

CROSSING THE BAR

1           Sunset and evening star  
2                 And one clear call for me!  
3           And may there be no moaning of the bar,  
4                 When I put out to sea,  
  
5           But such a tide as moving seems asleep,  
6                 Too full for sound and foam,  
7           When that which drew from out the boundless deep  
8                 Turns again home.  
  
9           Twilight and evening bell,  
10                 And after that the dark!  
11           And may there be no sadness of farewell,  
12                 When I embark;  
  
13           For though from out our bourne of Time and Place  
14                 The flood may bear me far,  
15           I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
16                 When I have crossed the bar.

NOTES

This poem is at once a noble proclamation of resignation to the inevitability of mortality *and* of Christian faith in salvation *and* a wish for a quick, easy death (for instance, in one’s sleep — note the particulars of line 5).

Aside from the wonderful precision of the metaphor of crossing a sand dune (with or without a heavy cargo) on the way out of a harbor to figure death with or without struggle, this poem’s appeal seems to reside primarily in its rich overlay of patterned sounds. The following notes come no where near to cataloging all the poem’s sound effects.

- 1       The evening star appears in a sky still light, though dimly so. Like the sunset it follows, it is a sign that night is coming, though not yet arrived.
- 2       “One clear” momentarily adheres to the idea of the evening sky in line 1 — to “star” in particular.
- 2, 3    The 3rd stresses of lines 2 and 3 begin with *m* sounds: *me*, *moan*.

- 3 The reference is to a scraping sound made by the hull of a laden ship just barely scraping across a sand bar at high tide. The idea of moaning, of course, relates both to the lamentation of survivors of a newly deceased person and to the protests of someone fighting against death.
- Note the intricate patterns of assonance in *o* and consonance in *m* and *n*:  
May ... No / MoaN
- 1, 3 The second stressed syllables of lines 1 and 3 have the same vowel sound, followed by an *n* sound: *eve-n* / *be no*. The same vowel sound is the “b” rhyme, and at the end of line 2 it too is followed by an *n*, the one that “and” is at the beginning of line 3.
- 1–4 The first syllables of lines 1–4 each contain an *n* sound: *Sun-*, *And*, *And*, *When*.
- 4 The unstressed sound of “when” echoes the stressed sound of “one” (pronounced “won”) in the first foot of line 2.
- 1, 3, 5 1: *eveNing*; 3: *moaNing*; 5: *moving*; note too that the three words, drawn together by a second syllable in common are grammatically different: “evening” is an ordinary noun (its *i-n-g* sound is many centuries from the verb in its Old English ancestry); “moaning” is a participial noun; “moving” is adjectival here.
- 5 “But” presents the full tide as the preferred alternative to the kind that causes “moaning of the bar.”
- The poem begins with a 3-stress line; the next quatrain begins with a line that has two stresses more. The difference helps accentuate the likenesses of line 9 to line 1. That likeness gives the four quatrain poem a superimposed extra identity as two eight-line stanzas. On the other hand, the two-stress fourth line of quatrain 3 insists on the likeness of the middle two quatrains. Such superimpositions of phonic identities are, of course, of the essence of this poem’s special appeal.
- 3, 6 “foam,” the sixth syllable and third stress of line 6 is a near rhyme with “moan-” — the sixth syllable and third stress of line 3.
- 7, 8 These two lines suddenly and gracefully expose the tide and the human soul as wondrously similar.
- A sense alien to the sense the first syllable of “boundless” has in line 7 pertains to the sense of line 8, which says what “is bound again for home” would say. (See “bourne” in line 13.)
- 9–12 The whole third quatrain insists on its identity as quatrain 1 rephrased.
- 10 “the dark”: The parallel line in quatrain 1 has “clear” in it.
- 11 The line does not demand that its readers take conscious note that it enjoins against lamentation both *for* the dying man and *by* him.

“farewell”: The context of travel all but revivifies the literal (and hopeful) sense of *fare well*: “Have a good trip.”

- 13 *bourne* = “domain,” “realm.” (Note, however, the echo in a sense here unavailable to *bourne* — “boundary” — of “boundless” in line 7. What’s more, in this context of travel and death, “bourne” puts the “To be or not to be” soliloquy into this poem’s background. *Hamlet* 3.2.78–79: “The undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveler returns.”)

Line 13 presents four varieties of *o* sound; five if you count “for”; six if you count the vowel in “from” and “of.”

The “out” in line 13 is the third in the poem: “put out” (4), “from out” (7 and here).

- 15 The poem gets a lot of energy when half of everything we know about real pilots (who operate only inside their harbors) is contradicted in the metaphor of God as pilot (guide through treacherous ways). The line presents us with the easily acceptable idea of God as pilot at just the point in the analogy when the pilot boat would take the pilot back into the port from which the ship has safely passed.

- 16 “When I” echoes the last lines of quatrains 1 and 3.

- 1-16 No two of the four quatrains is metrically even roughly identical with any other. The four verse paragraphs are nevertheless stanza, are so because they feel formally alike. They are, however, not alike:

**Stanza 1:** 3-stress line rhymed in *a*  
3-stress line rhymed in *b*  
5-stress line rhymed in *a*  
3-stress line rhymed in *b*

**Stanza 2:** 5-stress line rhymed in *c*  
3-stress line rhymed in *d*  
5-stress line rhymed in *c*  
2-stress line rhymed in *d*

**Stanza 3:** 3-stress line rhymed in *e*  
3-stress line rhymed in *f*  
5-stress line rhymed in *e*  
2-stress line rhymed in *f*

**Stanza 4:** 5-stress line rhymed in *g*  
3-stress line rhymed in *a*  
5-stress line rhymed in *g*  
3-stress line rhymed in *a*