of life. The polyptoton of "hillmen and "Hills" suggests that the desire for "hills" is an essential part of who these people are.

There's no attempt to describe these hills or these people, however, and it's worth noting that the word "hillmen" in Kipling's work sometimes refers to indigenous tribes in the north of India. The lack of development/description suggests that the speaker/the poem probably sides with those who "desire[] the sea."

LINES 8-14

> *Who hath desired the Sea?—the immense and contemptuous surges?*
> *The shudder, the stumble, the swerve, as the star-stabbing bow-sprit emerges?*
> *The orderly clouds of the Trades, the ridged, roaring sapphire thereunder—*
> *Unheralded cliff-haunting flaws and the headsail's low-volleying thunder—*
> *His Sea in no wonder the same—his Sea and the same through each wonder:*
> *His Sea as she rages or stills?*
> *So and no otherwise—so and no otherwise—hillmen desire their Hills.*

This second stanza follows the same general format as the first: it opens with the refrain "Who hath desired the Sea?" and then follows this up with vivid imagery that conveys the sea's powerful, unpredictable nature.

First, the speaker notes that the sea contains "immense and contemptuous surges." Sometimes, the waves of the sea are unfathomably large. In fact, they're so big—and potentially destructive—that they seem full of hate (they're "contemptuous").

Next, the speaker describes a ship being tossed about like a toy as it sails through those "surges": the vessel will "shudder," "stumble," and "swerve" as its "bow-spirit" (a long piece of wood that helps support the sail) finally "emerges" from the water. Sibilance evokes the spray and salt as the boat crashes through wild waves:

> [...] the immense and contemptuous surges?
> The shudder, the stumble, the swerve, as the
> star-stabbing bow-sprit emerges?

The scene is violent and intense; the ship is at the sea's mercy. But the ship also seems up to the challenge: the evocative metaphor "star-stabbing bow-spirit" refers to the way that the bow-spirit forcefully thrusts up toward the night sky as it emerges from the waves. It takes a hardy boat—and, by extension, a hardy sailor—to navigate the sea.

Yet the sea isn't all chaos. In the next line, the speaker points out the "orderly clouds of the Trades": a set of winds that reliably blow from east to west near the equator. Underneath those is "the ridged, roaring sapphire": a metaphor conveying how the waves look like jeweled mountain peaks in the sun. The growling alliteration of "ridged, roaring" conveys the sea's rage, yet the metaphor also that the sea is beautiful and something to be treasured.

Other winds are less "orderly": there are the "Unheralded cliff-haunting flaws," or unpredictable gusts of wind that "haunt" the

cliffs along the water. And then there's the "low-volleying thunder"—or the booming, thunderous sound—of the wind filling a ship's "headsail[]." The word "volley" can also mean gunfire; as with "star-stabbing" above, it adds to the scene's sense of danger—and excitement.

The fifth line of this stanza echoes the fifth line of the first, the speaker again using antimetabole to illustrate the sea's paradoxical nature:

> His Sea in no wonder the same—his Sea and the same through each wonder:

The sea is filled with wonders, no two of which are the same. These wonders might be its "sapphire" color, the thunderous sound of the crashing waves, etc. Yet, the sea itself—its basic essence—is always "the same," persisting "through each wonder." The sea is always the sea, even if its specific attributes—the size of its waves, for example—are constantly shifting. Line 13 hammers home this idea, again personifying the sea as a woman and declaring that she both "rages or stills": sometimes she's vengeful and angry, and sometimes she's totally calm.

The stanza's final line returns to its refrain, acknowledging that the sea isn't for everyone. Some people prefer a simpler, safer life in the hills.

LINES 15-18

> *Who hath desired the Sea? Her menaces swift as her mercies?*
> *The in-rolling walls of the fog and the silver-winged breeze that disperses?*
> *The unstable mined berg going South and the calvings and groans that declare it—*
> *White water half-guessed overside and the moon breaking timely to bare it—*

By now the reader pretty much knows what to expect with each stanza. Line 15 begins with the same phrase as all the other stanzas—"Who hath desired the Sea?"—before diving into more descriptions of the sea's power.

The sea, the speaker says, doles out "menaces" as "swift as her mercies." That is, she's as quick to be cruel as she is to be kind. The words "menaces" and "mercies" sounds quite similar, thanks to alliteration ("menaces"/"mercies") and consonance ("menaces"/"mercies"). This sonic similarity, in turn, conveys that these states are two sides of the same easily-flipped coin. What could be a matter of life and death to human beings navigating the sea means little to the sea herself, depicted here like a god in the grip of ever-changing moods.

The speaker then gives a concrete example of the sea's volatility. Dense fog sometimes unfurls across the water, obscuring the way and making passage by sea more dangerous. The fog is one of those "menaces," yet it's easily cleared away by a sweet, "silver-winged breeze." This happens in the course of one line, hammering home how quickly the sea's conditions can change. Again, danger and adventure, chaos and control exist side by side.

The poem then moves on to icebergs: hulking, "unstable" slabs of ice that slowly drift south. Their sounds—"calvings and groans"—precede them as they float in the water like a warning. (*Calving* refers to huge chunks of ice sliding off an iceberg.)

Next, the speaker focuses on how the sea can be read for clues to help navigation:

> White water half-guessed overside and the moon breaking timely to bare it.—

"White water" suggests the breaking of waves, which in turn might tell a sailor that there's a reef or rocks nearby. The sailor can't be sure—they only "half-guess[]"—but the moon comes out just in time to illuminate and reveal the sea's warning (to "bare," or expose it). One might read this as the sea toying with humanity, putting it in danger *and* helping it escape; alternatively, it's just the sea being the indifferent sea!

LINES 19-21

> *His Sea as his fathers have dared—his Sea as his children shall dare it:*
> *His Sea as she serves him or kills?*
> *So and no otherwise—so and no otherwise—hillmen desire their Hills.*

The desire for the sea, the speaker continues, is something that's passed down from one generation to the next. There always have been, and there will always be, people who feel called to the water, the speaker says. Again, the speaker describes an unspecified male figure whose identity is wrapped up in the sea. He got his taste for the sea from his ancestors, and he'll pass it on to his children:

> His Sea as his fathers have dared—his Sea as his children shall dare it:

The repetition of "dared"/"dare" reminds the reader that it's the sense of *risk* that makes the sea so attractive. Those who "desire[]" the sea, the poem insists, are bold and brave.

Indeed, they have to be: the sea might "serve[]" or "kill" them. People might have great adventures on the sea—and, in the past, they might have attained great riches—but each voyage could always be their last. Whether the sea "serves" or kills" is, ultimately, up to the sea.

Line 21 repeats the same line as all the others, acknowledging that some people prefer a life inland, something more stable, secure, and predictable. The excitement with which the poem discusses the sea vs. the nondescript lines about the hills

suggests that the speaker relates more to the adventurous type.

LINES 22-25

Who hath desired the Sea? Her excellent loneliness rather
Than forecourts of kings, and her outermost pits than the streets where men gather
Inland, among dust, under trees—inland where the slayer may slay him—
Inland, out of reach of her arms, and the bosom whereon he must lay him—

In the final stanza, the speaker juxtaposes life asea with life on land. Some people prefer the sea's "excellent loneliness"—the kind of total solitude found on the open ocean, far from the cares of daily life—over life at the royal court; they'd take the furthest reaches of the sea over "the streets where men gather / Inland."

The poem depicts the "inland" world as hectic and draining. The "forecourts of kings" and the "streets where men gather" suggest the hustle and bustle of human society and all the complications that come with it. By implication, the sea—even though it too is a complex entity—offers something simpler, freer, and, perhaps, more honest.

On land, "among dust, under trees," the poem's hypothetical male figure could be in danger: it's "where the slayer may slay him." Dangerous though it may be, the sea also offers an escape from the risks entailed by living among other people. The sea might toss your boat around, but it won't stab you in the back.

The speaker personifies the sea as a female figure throughout this stanza, building to the image of line 25:

> Inland, out of reach of her arms, and the bosom whereon he must lay him—

Back on land, far from the shore, people are out of reach of the sea's comfort. They can't be wrapped up in her arms or rest their weary heads on her chest.

LINES 26-28

His Sea from the first that betrayed—at the last that shall never betray him:
His Sea that his being fulfils?
So and no otherwise—so and no otherwise—hillmen desire their Hills.

Line 26, like the fifth line of all the stanzas that came before, makes a philosophical statement about the relationship between humankind and the sea.

"His Sea," says the speaker, has "betrayed" him (the poem's hypothetical male figure) "from the first." That is, it's *always* been a dangerous place, never offering *true* loyalty or security. But, "at the last," it "shall never betray him." The sea might be slippery and unpredictable, but it will also always be there.

The speaker previously talked about "forecourts of kings," busy streets, and potential "slayer[s]." By saying the sea will "never betray" people in the end, the speaker hints that the sea is ultimately nobler than humanity.

The sea "fulfils" some people's "being." In other words, it makes them who they are; it gives them purpose and makes life worth living. As the reader knows by now, these people have a mirror in the "hillmen [who] desire their Hills." Some human beings *long* for the sea's danger and volatility, and they wish to sail the seas to satisfy their spirit of adventure. Others, however, prefer the stability offered by the land.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration fills the poem with noisy, boisterous music that evokes the immense power and chaos of the sea.

Much of the alliteration is sibilant, calling to mind the splash and crash of waves. Take the first line, for example, where hissing /s/ sounds of "Sea" and "sight of salt water" makes it so one can almost taste the salty air.

The alliteration in the next line is just as evocative. Huffing /h/ sounds suggest the great strength and physical effort required to "heave" those long waves up and "hurl" them back down, while crashing, cacophonous /k/ sounds convey the violent breaking of the wave:

> The heave and the halt and the hurl and the crash of the comber wind-hounded?

Alliteration can also link words/concepts together. In line 15, for example, the speaker refers to the sea's "menaces" and "mercies." The point here is that the sea doles out both cruelty and kindness in equal measure. The sonic similarity of these two words, created through alliteration and consonance ("menaces," "mercies"), reflects just how fine the line is between the sea's wrath and its forgiveness.

Likewise, the refrain in the last line of each stanza sonically links the "hillmen" with their "Hills." The similarity of the two words suggests that hill-dwelling people *belong* in their chosen environment (this is also an example of polyptoton, in which two words in close proximity are drawn from the same root).

Note that alliteration is just one of many sonic devices in the poem. Others, including consonance and assonance, which further add to the poem's rip-roaring music. Take "So and no," "The shudder, the stumble," "Sea as she," "forecourts of kings," "dust, under," and so on. The poem is simply loud and rollicking.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Sea," "sight," "salt"
- **Line 2:** "heave," "halt," "hurl," "crash," "comber," "hounded"
- **Line 3:** "sleek-barrelled swell before storm," "grey," "growing"
- **Line 4:** "calm," "lap," "Line," "crazy"
- **Line 5:** "Sea," "same," "Sea," "same"
- **Line 6:** "Sea," "slackens"
- **Line 7:** "hillmen," "Hills"
- **Line 8:** "surges"
- **Line 9:** "stumble," "swerve," "star-stabbing," "sprit"
- **Line 10:** "ridged, roaring"
- **Line 11:** "haunting," "headsail's"
- **Line 12:** "Sea," "same," "Sea," "same"
- **Line 13:** "Sea," "stills"
- **Line 14:** "hillmen," "Hills"
- **Line 15:** "menaces," "mercies"
- **Line 18:** "White water," "breaking," "bare"
- **Line 20:** "Sea," "serves"
- **Line 24:** "slayer," "slay"
- **Line 26:** "from," "first," "betrayed," "betray"
- **Line 27:** "being"
- **Line 28:** "hillmen," "Hills"

IMAGERY

The poem's imagery conveys the sights, sounds, and sensations of being at sea. Take lines 1-4:

> [...] the sight of salt water unbounded—
> The heave and the halt and the hurl and the crash of the comber wind-hounded
> The sleek-barrelled swell before storm, grey, foamless, enormous, and growing—
> Stark calm on the lap of the Line or the crazy-eyed hurricane blowing—

Part of the sea's appeal is how it looks: it offers "the sight of salt water unbounded." It's a seemingly endless expanse of salty water, just calling out to be explored. Sibilance enhances the poem's imagery here: thanks to all those hissing /s/ sounds, readers can almost *feel* that salty sea spray.

The speaker next describes the "crash" of a long, curling wave that seems to be chased down by the wind, a bit of imagery that appeals to readers' eyes *and* ears: it's easy to envision a fierce wind raising up a wave and then slamming it back down. Next comes the ominous, threatening image of the dark, glossy surge of water that rises before a storm: "grey, foamless, enormous, and growing." The sea, all this imagery makes clear, is not a force to be trifled with. The poem's imagery paints a vivid picture of the sea as a wild, unpredictable, ferocious force.

The imagery of the next stanza illustrates this as well. Take line 9, where the speaker describes a boat being violently tossed about by the sea:

> The shudder, the stumble, the swerve, as the star-stabbing bow-sprit emerges?

The ship is at the sea's mercy. The image of its sharp "bow-sprit" bursting forth from the waves and pointing up toward the stars as though "stabbing" them suggests that the boat, too, is hardy and fierce—as it would have to be to set sail on such waters!

The description of icebergs in line 17 again hints at the sea's capacity for danger and "menace[]," the "calvings and groans" almost like moans of pain:

> The unstable mined berg going South and the calvings and groans that declare it

Line 10 also features auditory imagery in "the headsail's low-volleying thunder"—the sail in the wind recreating the noise of gunfire.

The poem's imagery conveys not just the sea's anger and might, but also its peace and beauty. For example, it looks at times like a deep blue, glittering mountain range—"ridged, roaring sapphire." The "silver-winged breeze" gently sends away the "in-rolling walls of the fog" that at times settle over its waters

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "the sight of salt water unbounded— / The heave and the halt and the hurl and the crash of the comber wind-hounded? / The sleek-barrelled swell before storm, grey, foamless, enormous, and growing— / Stark calm on the lap of the Line or the crazy-eyed hurricane blowing—"
- **Lines 8-11:** "the immense and contemptuous surges? / The shudder, the stumble, the swerve, as the star-stabbing bow-sprit emerges? / The orderly clouds of the Trades, the ridged, roaring sapphire thereunder— / Unheralded cliff-haunting flaws and the headsail's low-volleying thunder—"
- **Lines 16-18:** "The in-rolling walls of the fog and the silver-winged breeze that disperses? / The unstable mined berg going South and the calvings and groans that declare it— / White water half-guessed overside and the moon breaking timely to bare it—"
- **Line 25:** "out of reach of her arms, and the bosom whereon he must lay him"

PERSONIFICATION

"The Sea and the Hills" presents the sea as a complex, multi-faceted, and endlessly fascinating entity. Part of the way it does this is through personification: the speaker depicts the sea as a

female figure, calling her "she" throughout and granting her human emotions. This personification makes the poem more exciting and dramatic.

The sea can be "contemptuous," or hateful. Sometimes she "rages," while at other times she "stills"—that is, remains calm. She can be both menacing and merciful, kind and cruel. She's tempestuous and uncontrollable, and this is exactly what draws some people to her. With her wild, unpredictable ways and "salt water unbounded," the sea also offers a kind of escape from the tedium and politics of human society—an alternative way of life.

The poem's personification also creates a sense of intimacy between the sea and its sailors: the sea opens "her arms" and offers her "bosom" like a lover. Lurking behind this image is a very Victorian conception of men as conquerors and women as their conquests. Indeed, the speaker uses an anonymous man to stand in for all those who "desire[]" the sea, which the poem refers to repeatedly as "His sea." Personifying the sea as female makes the ocean the yin to the sailor's yang, the thing he needs to "fulfil[]" his very "being."

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "the crazy-eyed hurricane"
- **Line 6:** "His Sea as she slackens or thrills?"
- **Line 8:** "contemptuous surges"
- **Line 13:** "His Sea as she rages or stills?"
- **Line 15:** "Her menaces swift as her mercies?"
- **Line 20:** "His Sea as she serves him or kills?"
- **Line 22:** "Her excellent loneliness"
- **Line 23:** "her outermost pits"
- **Line 25:** "Inland, out of reach of her arms, and the bosom whereon he must lay him—"
- **Line 27:** "His Sea that his being fulfils?"

REFRAIN

"The Sea and the Hills" uses *a lot* of repetition. Each stanza follows the same overarching pattern, while the specific content changes. In a way, then, the poem mimics the paradox of the sea: it's constant yet always in a state of flux.

Most obviously, every stanza begins and ends with a refrain:

> Who hath desired the Sea?
> [...]
> So and no otherwise—so and no otherwise—hillmen desire their Hills!

The first refrain implies that there are indeed some people who *do* desire the sea. By the fourth time it appears, the question sounds more like a call to arms, a kind of summoning for sea lovers everywhere.

The second refrain, which closes each stanza, stresses that the sea isn't for everyone: some people prefer the safety and security of the hills. Fair enough, suggest the poem—but it's clear which environment the speaker thinks is more exciting!

Note how the closing refrain also uses epizeuxis in the immediate repetition of "so and no otherwise." This smaller-scale repetition builds rhetorical power, making the poem seem all the more dramatic and rousing. The polyptoton of "hillmen/Hills," meanwhile, reflects the idea that people's desire for the sea or land is baked into their very natures. People are who they are and they want what they want.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Who hath desired the Sea?"
- **Line 7:** "So and no otherwise—so and no otherwise—hillmen desire their Hills!"
- **Line 8:** "Who hath desired the Sea?"
- **Line 14:** "So and no otherwise—so and no otherwise—hillmen desire their Hills."
- **Line 15:** "Who hath desired the Sea?"
- **Line 21:** "So and no otherwise—so and no otherwise—hillmen desire their Hills."
- **Line 22:** "Who hath desired the Sea?"
- **Line 28:** "So and no otherwise—so and no otherwise—hillmen desire their Hills."

SIBILANCE

"The Sea and the Hills" is packed with sibilance from start to finish, with one main goal: to evoke the sounds of the sea. The poem wastes no time building its salty, windy, watery world:

> Who hath desired the Sea?—the sight of salt water unbounded—

Right away, hissing sibilance makes sea spray seem to bounce off the page. Line 3 dials this effect up: "sleek-barrelled swell," "storm," "foamless," "enormous." The reader can almost taste the salt in the air!

Sibilance also aids the poem's personification of the sea. In line 15, the speaker says that the sea's "menaces" are "swift as her mercies." These sibilant sounds have a harsh, almost spitting quality, reinforcing the image of the sea as capable of malice and destruction.

The most sibilant line of all, though, is probably line 9:

> The shudder, the stumble, the swerve, as the star-stabbing bow-sprit emerges?

The intense sound patterning here puts the reader right in the thick of it—on deck of this imagined ship as it wrestles for control against the waves.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Sea," "sight," "salt"
- **Line 3:** "sleek-barrelled swell," "storm," "foamless, enormous"
- **Line 5:** "Sea," "showing," "same," "Sea," "same," "showing"
- **Line 6:** "Sea," "she slackens"
- **Line 8:** "immense," "contemptuous surges"
- **Line 9:** "shudder," "stumble," "swerve," "star-stabbing," "sprit"
- **Line 12:** "Sea," "same," "Sea," "same"
- **Line 13:** "Sea," "she," "stills"
- **Line 15:** "Sea," "menaces swift," "mercies"
- **Line 16:** "silver," "disperses"
- **Line 17:** "unstable," "South"
- **Line 18:** "half-guessed overside"
- **Line 20:** "Sea," "she serves"
- **Line 22:** "Sea," "excellent loneliness"
- **Line 23:** "forecourts," "outermost pits," "streets"
- **Line 24:** "dust," "slayer," "slay"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora adds to the poem's rollicking rhythm, creating a sense of building momentum and excitement throughout. Take lines 1-3:

> —the sight of salt water unbounded—
> The heave and the halt and the hurl and the crash of the comber wind-hounded?
> The sleek-barrelled swell before storm, grey, foamless, enormous, and growing—

The poem effectively pummels the reader with descriptions of the sea, making it seem like a kind of unstoppable force. Anaphora makes the poem read like a list, showcasing a variety of the sea's marvels while not pretending to exhaust the possibilities. Note how the polysyndeton of line 2 ("and the halt and the hurl and the crash") creates a piling-up effect; the phrase stack on top of each other as the wave grows and grows before crashing down.

More anaphora appears in the next stanza:

> [...]—the immense and contemptuous surges?
> The shudder, the stumble, the swerve, as the star-stabbing bow-sprit emerges?
> The orderly clouds of the Trades, the ridged, roaring sapphire thereunder—

This particular list also features asyndeton, the *lack* of any coordinating conjunctions speeding things up to mirror the frenzy of those "surges."

The fifth and sixth lines of each stanza also feature anaphora in beginning with the repeated phrase "His sea." The fifth line then describes contradictory aspects of the sea, using antimetabole to do so:

> His Sea in no showing the same his Sea and the same 'neath each showing: (line 5)
> [...]
> His Sea in no wonder the same—his Sea and the same through each wonder: (line 12)
> [...]
> His Sea as his fathers have dared—his Sea as his children shall dare it: (line 19)
> [...]
> His Sea from the first that betrayed—at the last that shall never betray him: (line 26)

Each of these recombines words/grammatical elements to state an opposing aspect of the sea—that is, for example, the fact it is never the same and yet somehow *always* the same. The sea, in other words, can't be pinned down to any one trait or definition, and the use of repetition depicts its awe-inspiring ability to be many things at many times.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "the"
- **Line 2:** "The"
- **Line 3:** "The"
- **Line 5:** "His Sea"
- **Line 6:** "His Sea"
- **Line 8:** "the"
- **Line 9:** "The," "the," "the"
- **Line 10:** "The," "the"
- **Line 12:** "His Sea"
- **Line 13:** "His Sea"
- **Line 16:** "The"
- **Line 17:** "The"
- **Line 19:** "His Sea"
- **Line 20:** "His Sea"
- **Line 24:** "Inland"
- **Line 25:** "Inland"
- **Line 26:** "His Sea"
- **Line 27:** "His Sea"

VOCABULARY

Hath (Line 1, Line 8, Line 15, Line 22) - Archaic form of "has."

Unbounded (Line 1) - Free and limitless.

The heave and the halt and the hurl and the crash of the comber (Line 2) - The different stages of a long, curling wave. It rises ("heave[s]"), pauses ("halt[s]"), gets thrown downward (hurl[s]), and then crashes on the sea's surface or the shore.

Wind-hounded (Line 2) - Chased by wind. The poem is subtly

personifying the wind here, depicting it as though it hunts down the waves.

Sleek-barrelled swell (Line 3) - Smooth, cylindrical accumulation of water (e.g. before a storm).

Showing (Line 5) - Appearance.

'Neath (Line 5) - Beneath or underneath.

Slackens or thrills (Line 6) - Loosens up or excites.

No otherwise (Line 7, Line 14, Line 21, Line 28) - Essentially: "This is how it is."

Contemptuous (Line 8) - Hate-filled/spiteful.

Shudder (Line 9) - Shaking, as though in fear.

Star-stabbing bow-sprit (Line 9) - A *bow-sprit* is a piece of wood that supports a sail. It metaphorically stabs the stars because it points up from the ship toward the sky.

Orderly (Line 10) - Neat and predictable.

The Trades (Line 10) - Winds that consistently blow from east to west in the Earth's equatorial regions.

Ridged (Line 10) - Crumpled (like the appearance of waves from above).

Sapphire (Line 10) - A precious blue gemstone, or that stone's color. Here, the word conveys that the sea is a deep blue color that glints in the sun.

Thereunder (Line 10) - Below (the Trade winds).

Unheralded cliff-haunting flaws (Line 11) - Unpredictable winds blowing from the cliffs.

Headsail's low-volleying thunder (Line 11) - A headsail is a ship's foremost sail (the one furthest at the front). "Low-volleying thunder" refers to the booming, explosive sound that sail makes as the wind fills it.

Stills (Line 13) - Remains/inspires calm.

Menaces (Line 15) - Malicious feelings/actions.

Mercies (Line 15) - Kindnesses.

Berg (Line 17) - Iceberg.

Calvings (Line 17) - Here, *calving* refers to large chunks of ice splitting off an iceberg or glacier. This is accompanied by deep, booming sounds as the ice tumbles into the sea—hence the reference to "groans" later in the line.

Overside (Line 18) - On the surface of the water as one looks over the side of the ship.

The moon breaking timely to bare it (Lines 18-18, Line 18) - The moon appearing just in time (from behind the clouds) to illuminate the surface of the water.

Forecourts (Line 23) - Open area in front of a building (e.g., a palace).

Outermost pits (Line 23) - Furthest reaches.

Slayer / slay (Line 24) - Killer/kill.

Bosom (Line 25) - Chest.

Whereon (Line 25) - On which.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Sea and the Hills" contains four seven-line stanzas, a.k.a. septets. Though the poem doesn't follow a set form like a sonnet or a villanelle, it is nevertheless tightly organized and controlled.

For one thing, a steady rhyme scheme divides each septet into two couplets that sandwich a tercet. The length of the poem's rhyming sections subtly ebbs and flows, perhaps calling to mind the movement of the tides. Likewise, the poem's long, sweeping lines evoke the vast reaches of the sea.

The poem is also intensely repetitive in terms of both its language and imagery. Most obviously, each stanza opens and closes with the same refrain:

> Who hath desired the Sea? [...]
> [...]
> So and no otherwise—so and no otherwise—hillmen desire their Hills!

These refrains create familiarity, the poem becoming a rousing call to arms for all sea lovers by its end.

The lines *between* those refrains feature clear parallelism as well. The middle lines of the first three stanzas all follow this pattern:

> The [...]
> The [...]
> [...]
> His Sea [...]
> His Sea [...]

The fifth line of each stanza offers a philosophical statement about the contradictory nature of the sea, as in line 12:

> His Sea in no wonder the same—his Sea and the same through each wonder:

The sixth line in each stanza is also shorter than all the rest, succinctly juxtaposing two facets of the sea's nature. For example, here's line 20:

> His Sea as she serves him or kills?

The final stanza changes things up a bit but generally sticks to

the rhythms established by the rest of the poem. All in all, the poem's sweeping, circular form create a sense of swirling, repetitive, endless motion that evokes the "unbounded" majesty of the sea.

METER

"The Sea and the Hills" is a very musical poem, even if its meter isn't always exact. The meter is rough and ready, evoking the choppy rhythms of the sea as well as the lurch of sailing on the ocean's waves.

The first line of each stanza consists of dactyls (poetic feet with an stressed-unstressed-unstressed syllable pattern) and trochees (stressed-unstressed):

> Who hath de- | sired the | Sea? —the | sight of salt | water un- | bounded—

For the most part, the rest of the lines in each stanza use anapests (unstressed-unstressed-stressed) and iambs (unstressed-stressed). For example, the second line is best scanned as an opening iamb followed by anapests:

> The heave | and the halt | and the hurl | and the crash | of the comb- | er wind-hounded?

The second line of the second stanza has a pretty similar pattern:

> The shud- | der, the stum- | ble, the swerve, | as the star- | stabbing bow- | sprit emerges?

There's no one correct way to break this meter up, however, and what matters is how it sounds. Read aloud, there's a clear rhythm at play. The poem pulls readers this way and that, evoking the heave and lurch of the waves.

Note, too, that the first five lines of each stanza end with a dangling unstressed syllable ("hounded," "growing," etc.). As a result, the first chunks of each stanza feel a bit unstable or incomplete. The final two lines of each stanza, by contrast, always feature strong endings:

- "slackens or thrills?"
- "rages or stills"
- "serves him or kills"
- "his being fulfils"
- "desire their Hills."

The poem closes on firm, strong beats as the speaker declares that some people will always belong to the sea, just as some belong to the hills; it is "so and no otherwise."

RHYME SCHEME

"The Sea and the Hills" has a very regular rhyme scheme. Each stanza opens and closes with a rhyming couplet. Sandwiched between these is a tercet. The pattern, then, runs AABBBCC / DDEEEFF and so on. The clear, full rhymes add to the poem's exciting music. They're like the wind in the poem's sails, driving the language forward.

Subtly, the rhymes also mimic the motion of the sea: the rhyme scheme expands and contracts over and over again, much as waves roll in and out.

SPEAKER

"The Sea and the Hills" features an anonymous speaker. While the speaker never outright says that they're one of those people who "hath desired the Sea," they clearly find the sea breathtaking and awe-inspiring. It's ambiguous as to whether the speaker is a sailor/explorer or simply someone who admires those daring enough to set out on "salt water unbounded." Still, the speaker has a keen awareness of the sea's power and a solid respect for both its rage and its beauty. This speaker understands that the sea is a wild, contradictory place that can be cruel or kind. Note, too, that the speaker doesn't really make any effort to paint as vivid a picture of the "Hills" as they do of the sea. This might suggest that the speaker feels more of an affinity with those people who "desire[]" the sea than with those who prefer life on land.

The also speaker personifies the sea as female throughout the poem, while talking about those who feel drawn to the sea using male terminology (often saying "His Sea" rather than "the sea"). The poem thus defers to a pretty typical Victorian Era view of men as adventurers and women as objects of desire.

SETTING

While it's not clear where the speaker themselves is, the poem paints a striking portrait of the sea and what it might feel like to set sail on its unpredictable waters. In fact, despite its title, the poem says almost nothing about the "hills" at all!

The sea, in the poem, is enormous, angry, and overwhelming in its power. Waves smash, winds howl, chunks of icebergs crash into the water below with deep "groans." Sometimes there's dense fog, "crazy-eye hurricanes," or ominous gray storm swells, and the crack of wind in a ship's sails can sound like thunder or gunfire. At other times, the sea is utterly calm, warm, and inviting—a place marked by "silver-winged breeze[s]" "orderly clouds," and "sapphire" blue water. In short, the sea is a place filled with contradictions and marked by constant change. It can peaceful and violent, calm and chaotic, hateful and loving, complicated and simple, ugly and beautiful, and so on.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Rudyard Kipling was one of the most popular British writers of the late Victorian and early Edwardian periods—that is, the turn of the 20th century. Kipling published numerous novels, poetry collections, works of non-fiction, and popular children's books like *The Jungle Book* and *Just So Stories*. He was born in Mumbai, India (then under British rule), where he spent some of his adult life as well. Kipling traveled widely on the seas, both as a child and an adult, perhaps explaining his grasp of such specific details as the different stages of a "comber" wave in line 2.

The first and second verses of "The Sea and the Hills" originally appeared as headings to two chapters in Kipling's popular novel *Kim*, published in 1901. *Kim* explored the lives of ordinary people in colonialist India and other territories under British rule. Kipling later added the other two verses, publishing the full version in 1919's *Inclusive Verse*.

Though 1919 is deep in the period of literary modernism, "The Sea and the Hills" has more in common with the rhymes and rhythms of Victorian-era poets. The sea, of course, has long held a mysterious allure for humankind and has been the subject of countless works of literature, from Homer's *Odyssey* to Melville's *Moby-Dick*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The first parts of "The Sea and the Hills" were published at the tail-end of the Victorian era (1837-1901). Under Queen Victoria, Britain's power expanded worldwide. Proverbially, the "sun never set on the British Empire": Britain had colonial holdings across the world and saw itself as the rightful ruler of all the lands it had conquered. Among Queen Victoria's many titles was "Empress of India," an indication of the widespread imperialist project that proceeded during her reign.

Kipling was keenly aware of the excitement offered by sea travel within the context of the British Empire, describing Mumbai, his birth-place, as the land "Where the world-end steamers [steamships] wait." (Mumbai, of course, is only a far-off, "world-end" place to someone viewing Britain as the center of the world.) Kipling was also a full-throated imperialist who paternalistically believed the British had a responsibility to guide and shape the "less civilized" countries they colonized.

When Kipling finished the full poem WWI had just finished. Britain's sea power was crucial to its survival, allowing supplies to come into the country and go out to the mainland. Kipling didn't serve in the war but supported it and the Empire more generally.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a recording of "The Sea and the Hills" by LibriVox (the poem begins at 1:30). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWcb3wJHV0A&ab_channel=LibriVoxAudiobooks)
- The Author's Life — Read more about Rudyard Kipling in this brief overview of his life and work from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/rudyard-kipling)
- Kipling and the Sea — Read more about Kipling's various adventures on the sea. (https://archive.org/details/kiplingseavoyage0000kipl/page/n1/mode/2up)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER RUDYARD KIPLING POEMS

- If—
- The White Man's Burden

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