

Written Near a Port on a Dark Evening



POEM TEXT

- 1 Huge vapours brood above the clifted shore,
- 2 Night on the ocean settles dark and mute,
- 3 Save where is heard the repercussive roar
- 4 Of drowsy billows on the rugged foot
- 5 Of rocks remote; or still more distant tone
- 6 Of seamen in the anchored bark that tell
- 7 The watch relieved; or one deep voice alone
- 8 Singing the hour, and bidding "Strike the bell!"
- 9 All is black shadow but the lucid line
- 10 Marked by the light surf on the level sand,
- 11 Or where afar the ship-lights faintly shine
- 12 Like wandering fairy fires, that oft on land
- 13 Mised the pilgrim--such the dubious ray
- 14 That wavering reason lends in life's long darkling way.

beings' capacity to make sense of the world around them.

Trying to navigate one's way through the world, the speaker suggests, is like facing a wide, dark ocean. In this ocean there are a few "remote" sounds and distant ship lights, but they don't successfully guide people through the unknown. In the same way, the speaker argues, it might *seem* like it's possible to use reason to better understand the world, but such thinking only gives people false confidence as they wander blindly through "life's long darkling way."

One way that the poem explores the relationship between uncertainty and human reason is by acknowledging that trivial things can sometimes feel comforting and familiar. Looking out at the dark ocean is disorienting, which is why things like the sound of sailors' voices or waves against rocks seem reassuring—after all, these sounds are familiar, making it easier for people to fight off feelings of confusion. Yet these rocks are "remote" and unseen, as are the sailors' voices. This, in turn, ends up creating a sense of discombobulation in the poem, indicating that things that *appear* familiar aren't necessarily as reassuring or grounding as one might assume.

The lights of passing ships on the horizon are similar in that they don't actually help people make sense of the dark ocean. For this reason, the speaker compares the ship lights to "wandering fairy fires," saying that they mislead travelers. "Fairy fires" are pieces of decaying wood that glow in the dark, deceiving wayward travelers who mistake them for signs of shelter or human activity.

Although it's natural to assume that light would give clarity to people moving through darkness, it becomes clear in this [simile](#) that this isn't always the case. In fact, the speaker implies that such lights can create an unwarranted feeling of certainty in people who would be better off accepting that they're completely lost.

Very few things, then, can truly make "life's long darkling way" feel less unknowable or baffling. Like peering out at the ocean at night, the experience of being alive is inevitably full of uncertainty, and no amount of human reason—which the speaker casts as unreliable and "wavering"—will change this.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14



SUMMARY

Big, moody clouds hang above the cliffs along the shore. Night falls over the ocean, and everything is dark and silent except for the rhythmic crash of lazy waves against the uneven base of faraway rocks; except for the even more distant sound of sailors in an anchored boat as they tell the watch shift to go to sleep; except for the sound of a single deep voice yelling out the time and declaring that the ship's bell should be struck. Everything is as dark as a shadow except for the clear line created by the white foam of waves breaking on the flat shoreline, except for the lights of far-off boats that shine like moving fairy fires, which often mislead travelers wandering on land—in the same way, human reason casts an untrustworthy light that people try to use while navigating life's long, dark path.



THEMES



UNCERTAINTY AND THE LIMITS OF HUMAN REASON

As the poem's speaker describes an ocean at night, this vast and disorienting setting comes to [metaphorically](#) represent life's many uncertainties. The imposing, foreboding natural landscape makes the speaker feel intensely isolated and lost, and through this the poem suggests the limits of human



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Huge vapours brood above the clifted shore,

Night on the ocean settles dark and mute,

The speaker begins the poem by setting a dark, ominous scene. "Huge" clouds "brood" above a seashore lined by cliffs. This [personification](#) (and more specifically [pathetic fallacy](#)) presents the clouds themselves as moody and ominous (to "brood" means to worry or mope). Clouds can't literally brood, of course, and this description seems to reflect the *speaker's* own state of mind, projected onto the surrounding environment. The poem opens on a foreboding note, vividly conveying the intimidating feeling of staring out at an ocean on a stormy evening.

The second line digs into this feeling, as the speaker describes the night as "dark and mute." The word "mute" suggests that the entire setting is strangely quiet, as if the poem takes place very far away from the standard noises of daily life. Such descriptions draw upon [imagery](#) that makes it easier for readers to envision this "dark," silent place.

"Written Near a Port on a Dark Evening" is written in [iambic pentameter](#), meaning that its lines are mostly made up of five iambs (metrical feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, da-DUM):

Huge va- | pours brood | above | the cliff- | ted shore,
Night on | the o- | cean set- | tles dark | and mute

The steady iambic rhythm reflects the rolling clouds and the subtle sound of waves. That said, the meter isn't perfect. The second line starts with a [trochee](#) (a foot with a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable) and the first foot of line 1 can also be read as being a [spondee](#) (meaning that both syllables are stressed: "Huge va-").

These are minor variations, but they still manage to make the language sound just a little less predictable and, because of this, ever so slightly unsettling.

LINES 3-5

*Save where is heard the repercussive roar
Of drowsy billows on the rugged foot
Of rocks remote;*

The speaker continues to evoke the ominous setting through vivid [imagery](#), now noting the sound of the waves as they break over rocks. Though the speaker said the night is "mute," or silent, in the previous line, now the speaker points out the "repercussive roar" of the rocks. The [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) here, with all those growling /r/ sounds, evokes the sound of a roar itself. The same sound is then picked up by "rugged foot / Of rocks remote."

That these rocks are "remote" means that they're far away and impossible to see from where the speaker stands onshore. As such, the sound of waves crashing against the rocks is the only indication that the rocks themselves are even out there in the

darkness. This, in turn, makes the entire environment seem mysterious, since the speaker can only describe the surroundings in roundabout ways—emphasizing the fact that everything is shrouded in darkness.

The speaker uses more [pathetic fallacy](#) in these lines, this time describing the waves (or "billows") as "drowsy." This doesn't mean they aren't powerful, however—they do, after all, make a "repercussive roar" when they hit the rocks. Because of this, the surrounding world seems both unstoppable and unconcerned with human life.

These lines establish the [sonnet's](#) ABAB [rhyme scheme](#). However, this rhyme scheme isn't perfect, since the word "mute" in line 2 only creates a [slant rhyme](#) with the word "foot" in line 4. Given that lines 1 and 2 create perfect [end rhymes](#), this faint slant rhyme breaks the otherwise cohesive sound of the opening four lines, keeping the poem from sounding too tidy or musical. The poem maintains a slightly off-kilter, unsettling sound that aligns with the feeling of discomfort or disorientation that one might face while staring at the ocean on a dark night.

LINES 5-8

*or still more distant tone
Of seamen in the anchored bark that tell
The watch relieved; or one deep voice alone
Singing the hour, and bidding "Strike the bell!"*

The crashing of the waves aren't the only things the speaker hears. Another thing piercing the "dark and mute" night is the sound of sailors' voices as they yell to each other on an anchored boat (or "bark"). These sounds, the speaker notes, are "more distant" than the noise of waves crashing over "remote" rocks. Although the sound of sailors' voices might be familiar and comforting, these voices are even farther away than unseen rocks, a fact that imbues the poem with a sense of profound loneliness and isolation.

Still, though, the speaker can hear one group of sailors "reliev[ing]" another group of their watch duties, and can even hear a specific sailor yelling out the time and saying, "Strike the bell!" All of this is fairly specific, but it doesn't make the dark surroundings more tangible. Such sounds might make the speaker—or, in turn, readers—feel less alone and more grounded in the otherwise disorienting surroundings, but the fact remains that these sailors are very far away. Their voices float on the wind in a detached manner that doesn't actually make the dark setting any easier to grasp.

The speaker employs subtle kinds of [repetition](#) in these lines, using [anaphora](#) to begin two consecutive phrases with the word "or" (also making this additionally an example of [polysyndeton](#)). This creates a feeling of cohesion and predictability that emphasizes the fact that everything else about the poem—at least in terms of subject—*lacks* predictability, since the poem takes place in such a disorienting

setting.

These lines also contain several moments of [sibilance](#), in words like "still," "distant," "seamen," "voice," "singing," and "strike." Readers will perhaps also pick up on the [assonant](#) /ee/ sound that appears in the words "seamen," "relieved," and "deep." These sounds combine to give the poem a richly musical feel.

LINES 9-13

*All is black shadow but the lucid line
Marked by the light surf on the level sand,
Or where afar the ship-lights faintly shine
Like wandering fairy fires, that oft on land
Misled the pilgrim--*

The speaker explicitly notes just how dark the ocean is, saying that "all is black shadow." This [metaphor](#) presents the speaker's surroundings as an unfathomable abyss, but the speaker goes on to say that it's possible to make out the "lucid line / Marked by the light surf on the level sand." This "lucid line" is made up of the white foam that waves create when they crash against the beach, something that is visible even in the darkest of nights.

The speaker also mentions that it's possible to glimpse lights on the horizon—lights emanating toward the shore from passing ships. Suddenly, then, it seems as if this setting isn't as dark and mysterious as it seemed at first.

But this feeling doesn't last long, since the speaker uses a [simile](#) to compare the ships' lights to "wandering fairy fires." When certain kinds of wood decay, sometimes organic matter in the wood itself will glow in the dark. These are known as "fairy fires," and they emit a light that the speaker implies has often misled people wandering through the woods. The idea that the ship lights are like "fairy fires" therefore suggests that they're untrustworthy and that they won't actually help people get a better sense of their surroundings while staring out at the dark ocean.

These lines are filled with [consonance](#) of the /l/ sound, a smooth, liquid sound that suggests the movement of the water. These lines also feature gentle /f/ sounds and [sibilant](#) /s/ and /sh/ sounds:

*All is black shadow but the lucid line
Marked by the light surf on the level sand
Or where afar the ship-lights faintly shine
Like wandering fairy fires, that oft on land
Misled the pilgrim [...]*

These are soft, delicate sounds, but the gentle musicality here is perhaps like those "fairy fires"—misleading and untrustworthy. Despite the pleasant sounds of the poem here, the speaker is still in a dark, gloomy setting.

LINES 13-14

such the dubious ray

That wavering reason lends in life's long darkling way.

The poem's ending builds upon the [simile](#) comparing the distant lights of passing ships to "fairy fires." This time, though, the speaker takes the idea one step further by presenting human "reason" as an untrustworthy "ray" of light that fails to help people find their way through "life's long darkling way."

Until this moment, the speaker has mostly focused on what it feels like to look out at the ocean at night. Now, though, it becomes clear that the entire poem might be an [extended metaphor](#) for life itself, which often feels just as confusing, disorienting, and uncertain as looking at the dark, vast ocean.

The speaker describes human reason as "dubious," suggesting that it is unreliable. Logic and critical thinking are often able to help people answer difficult questions or solve difficult problems, yet the poem suggests that this kind of reason can only go so far, since life is "long" and dark. Experiencing uncertainty, the poem implies, is simply part of being alive.

The poem intimates that reason can sometimes give people false confidence by making it seem like it's possible to know what lies ahead. This, the speaker suggests, is foolish, since depending on such thinking is like trusting "fairy fires" to lead one through the dark woods. Such lights might give a lonely wanderer a sense of hope and comfort, but they won't actually guide these wayward souls through the dark. The same is true for reason: it will perhaps make people feel more in control when confronting the unknowable nature of life, but it won't change the fact that human existence is full of mystery and confusion.

The [caesura](#) in the middle of line 13 separates the speaker's thoughts about "fairy fires" from the idea that reason is like a "dubious ray." This signals a shift in the poem, as the speaker expands the general scope of the subject to focus not just on the idea of darkness and light, but on the human tendency to search for meaning in moments of uncertainty. It makes sense that this shift comes in the last two lines, since the poem is a Shakespearean [sonnet](#), which usually feature a "[turn](#)" in the final [couplet](#).

The [couplet](#) here includes an [end rhyme](#) between the words "ray" and "way," meaning that the poem ends on a musical note. This perhaps softens the otherwise bleak idea that reason cannot diminish uncertainty in life. It's possible to read the poem not as a lament that life is so unknowable, but an embrace or acceptance of this kind of uncertainty.



SYMBOLS



LIGHT AND DARKNESS

Darkness in the poem represents the limits of human understanding. That the speaker struggles to make out details in the nighttime landscape [symbolically](#) reflects the

idea that there are many things in the world beyond human knowledge.

By contrast, light in the poem represents reason—attempts to make sense of the world and peer through that darkness. Of course, the various sources of light in the poem *fail* to illuminate the surroundings in any meaningful way. Even the ship lights that are visible in the ocean are unhelpful when it comes to navigating the darkness, as the speaker likens them to "wandering fairy fires" that confuse travelers with their faint but misleading glow. This reflects the poem's argument that human reason is "wavering" and "dubious"—an unreliable way to unravel the world's deepest mysteries.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Night on the ocean settles dark and mute,"
- **Lines 9-14:** "All is black shadow but the lucid line / Marked by the light surf on the level sand, / Or where afar the ship-lights faintly shine / Like wandering fairy fires, that oft on land / Misled the pilgrim--such the dubious ray / That wavering reason lends in life's long darkling way."

associated with the ocean. In this way, then, the speaker uses personification not just to imbue the setting with a sense of foreboding, but also to more vividly describe the ocean, which rolls steadily along.

Lastly, the speaker considers human reason at the end of the poem, calling reason itself "wavering" and saying that it "lends" a "dubious ray" of light to illuminate "life's long darkling way." According to this idea, reason itself is untrustworthy and inconsistent. The [metaphorical](#) "ray" of light that reason gives to people on their journey through life cannot be counted on to lead the way through darkness. By personifying reason as an unreliable entity, the speaker makes it clear that trying to make sense of life using logic and critical thinking is often like using distant ship lights on the horizon to navigate through the night.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Huge vapours brood above the clifted shore,"
- **Line 2:** "Night on the ocean settles dark and mute,"
- **Line 4:** "drowsy billows"
- **Lines 13-14:** "such the dubious ray / That wavering reason lends in life's long darkling way."

SIMILE

There is one very important [simile](#) in "Written Near a Port on a Dark Evening." In lines 11-13, the speaker compares the ship lights on the horizon to "wandering fairy fires" that have often "misled" wayward travelers:

Or where afar the ship-lights faintly shine
Like wandering fairy fires, that oft on land
Misled the pilgrim [...]

As noted elsewhere in this guide, "fairy fires" are pieces of decaying wood that, due to certain kinds of organic matter, glow in the dark. The speaker suggests that these lights frequently confuse people who are trying to make their way through otherwise completely black woods, perhaps leading them to believe that they're headed toward civilization when, in reality, they're only walking toward a [bioluminescent](#) piece of wood.

Of course, it *does* seem logical to think of lights as beacons of hope in dark settings—after all, what else would possibly alleviate the confusion of staring into a dark abyss? However, it makes sense that the speaker wouldn't put any trust in these ship lights, since they're so far away and can't actually lead people through the blackness.

For this reason, the speaker uses the simile comparing them to the unreliable "fairy fires," indicating that they give people an unwarranted sense of direction and comfort even though they are, in the end, incapable of actually dispelling feelings of disorientation. In turn, the simile invites readers to consider the



POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

The poem begins with a type of [personification](#) known as [pathetic fallacy](#), as the speaker suggests that clouds "brood" over the shoreline. To "brood" means to think deeply about something that is usually unpleasant or troubling. The fact that the speaker uses this word to describe the clouds suggests that the speaker is projecting the speaker's *own* troubled emotional state onto the surrounding environment, perhaps because the dark clouds look intimidating.

Of course, clouds can't actually "brood," but this characterization suggests that they're discontent and maybe even angry. As such, the clouds themselves come to seem threatening, as if they're moody and ill-tempered.

The speaker goes on to personify the night, describing it as "mute"—meaning that it doesn't speak. The speaker casts the night as a silent presence that sneaks in and "settles" over the ocean. Combined with the moody clouds above, the idea that the night is so silent feels oddly disturbing, since its approach is quiet and unassuming even though everything suddenly becomes dark. Personification thus accentuates the foreboding quality of the speaker's immediate surroundings, presenting both the clouds and the night itself in ways that feel intimidating and mysterious.

The speaker uses personification again when characterizing the waves in the ocean as "drowsy." The idea that the waves are sleepy and slow evokes the gentle rocking motion often

fact that sometimes it's impossible in life to escape uncertainty.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-13:** "Or where afar the ship-lights faintly shine / Like wandering fairy fires, that oft on land / Misled the pilgrim--"

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) appears throughout "Written Near a Port on a Dark Evening," often making the lines' content all the more vivid for the reader. For example, the growling /r/ sounds of "repercussive roar" and "rugged foot / Of rocks remote" evoke the sound of that roar, of the waves crashing against the rocks. The /z/ of "drowsy billows," by contrast, evokes the sleepiness of the phrase.

As another example, note how the combination of the quiet /s/ and sharp /t/ sounds in line 5 subtly reflects the [imagery](#) at hand—with only short snippets of the men's voices cutting through the darkness, just as the /t/ sounds cut through the line:

[...] or still more distant tone
Of seamen [...]

Consonance also makes the poem's language sound more elevated and poetic, different from everyday speech. Lines 9-13 are particularly musical, for example, dominated by the gentle /l/, /f/, /sh/, and /m/ sounds in words and phrases like "light surf on the level sand" and "afar the ship-lights faintly shine." The language here feels especially lofty and pleasant, subtly reflecting the (misleading) allure of those "ship-lights."

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Lines 7-8
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Lines 12-13
- Line 13
- Line 14

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) appears in small ways throughout the poem, acting as a way for the speaker to add subtle moments of musicality to the language. Consider, for example, the long /ee/ sounds in lines 6 and 7:

Of seamen in the anchored bark that tell
The watch relieved; or one deep voice alone

The /ee/ sound is very bright, so the words "seamen," "relieved," and "deep" stand out in this section.

The most striking assonance, however, pops up in lines 9-14—which, as noted in the consonance discussion of this guide, are filled with gentle, repetitive sounds. Notice the /ah/, /aw/, and long and short /i/ sounds that weave throughout this section:

All is black shadow but the lucid line
Marked by the light surf on the level sand,
Or where afar the ship-lights faintly shine
Like wandering fairy fires, that oft on land
Misled the pilgrim--such the dubious ray
That wavering reason lends in life's long darkling way.

Line 9 marks the first introduction of light into the poem, which the following lines then flesh out. Given that these lines deal with light—the opposite of the gloomy darkness of the poem's first half—it makes sense that suddenly the speaker's language gets more explicitly poetic. All the same, such poetry is misleading; like the "fairy fires" that mislead travelers, the prettiness of the language here masks the fact that, in the speaker's mind, there is no real illumination in the [metaphorical](#) darkness of life.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Huge," "brood"
- **Line 3:** "heard," "repercussive"
- **Line 6:** "seamen"
- **Line 7:** "relieved," "deep"
- **Line 9:** "black shadow," "line"
- **Line 10:** "light"
- **Line 11:** "lights," "shine"
- **Line 12:** "Like," "fires," "oft on"
- **Line 13:** "Misled," "pilgrim," "ray"
- **Line 14:** "wavering," "way"

SIBILANCE

[Sibilance](#) appears throughout "Written Near a Port on a Dark Evening," adding to the poem's quiet, still atmosphere. Sibilance also mimics the fizzling spray of breaking waves, so it makes that it appears so often in a poem about staring out at the

ocean. Note, for example, the sibilance in lines 1 through 4:

[...] clifted shore
 Night on the ocean settles dark and mute,
 Save where is heard the repercussive roar
 Of drowsy billows [...]

In particular, the /sh/ sound in "shore" and "ocean" conjures the noise of the waves crashing against unseen rocks. In this way, then, sibilance helps the speaker more vividly depict the surrounding world, matching the sounds of the poem to the sounds of its setting.

In lines 5-6, sibilance suggests the distance of the sailors' voices, the /s/ sounds adding a whispery quality to the lines. This, in turn, is punctuated by sharp /t/ sounds, subtly evoking the way those voices might occasionally break through the darkness:

[...] or still more distant tone
 Of seamen [...]

As noted in this guide's discussions of [consonance](#) and [assonance](#), the section half of the poem features lots of sibilance as well. Sibilance combines with many gentle /l/ and /f/ sounds in lines 9-13, as the speaker describes seeing lights in the distance. The pleasing, soft sounds of these lines feel eloquent and lovely—and thus may lead the reader into a false sense of security. Just as those "ship-lights" are akin to "fairy-fires" that lead travelers astray, the gentle language of the poem is a pleasant distraction from the disorientation and confusion at its heart.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "shore"
- **Line 2:** "ocean settles"
- **Line 3:** "Save," "is," "repercussive"
- **Line 4:** "drowsy billows"
- **Line 5:** "rocks," "still," "distant"
- **Line 6:** "seamen"
- **Line 7:** "voice"
- **Line 8:** "Singing," "Strike"
- **Line 9:** "shadow," "lucid"
- **Line 10:** "surf," "sand"
- **Line 11:** "ship," "lights," "shine"
- **Line 12:** "fires"
- **Line 13:** "Misled," "such," "dubious"

IMAGERY

The speaker's use of [imagery](#) makes it easier for readers to envision the setting in which the poem takes place. The speaker vividly illustrates what it feels like to stand on the edge of the ocean and gaze out at the rolling water at night, first by

focusing on the many sounds of this environment. There is the "repercussive roar" of waves hitting "remote" rocks, along with the muffled sounds of sailors yelling to each other on some faraway boat. By describing this soundscape before focusing too heavily on what the ocean *looks* like, the speaker implies that the scene is so dark and intangible that distant noises are more revealing than anything else.

This, however, is not to say that the speaker doesn't also use visual imagery. The speaker says that everything looks like a "black shadow"—everything, that is, except for the "lucid line" that the waves make when they break on the shoreline. This description invites readers to envision a vast abyss of darkness surrounding a clear white line formed by the foamy waves.

The speaker then notes the twinkling lights of ships on the horizon, which punctuate the darkness. However, neither these lights nor the white line on the shore actually *illuminate* the darkness—they don't make things any clearer or more visible. As a result, the speaker's use of imagery in this moment ends up making the entire scene feel even more mysterious and disorienting.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 9-12

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The poem focuses on the feeling of staring out at the dark ocean at night, using this as an [extended metaphor](#) to illustrate the idea that it's impossible for human beings to fully make sense of the mysteries and uncertainties of life. As the speaker describes the dark ocean's horizon, readers will perhaps feel a sense of disorientation. This is because there are very few things to visually latch onto in this particular setting, in which everything is like a "black shadow."

To that end, the only things that *are* visible are lights that ultimately fail to fully illuminate the surroundings. The shoreline, for instance, is visible because of the white band of foam created by the waves as they break on the sand. But while this might reveal the shore's location in the dark, it doesn't provide enough light to actually make sense of the environment. Similarly, the lights of boats on the horizon are visible, but they're distant and unreliable—something the speaker implies by comparing them to "[fairy fires](#)" that often mislead people trying to make their way through the woods at night.

At the end of the poem, the speaker suggests that the attempt to use human reason to make sense of life is futile, comparing it to the act of relying on faulty, misleading lights to make one's way through darkness. This assertion clarifies that the poem is built around an extended metaphor that presents "life's long

darkling way" as a vast and dark ocean that is impossible to understand—an unknowable ocean that forces people to embrace the fact that reason cannot eliminate the many uncertainties that are simply part of being alive.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-14

CAESURA

The few [caesuras](#) in "Written Near a Port on a Dark Evening" help organize the poem, since they separate and organize the poem's many images. For instance, the caesura in line 5 creates a brief pause as the speaker transitions from the sound of the waves against the rocks to the sound of sailors' voices on a distant ship:

[...] drowsy billows on the rugged foot
Of rocks remote; || or still more distant tone
Of seamen in the anchored bark [...]

In the same way, the speaker uses another caesura in line 7, separating the sound of the sailors' voices from the sound of a *specific* voice speaking out on its own.

In the final two lines, the speaker uses a caesura to highlight one of the poem's most important ideas:

Misled the pilgrim — || such the dubious ray
That wavering reason lends in life's long darkling way.

By separating the last sentence from the rest of the poem, the speaker calls attention to the idea that human reason is like an unreliable light that is incapable of illuminating life's long, dark path. This is a crucial moment, since the rest of the poem mainly focuses on describing the physical setting. It isn't until this final idea, then, that the true [metaphorical](#) meaning of the poem reveals itself. And because this moment is so significant, a caesura separates it from everything else, thereby ensuring that it won't simply blend into the rest of the poem.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "remote; or"
- **Line 7:** "relieved; or"
- **Line 8:** "hour, and"
- **Line 12:** "fires, that"
- **Line 13:** "pilgrim--such"

REPETITION

[Repetition](#) appears throughout the poem in a few different forms. The speaker leans heavily on [anaphora](#) and [polysyndeton](#), for example, beginning several lines and clauses with the same words while listing the various sights and sounds

of the speaker's environment. The speaker says that everything is quiet except for:

[...] the repercussive roar
Of drowsy billows on the rugged foot
Of rocks remote; or still more distant tone
Of seamen in the anchored bark that tell
The watch relieved; or one deep voice alone
Singing the hour [...]

This pattern of repeating the word "or" also appears later in the poem, when the speaker lists the few visible things in the otherwise dark setting:

All is black shadow but the lucid line
Marked by the light surf on the level sand,
Or where afar the ship-lights faintly shine.

By using the same sentence construction multiple times, the speaker also makes use of [parallelism](#) and in doing so maintains a sense of consistency throughout the poem. This repetition lends the poem a feeling of predictability—something that clashes with the poem's exploration of uncertainty and mystery. All that repetition, then, is a lot like those pretty "fairy fires" and "ship-lights": misleading.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Of"
- **Line 5:** "Of," "or"
- **Line 6:** "Of"
- **Line 7:** "or"
- **Line 10:** "light"
- **Line 11:** "Or," "lights"



VOCABULARY

Vapours (Line 1) - Clouds.

Brood (Line 1) - To think intensely about something in a concerned, unhappy way.

Clifted (Line 1) - The speaker uses the word "clifted" to indicate that shoreline is made up of cliffs.

Mute (Line 2) - Silent.

Save (Line 3) - Except.

Repercussive (Line 3) - A sound is one that echoes or reverberates in a rhythmic way.

Drowsy (Line 4) - Sleepy, lethargic, or peaceful.

Billows (Line 4) - Waves.

Rugged Foot (Line 4) - The base of the rocky cliffs on the shoreline.

Remote (Line 5) - Distant or very far removed.

Bark (Line 6) - A boat.

Relieved (Line 7) - In this context, the word "relieved" refers to sailors who have been dismissed from their watch duties.

Singing the hour (Line 8) - Shouting out the time.

Bidding (Line 8) - Saying.

The lucid line (Line 9) - The clear, visible line of white foam created by waves as they wash up onshore.

Afar (Line 11) - Far away.

Fairy fires (Line 12) - Pieces of decaying wood that, because of the decomposition process of a certain kind of organic matter, glow in the dark.

Oft (Line 12) - Often.

Pilgrim (Line 13) - A person on a long journey.

Dubious (Line 13) - Unreliable.

Wavering (Line 14) - Something that "wavers" is usually inconsistent, hesitant, or indecisive.

Darkling (Line 14) - Dark.

This line features the heartbeat thump characteristic of iambic pentameter, creating a steady rhythmic pulse (da-DUM da-DUM) reminiscent of the sound of waves crashing consistently against a rocky shoreline.

Elsewhere, though, the meter isn't quite so straightforward. For example, it could be argued that the very first line begins with a [spondee](#) (a metrical foot consisting of two consecutive stressed syllables: "Huge vap-"). Similarly, line 2 begins with another stressed syllable:

Night on | the o- | cean set- | tles dark | and mute,

The first foot of this line is a [trochee](#), or a foot consisting of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable: "Night on." This metrical substitution breaks up the predictable iambic bounce that otherwise defines the poem. This makes the language sound ever so slightly unpredictable and inconsistent, creating a vaguely unsettling sensation that mirrors the feeling of uncertainty one might experience while staring out at the ocean at night.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's [rhyme scheme](#) follows the conventions of a [Shakespearean sonnet](#). It can be mapped out like this:

ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

Nearly every rhyme in the poem is a [perfect end rhyme](#), creating a musical and confident sound. However, the first [quatrain](#) features the poem's only [slant rhyme](#), rhyming "mute" with "foot." This makes the beginning of the poem sound somewhat off-kilter and keeps the poem from sounding too tidy or perfect. This, in turn, leads to a vaguely unsettled sound that aligns with the disconcerting feeling of looking out at a vast ocean at night.

At the same time, everything else about the rhyme scheme is very straightforward. The poem culminates in a very obvious rhyme between the words "ray" and "way" in the final [couplet](#), thereby ending on cohesive, conclusive note. As such, the poem has a very satisfying and musical sound that draws readers through the lines, creating a feeling of predictability and consistency that the subject matter otherwise lacks.



SPEAKER

The reader doesn't learn much, if anything, about the poem's speaker. The speaker is almost entirely absent from the poem, in fact, which focuses instead on vivid descriptions of the environment.

All readers know is that the speaker is someone describing their surroundings while looking out at the dark ocean, detailing what it's like to stand alone on the brink of such a vast, mysterious body of water. The poem's use of [pathetic fallacy](#)



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Written Near a Port on a Dark Evening" is a [sonnet](#). More specifically, it's a Shakespearean sonnet, since its 14 lines are divided into three quatrains (four-line stanzas) followed by a final rhyming couplet.

That said, the first quatrain spills over into the second, as the phrase begun in line 4 doesn't actually end until the middle of line 5 (after which there is a [caesura](#) that marks the beginning of the second quatrain). The same thing happens at the end of the third quatrain, which spills over into the final couplet. Perhaps this suggests the speaker's struggle against the confines of the poem's form—that this form can't entirely contain the mysterious setting at hand.

As is standard in a Shakespearean sonnet, the poem also features a "turn" in the final couplet. Here, the speaker expands the poem's scope, so that it no longer focuses solely on the experience of staring out at a dark ocean. The final two lines make it clear that the poem is actually an [extended metaphor](#) for life itself, with all its countless uncertainties.

METER

Like most English-language [sonnets](#), the poem is written in [iambic pentameter](#). This means that its lines are made up of five [iambs](#), metrical feet consisting of unstressed syllables followed by stressed syllables. Take line 5:

Of rocks | remote | or still | more dis- | tant tone

(describing the clouds as "brood[ing]," for example) gives some hints as to the speaker's own emotional state, implying that this person feels a sense of isolation and disorientation while staring out into the darkness.

That said, the fact that the speaker doesn't use personal pronouns to talk about this experience makes it easier for readers to imagine themselves in this context, to envision what it would be like to stare out at such a lonely horizon. In this way, the speaker actually seems more like a distant narrator detailing a certain scene than an actual person standing by the ocean.



SETTING

The poem takes place at the "clifted shore" of the ocean on a dark, gloomy night. As clouds roll in overhead, the speaker describes the rhythmic splash of waves against jagged rocks and the distant sound of sailors' voices on an anchored boat. These voices are the only sign of human activity apart from dim lights shining from ships on the distant horizon.

These details convey a feeling of disorientation and isolation, allowing the setting to become a [metaphor](#) for the idea that navigating life is often as confusing and uncertain as looking out at the ocean on a dark night. This vast, imposing natural environment, almost entirely free of human beings, displays a classic Romantic sensibility as well, prioritizing the power of nature and emotion over strict reason or rationality.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Written Near a Port on a Dark Evening," which was published sometime around 1800, engages with nature in a way that is characteristic of Romantic poetry. As the world changed and life sped up to match the shifting landscape of the Industrial Revolution, the Romantic poets yearned for a return to nature and celebrated slower, more contemplative lifestyles. They also rebelled against the increasing focus on science and rationality that had taken hold during the Enlightenment.

"Written Near a Port on a Dark Evening" displays many Romantic characteristics. For one thing, it takes place in a remote setting where it's nearly impossible to find signs of human activity. Its acknowledgment of the disorienting enormity and power of nature is textbook Romanticism, as is the poem's insistence on the limits of reason and rationality.

Charlotte Turner Smith in fact helped shape the Romantic movement itself, ultimately influencing many of the most famous Romantic poets and helping bring the [sonnet](#) form back to popularity in the 18th century. Her work made an impression on famous Romanticists like John Keats and William

Wordsworth. In particular, Wordsworth praised her for writing about nature in such beautiful, perceptive ways, saying that she deserved credit for shaping British poetry so profoundly.

All that said, "Written Near a Port on a Dark Evening" is more morose and pessimistic than many of the most famous Romantic poems. The poem focuses on a rural setting and uses the speaker's observations about nature to illuminate larger ideas about life and humanity (all things that are typical of Romantic poetry), but its central [metaphor](#) presents the world as dark and ominous.

In contrast, poets like William Wordsworth tended to approach nature with a more appreciative, gleeful viewpoint (for example, look to Wordsworth's "[I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud](#)"). That said, it's possible to compare "Written Near a Port on a Dark Evening" to Keats's "[The Rime of the Ancient Mariner](#)"; both focus on the sea and play with feelings of dread and isolation, stepping away from the more optimistic, joyful elements of Romantic poetry.

Historical Context

As previously mentioned, Smith composed the poem at the turn of the 18th century. This means the poem was written during the Industrial Revolution, which began in 1760 and lasted for the next 60 to 80 years. The Industrial Revolution led to great innovation, especially in England, where there were notable advancements in the textile and metalworking industries. These advancements changed the nature of life at the end of the 1700s. Laborers transitioned from working with their hands to operating machinery, which ultimately expedited the labor process and led to rapid economic growth.

The poem's focus on the enormity of nature reflects common Romantic ideas of the time, which developed in response to the era's increasing industrialization and focus on science and rationality above all else. The speaker's insistence on the limits of human reason suggests that society has perhaps put too much faith in its powers of invention—after all, none of the technological advancements of the Industrial Revolution could ever change the fact that life is full of uncertainty.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [A Reading of the Poem](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N0Fda2RdFb4) — Hear the poem read aloud. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N0Fda2RdFb4>)
- [Romanticism](https://www.britannica.com/art/Romanticism) — For more information about Romanticism, check out Britannica's entry on the movement. (<https://www.britannica.com/art/Romanticism>)
- [About Charlotte Smith](https://poetryarchive.org/poet/charlotte-smith/) — Learn more about Charlotte Smith in this brief overview of her life and work. (<https://poetryarchive.org/poet/charlotte-smith/>)

- [Fairy Fires](#) – Read more about "fairy fires" and the bioluminescent reaction that creates them. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foxfire>)
- [Another Ominous Poem](#) – Charlotte Smith returned time and again to the unsettling atmosphere of the ocean at night. Consider, for example, another of her sonnets: "On Being Cautioned Against Walking on an Headland Overlooking the Sea, Because It Was Frequented by a Lunatic." (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51893/sonnet-on-being-cautioned-against-walking-on-an-headland-overlooking-the-sea-because-it-was-frequented-by-a-lunatic>)



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