Watching for Dolphins

SUMMARY

Every time the speaker took a ship to Piraeus over the summer, the speaker would quickly notice some passengers somberly standing up from their seats in the busy lounge area. Without ever mentioning that they all had the same thing in mind, these passengers would go to the front of the ship to see if they could spot any wild dolphins.

These passengers became very intent on seeing dolphins, to the point where even lovers were paying more attention to the sea than to each other. An overweight man carrying lots of photography equipment stared intensely through his rather pathetic bi-focal glasses. Other passengers, who didn't expect to see anything, kept their eyes on the children—because if anyone was going to see dolphins, it would be them.

For days in a row, or if it was their last time making this crossing, all the passengers looked steadily out at the sea, unsure of whether there was a better chance of seeing dolphins in fair, calm weather. The sun and the wind together had the effect of making the waves look like dolphins. The passengers wondered if seagulls, swooping down from the sky and making a racket, or even just sitting in a group somewhere one wouldn't think to look, were a sign that dolphins would appear.

The faces of the passengers were eager, seeming to beg the sea for something. All of them wanted something they were not used to wanting: a sudden moment of insight, or an appearance of something divine. In their intense anticipation, it seemed they were praying that the sky would erupt into thunder and disturb the sea, and then that the sea would echo so loudly it would be like listening to loud, percussive instruments. The speaker, now including themselves among the other passengers, muses that they were in essence praying as hard as they could. The speaker then imagines what the scene would have been like if the dolphins had arrived at the moment the passengers most wanted them to appear.

The dolphins would have been happy and playful and wild, and all the passengers would have laughed and lifted the children into the air, turning to each other in their joy. They would have pointed to the dolphins leaping in and out of the ocean, noticing how graceful they were and how incredible it must have felt for them to re-enter the water and swim around the bottom of the ship.

The speaker, deep in this imaginary scene, thought about how it would feel to swim further and further into the depths of the ocean. But this fantasy dissolved soon enough; the ship arrived at the harbor, and the speaker could only imagine swimming amidst the chains and petroleum leaking out of the cargo ships. The passengers did not get to see dolphins, and returning to the reality of their ordinary lives was like waking from a dream. Not looking at each other or admitting their disappointment, the passengers spread out, preparing to go back to their lives on land in the city.

THEMES

NATURE, SPIRITUALITY, AND PURPOSE

In “Watching for Dolphins,” the speaker is one of many passengers hoping to spot wild dolphins while traveling on a ship to a port city in Greece. Soon enough, however, it becomes clear that the experience of seeing dolphins, which never actually happens, is representative of something that is missing from the passengers’ lives on land: the passengers’ desire to encounter dolphins is *really* a desire to come into contact with something more profound than what they have come to expect from their ordinary existence "in the city."

By the end of the poem, the act of watching for dolphins has become representative of the passengers' longing for a spiritual experience, and the sense of purpose and meaning that such an experience might provide. What's more, the poem implies that such spirituality—such feelings of awe, wonder, and purpose—is deeply connected to witnessing the majesty and beauty of the natural world.

The speaker takes care to point out the passengers' “serious looks” as they head towards the front of the ship in hopes of seeing dolphins. These “serious looks” reveal how eager the passengers are to encounter dolphins roaming free—an eagerness that implies the passengers' feelings of stagnancy and captivity in their own lives. The passengers, soon to return to those ordinary lives, crave something of the natural world that is missing from their day-to-day existence.

This idea is further supported by the poem's comparison of the dolphins to "satyrs." Satyrs were mythological woodland spirits, part man and part goat or horse, characterized by their lustfulness and drunkenness. The mention of satyrs suggests that the passengers long to get in touch with a more uninhibited, animalistic part of themselves—perhaps to feel like a *part* of the natural world rather than isolated from it.

The passengers rising from their seats also calls to mind the image of the dead being brought back to life. Such an image implies the stifled or “deadened” quality of the passengers’ everyday routines, and their desire to be metaphorically brought back to life by the wonder of nature.

One passenger even “stared like a saint.” The use of the word

"saint" points to how much importance the passengers have placed on the possibility of seeing dolphins. They look to the dolphins as a saint would look to divinity, expecting something extraordinary, something that might offer their lives meaning. With this comparison, the natural world becomes even more explicitly equated with something divine or holy. Even the more "hopeless" passengers "looked to the children," for children are often depicted as being more receptive to spiritual phenomena. These passengers—not daring to hope for a spiritual experience themselves—only hope to witness someone else's spiritual experience.

In the middle of the poem, the speaker interprets the watchful faces of the passengers in terms of what they most desire: "All, unaccustomed, wanted epiphany ..." The word "epiphany" describes a sudden revelation or an instance of insight. It is this epiphany—or sudden, tangible appearance of something that will infuse their lives with meaning—for which the passengers long.

The speaker then imagines what this contact might feel like. The image of the dolphins leaping from and returning to the water, "heavily and warm re-entered," is one of being both enveloped and of surrendering to something more powerful than oneself. The last thing the speaker imagines before returning to the reality of the dolphins having not been sighted is the feeling of going "further and further into the deep parts." The speaker wishes to feel like a part of something vast and unknowable.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 2
- Line 3
- Lines 3-12
- Line 12
- Lines 12-16
- Line 16
- Lines 16-23
- Line 23
- Lines 23-31

ISOLATION, LONGING, AND CONNECTION

The poem describes a group of passengers aboard a ship all hoping to catch a glimpse of wild dolphins. These passengers are quite different from one another—there are lovers, children, a "fat man" with a camera, and, of course, the unnamed speaker—yet they all are united by their "common purpose." The speaker suggests that the desire for a spiritual experience is *also* a desire to be brought into meaningful contact with the other passengers, to be united by a common understanding of the pain and longing of being human.

And yet, the ship's passengers feel isolated from one another throughout the poem. The speaker only *imagines* connecting with the other passengers over the sighting of dolphins; the dolphins ultimately remain unseen. Likewise, and the passengers remain alone in their individual desires to be brought together by a shared experience. The poem concludes with the passengers unable to even *articulate* their disappointment to one another, emphasizing the isolation to which they are all returned back on land.

In the first stanza, the passengers rise with "no acknowledgement of a common purpose." While they are all hoping for the same thing, they all feel alone in their desire because they can't articulate the true motivation behind that desire, which is to be brought together in some meaningful way. The unsaid contextualizes the passengers' desire to see dolphins: they hope for an experience that will break down the barriers between them, inspiring in them a sense of shared purpose.

The speaker imagines what would happen if they did catch sight of the dolphins, envisioning laughter and people lifting their children in the air, "stranger to stranger." The imagined scene is in stark contrast with the reality. In reality, the passengers sit side by side, not speaking to each other, but looking to the sea, "Praying the sky would clang and the abused Aegean / Reverberate with cymbal, gong, and drum." The noisiness of the fantasy further underscores the silence of the passengers. Even the word "passengers" implies passiveness, as they watch and wait for something to change them, and nothing does.

In the last stanza, the passengers leave the ship without having seen the dolphins. They disembark "Eyes cast down, / with no admission of disappointment." Despite their shared experience of longing, they are unable to articulate even their disappointment to one another, let alone the longing itself. They can't even bring themselves to look at each other, an action which might allow them to acknowledge their own disappointment, reflected back to them in another's eyes.

The passengers then "disperse," a word which suggests a growing distance and space between them. Though they are returning to the city, a place filled with people, they seem to have lost their chance at connection, which has become a dream from which the passengers "woke, blinking." The poem concludes with the passengers returning to the isolation of their ordinary lives.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-4
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 18-19
- Line 20
- Lines 21-22
- Line 23
- Lines 23-27

- Lines 30-33
- Lines 33-36

THE POWER OF IMAGINATION

While the passengers ultimately do not see dolphins and are returned to the city disappointed, the poem's endeavor is more ambiguous than its narrative suggests. In their shared desire for a meaningful experience, the passengers, as evidenced by the speaker's movement through the ecstatic language of the imagination, have taken part in something more extraordinary than what is immediately apparent. The poem subtly embraces the power of the imagination as a response to life's disappointments.

While it would seem nothing has changed between the beginning of the poem and its conclusion, the bulk of the poem deals not with the passengers' reality, but with their desires. Imagining seeing the dolphins allows the speaker to feel joy, joy not unlike what the passengers would have felt had they actually seen the dolphins. This joy is apparent in the heightened language at the climax of the poem. It is through the faculty of the imagination that the speaker is able to have this meaningful, joyful experience, however brief or abstracted from reality.

The poem's movement from using language of longing to a more ecstatic language indicates the speaker's movement from feeling isolated to feeling the *possibility* of connection, a shared experience of what it means to be human. This feeling comes not from *actual* connection but from the speaker's ability to *imagine* what this connection might be like.

As the speaker becomes more involved in imagining the experience of seeing dolphins, the language of the poem intensifies. Stanza five is then entirely given over to the delights of the speaker's imagination. "Smiling, snub-nosed, domed like satyrs, oh"—the fifth stanza begins with musicality, employing alliteration, assonance, consonance, meter, and rhyme all at once to create a sense of sudden beauty and joy.

The speaker then imagines the passengers laughing and lifting the children into the air, "stranger to stranger," an image which is joyous and communal. Additionally, the prevalence of the letters /l/ and /p/ throughout stanza five creates a playfulness and lightheartedness that is absent throughout the rest of the poem. Overall it is by far the most musical stanza, which for the reader creates the sense of ecstasy the speaker is feeling while imagining seeing the dolphins.

Notably, this is also the spot where the speaker moves from detached third person observations ("One noticed that certain passengers ...") at the beginning of the poem, to a more inclusive, plural first person ("We could not imagine more ..."). The speaker, by allowing themselves to become one with the other passengers, has gone through a subtle but significant transformation. Though they did not see dolphins, the passengers experienced something meaningful by participating in the experience that *was* available, i.e., the experience of *imagining* things to be different than they are. In this way the poem suggests that the imagination is a powerful tool, one that may be used to combat the disappointments of ordinary life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 23-31

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

In the summer ...
... watch for dolphins.

The first six lines of "Watching for Dolphins" establish the poem's setting. They also present the poem's speaker as a kind of removed, almost omniscient observer (something that, importantly, will change later in the poem).

The first line alone gives the reader so much context about what's happening. The most obvious information is that it is summer and the passengers are aboard a ship to Piraeus, a port city in Greece. The first line also implies that the passengers are likely returning from vacation, as the Greek Islands are a popular tourist destination in the summer months.

In the second line, the speaker of the poem is introduced rather abstractly with the phrase, "One noticed ..." When used as a pronoun, "One" implies that the speaker could be referring to anyone, or that they are referring to themselves as a kind of stand-in for everyone. It can also be used to refer to the self in the third person, automatically *distancing* the speaker from their *own* experience. It creates the feeling that the speaker is looking at this scene from a remove, and with neutrality—in other words, that the speaker isn't personally invested or implicated in what's happening; the speaker is just telling the story. The use of "One" thus also establishes a sense of isolation: the speaker is at a distance from the other passengers.

The speaker then describes the passengers as rising from their seats in the saloon (basically a bar or lounge area) to go watch for dolphins at the front of the ship. This observation seems neutral on the surface—not much is happening at this point in the poem. However, the poem's use of enjambment is already creating a sense of what's at stake for these passengers. For one thing, enjambment makes all of these lines flow (perhaps crash) into each other; it builds a sense of anticipation and surging forward motion that reflects the passengers' own anticipation and how they are pulled by an unnamed longing towards the bows of the ship.

All the passengers are doing the same thing, yet there is "no acknowledgement of a common purpose." The fact that the passengers are unable or unwilling to articulate their shared motivations further develops the sense of their isolation from one another.

The other thing the reader may become quickly aware of is the prevalence of sibilance, as well as some use of assonance and consonance, in the first stanza. Here's a closer look at the sibilance of lines 1-3:

> In the summer months on every crossing to Piraeus
> One noticed that certain passengers soon rose
> From seats in the packed saloon and with serious

Sibilance creates a hushed, quiet tone—one that feels almost reverent. This is fitting, since the passengers are in search of a meaningful, spiritual experience.

The use of sibilance appears to go hand-in-hand with a lack of punctuation. The first stanza is almost entirely made up of a single sentence with rather winding syntax. The sibilance of these lines forces the reader to slow down and (when read aloud) to enunciate very carefully. The effect of such a long, syntactically complex sentence being delivered without punctuation—but with the help of enjambment and sibilance—is that the scene unfolds very smoothly. There is almost a dreaminess to the way the lines unfold, and to the way the passengers rise without speaking to each other, in pursuit of the same thing. It lends beauty and weight to the opening of the poem, and gives the reader a sense of momentum.

LINES 6-12

> *One saw them ...*
> *... if anyone would.*

The momentum created in the first stanza through the use of enjambment, sibilance, consonance, and assonance carries the reader into the second stanza. A short sentence—"One saw them lose // Every other wish."—is broken across two lines and across two stanzas. This short sentence contrasts sharply with the long sentence that makes up the bulk of the first stanza, and another long sentence which makes up the bulk of the second. The sudden arrival of a short sentence, punctuation, and the caesura that punctuation creates, thus interrupts the smoothness of the poem, giving it more texture.

Similarly, while sibilance continues to be present in the second stanza, it is not quite as noticeable as it was in the first stanza, and consonance now revolves primarily around /f/ sounds ("fat," "photograph," "bi-focals," "for," "dolphins"). This change in texture keeps the poem fresh and surprising, discouraging complacence in the reader.

In the second stanza, the significance the passengers are attaching to the dolphins becomes much more apparent. They are completely absorbed in the task of watching for the wild creatures, so much so that the speaker describes one of them as "staring like a saint." This simile underlines how intensely the passengers are watching for dolphins; seeing them is like having a religious experience. Because of the emphasis the poem places on visual imagery, because of the intense watching that is being described, and maybe also because of the presence of so much sibilance, there is a hushed quality to the poem, which lends a reverence to the passengers' vigilance. There is a sense that the passengers are looking to have not just a beautiful or a rare experience, but a meaningful one.

It is telling that some of the passengers, "hopeless themselves," mediate their experience of desire through watching the children instead. They do not think the dolphins will appear, and they don't want to get invested only to be later disappointed. If they experience excitement, anticipation, or disappointment, it will only be by way of the children. This unwillingness to risk being disappointed is yet one more way the passengers isolate themselves.

LINES 12-16

> *Day after day ...*
> *... likeness of dolphins.*

The second stanza again ends with enjambment—every stanza of the poem will do so, in fact, contributing to the poem's sensation of forward momentum. Readers can practically sense the passengers' eagerly leaning out towards the ocean, hoping against hope that they will see these animals. The passengers here wonder what the best dolphin-seeing weather is—if a "flat calm," a day without wind is best, for example. The combination of sunlight, wind, and choppy ocean, by contrast, makes the waves themselves resemble dolphins as they swim and jump through the water.

The use of diacope with the phrase "Day after day" also speaks to the ongoing nature of the passengers' watching for dolphins. It might imply that the same passengers *keep* crossing over the sea, hoping that this time they'll catch sight of dolphins. It may also just speak to the *sameness* of the passengers' desires, that even though there are different passengers on each crossing, they are all watching for the same thing.

Finally, the phrase "on their last opportunity" drives home the fact that these passengers, most of whom are probably coming back from vacations, are running out of time to see the dolphins; soon enough they'll have to return to the drudgery of their regular lives on land. This adds an extra level of intensity to their desire, because they don't know when they will get the chance again.

The sentence broken across lines 12-16 is, once again, syntactically complex. That is, the way the sentence is written is certainly not the most straight-forward way that it could have been written! This seems at least partially to be in the service of sound: the assonance of /ay/ sounds at the ends of lines creates a feeling of rhyme ("day," "gazed," "favourable," "raised").

This feeling of rhyme is propulsive, moving the poem forward, as well as indicative of the rising expectations of the passengers.

Their anticipation is *so* intense, in fact, that by line 16 they have almost caused the dolphins to appear by sheer force of will: they see the "likeness of dolphins" created by the waves. There is a continued tension between the passengers' desire and their disappointment. It's a kind of conundrum: their desire to see dolphins is so strong that it causes them to see dolphins where there are none. Yet no matter how many "likenesses" of dolphins their desire creates, it cannot make the real dolphins appear. The full stop caesura in the middle of line 16 ("To a likeness of dolphins. ...") reflects this feeling of dashed hopes, the period abruptly cutting off the passengers' imaginative vision of the animals leaping through the sea.

LINES 16-19

Were gulls a ...
... implored the sea.

By the middle of the third stanza, the dolphins have taken on so much significance in the passengers' minds that the speaker wonders if seagulls, whether falling from the sky or sitting silently on the water, were "a sign." This speaks again to the passengers' vigilance, to the activeness of their watching. They are ready to interpret any little thing as a sign that dolphins are arriving. But it also speaks to the motivations beneath their vigilance. It speaks to the unacknowledged "common purpose" from the first stanza which drove the passengers into the bows in the first place. Their interpretation of gulls as a sign that dolphins may be nearby implies that the dolphins *themselves* may be a sign for the presence of something *else*.

The speaker goes on to observe that "Every face / After its character implored the sea." The phrase "After its character" implies that this imploring, or begging, looks different on different people, depending on the nature of the person. And it is the sea itself the passengers are imploring—the sea itself taking on a godlike quality, having the ability to grant or deny the passengers' desires. This brings to mind Poseidon, Greek god of the sea, with whom dolphins were associated. The passengers' desperation for "a sign" takes on more significance. They don't just desire a meaningful experience, but a spiritual one.

In terms of form, the poem continues with its use of enjambment in these lines, counterbalanced with many caesuras. Sentences rush past the line breaks and then come to rest in the middle of later lines, adding to the poem's seesawing sensation. The sense of forward motion keeps being to an abrupt halt; passengers' hopes are built up by the sight of the waves, by the cries of the gulls, only to quickly be dashed once again when no dolphins appear.

The sibilance continues here as well, the many hushed /s/ sounds once again adding to the poem's feeling of quiet reverence—of the passengers desperately longing for a spiritual epiphany:

> Were gulls a sign, that fell
> Screeching from the sky or over an unremarkable place
> Sat in a silent school? Every face
> After its character implored the sea.

The consonance of hard /k/ sounds, also highlighted above, mimics the sounds of the seagulls themselves—their harsh, raucous cries as they soar over the sea.

LINES 20-22

All, unaccustomed, wanted ...
... gong and drum.

The passengers implore the sea to deliver an experience that will lead to an epiphany. "Epiphany" here might refer to an occurrence of sudden insight, or to the sudden manifestation of a divine being. Either way, it is clear the passengers don't just want to see dolphins—they want to encounter something more powerful than themselves. They don't just want to float across the calm surface of the sea; they want the sea to "Reverberate with cymbal, gong and drum." The sea itself (the "Aegean") is referred to as "abused," revealing that the scene they imagine is thus far from gentle or subtle. They want something life-changing. They want the drama and intensity of a storm, the awe and terror of surrendering to something much greater than themselves.

The fact that the passengers are "unaccustomed" to wanting epiphany indicates that they themselves are surprised by the intensity of their desire. In this moment of crossing the sea and hoping to see dolphins, they have discovered something missing from their ordinary lives that they did not know was missing.

The sudden introduction of auditory imagery—the clanging of the sky and the sea sounding like percussive instruments—indicates a shift in the poem. The motivations behind the passengers' desires have revealed themselves. The passengers want drama, intensity, a real, emotional experience that will result in something being arrived at or understood. They want something to imbue their lives with meaning. They want to be changed.

LINES 23-25

We could not ...
... like satyrs, oh

The speaker of the poem suddenly identifies with the other passengers, no longer at a remove from the action of the poem. In this shared desire and longing, the speaker has become part of a collective "we." This suggests that seeing the dolphins brings a sense of meaning and purpose into the passengers'

lives not simply because it's something so different from what these people experience everyday, but because it's a *shared* experience. What the passengers are really after, in part at least, is a sense of *community*, of being a part of something greater than themselves.

"We could not imagine more prayer," the speaker claims, referring to the intensity of desire which has revealed itself. In other words, the passengers couldn't possibly be prayer any harder, they couldn't be longing any more completely, for the sight of dolphins. The poem seems to make an argument about prayer in this moment. It's as if it's asking, "What is prayer if not intense desire projected towards something unknowable?" It is on this "climax of longing"—the most intense moment of the passengers' desire—that the speaker imagines the dolphins arriving.

The "climax of longing" is in *itself* a powerful emotional state, not quite the experience the passengers desire, but a powerful experience all the same. It is so powerful that the speaker is able to picture the dolphins with absolute clarity, "Smiling, snub-nosed, domed like satyrs, oh."

The comparison to satyrs is another reference to Greek mythology. Satyrs were nature spirits, associated with wild places and drunkenness. They are depicted as having the ears, horns, and legs of a goat with the head and torso of a man. In other words, they were part human, part wild animal. The image speaks to the passengers' desire to be more connected to the divine and wild parts of themselves. They don't just wish to encounter dolphins but to encounter the unknown parts of themselves.

It is worth noting that the poem doesn't just announce its climax; the climax arrives via a number of intentional poetic devices which makes it stand out and sing. The fifth stanza is the most musical in the poem, and that begins with the sudden arrival of meter in line 25. This is trochaic tetrameter, a string of four trochees (poetic feet with a stressed-unstressed rhythm) in a row. Although it is not perfect meter (the extra syllable created by the "oh" at the end of the line stops it from being perfect trochaic tetrameter), it is notably sing-song-like in its rhythm when compared to the rest of the poem:

> Smiling, snub-nosed, domed like satyrs, oh

The line also employs sibilance ("Smiling," "snub-nosed," "satyrs"), and the assonance created by the long /o/ sounds ("nosed," "domed," "oh") creates a sort of echoing effect throughout the line. The "oh" at the end of the line does a lot of work, not just sonically but also because it feels less like a word than a kind of delighted sigh. It speaks to the pure joy the speaker can imagine upon having their desires realized.

LINES 26-31

> *We should have ...*
>
> *... the deep parts.*

Lines 26-31 continue the imagery that began at the beginning of the previous stanza: the speaker imagines the dolphins making an appearance at the moment of the passengers' deepest longing. The speaker imagines the passengers' joy in this moment—how people would pick up the children to see better, how strangers would acknowledge each other in their joy, how everyone would ecstatically point at the dolphins leaping through the water. In this moment of imagining the arrival of the dolphins, the speaker is firmly located on the ship with the other passengers, no longer distancing themselves but rather including themselves in the joyous scene (as part of a "we").

Several devices work together in this passage to create the sense of joy the speaker is feeling. The consonance created by the repetition of /l/, /p/, and /f/ sounds is very playful and pleasurable:

> ... laughed and lifted the children up
> Stranger to stranger, pointing how with a leap
> They left their element, three or four times, centred
> On grace, and heavily and warm re-entered,
> Looping the keel. We should have felt them go
> Further and further into the deep parts.

Diacope is also used twice in these lines. The first instance, with "Stranger to stranger," shows (rather than just telling) the way the experience is bringing people together. The mirroring of the word "stranger" shows the way in which these people are seeing themselves in one another, identifying with each other's joy. They are no longer isolating themselves from each other but reaching for each other. There is also a strong sense of action in this stanza. The passengers are not sitting and watching and waiting. Instead they are laughing and lifting and pointing and feeling.

Notably, in addition to visual and auditory imagery, the fifth stanza introduces tactile imagery, or imagery that involves touch. The passengers watch the dolphins leaping from the water and re-entering it "heavily and warm." The reader, like the passengers, can almost feel what it's like to be enveloped by the water. In this moment, the passengers don't feel isolated from one another and from the natural world, but deeply and meaningfully connected. The phrase "centred / On grace" speaks not only to the elegance of the dolphins' movement, but to the divine energy which drives them.

Finally, with the second use of diacope ("Further and further"), the speaker imagines what it would be like to swim into the depths of the ocean. There is still the lingering feeling of joy, imagining what it would be like to have that freedom and that communal drive, but there is also a return to longing. The speaker cannot follow the dolphins into the depths. The speaker has reached the limits of their imagination.

LINES 31-36

But soon ...
... in the city.

In the final lines of the poem, the speaker pulls away from the feeling of joy that characterized the previous stanza. The speaker can *imagine* the dolphins swimming into the depths of the ocean, but the passengers cannot actually follow the animals. The speaker is still inhabiting a purely imaginative space—though the speaker describes themselves and the other passengers as being "among the great tankers, under their chains / In black water," it is clear that they are still firmly located on the ship, which is now approaching the port and surrounding by other vessels.

In returning from the imaginative realm the speaker inhabited with the dolphins, the speaker now imagines being trapped below the ships in the port, in the water where oil leaks out from the tankers. All the joy of the previous stanza has seeped out, leaving in its place a sense of despair. The use of the word "chains" is particularly telling after the speaker's imagined proximity to the freedom and wildness of the dolphins.

The speaker describes their return from the imaginative realm as waking from a dream. The passengers have been returned to reality, to the loneliness and ordinariness of daily life. The imagined connection is gone; the passengers do not look at each other or admit to their disappointment. Instead they spread out, putting space between them and each other, further isolating themselves, preparing to return to their ordinary lives in the city, on land.

The final stanza is thus in stark contrast to the fifth stanza. The poem juxtaposes the joyfulness encountered in the imaginative realm with the disappointment of reality. It does this not only through the action of the poem and strong, opposing imagery, but also through the shift in sonic patterns. Where the fifth stanza created a playfulness and sense of pleasure with the consonance of /l/, /p/, and /f/ sounds, the final stanza's consonance is harder, less musical and more jarring. The repetition of /b/, /d/, and /k/ sounds have a very different effect, creating a kind of deadening matter-of-factness. Here's a closer look at the consonance of these final lines:

> ... tankers, under their chains
> In black water. We had not seen the dolphins
> But woke, blinking. Eyes cast down
> With no admission of disappointment the company
> Dispersed and prepared to land in the city.

The sharpness of the /k/ sounds combined with the plodding thud of the /b/ and /d/ sounds reflects the way that the speaker and all the passengers are all suddenly snapped back to reality.

SYMBOLS

DOLPHINS

The entire poem revolves around the passengers' desire to see dolphins. This desire has many layers, beginning with the most obvious: the passengers want to encounter these beautiful, laughing creatures in their natural habitat. It is a desire with which most people can probably identify, a one-of-a-kind experience, the kind of experience that people on vacation in particular would be seeking. The fact that the events of the poem occur in the summer, aboard a ship in a popular tourist destination, implies that the passengers are seeking an experience that falls outside the realm of their ordinary lives. On the broadest level, then, dolphins simply represent something out of the ordinary, a change of pace, an exciting experience that shakes people out of their humdrum existence.

The passengers' ordinary lives aren't really mentioned in the poem, and yet it is their ordinary lives—and more importantly, what is lacking from their ordinary lives—that contextualizes the poem. The more intently the passengers await the arrival of the dolphins, and the longer the poem goes without delivering on the passengers' expectations, the more important the dolphins become.

By the middle of the poem, as the passengers "implore" the sea and long for "epiphany," it becomes apparent that the dolphins have become symbolic of a profound, spiritual experience, something that will provide meaning and depth to their lives. By attaching so much significance to the dolphins, the poem has elevated them into a symbol, which allows the poem to explore the passengers' real motivations and desires without being overly explicit. That is, the dolphins represent a profound, spiritual experience—but what exactly that experience *is* is open to interpretation.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "Passed forward through the small door into the bows / To watch for dolphins"
- **Lines 10-12:** "others, / Hopeless themselves, looked to the children for they / Would see dolphins if anyone would"
- **Lines 15-16:** "a sea the sun and the wind between them raised / To a likeness of dolphins"
- **Lines 23-25:** "and had they then / On the waves, on the climax of our longing come / Smiling, snub-nosed, domed like satyrs"
- **Lines 27-31:** "pointing how with a leap / They left their element, three or four times, centred / On grace, and heavily and warm re-entered, / Looping the keel. We should have felt them go / Further and further into the

deep parts"
- **Lines 33-34:** "We had not seen the dolphins / But woke, blinking"

POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

"Watching for Dolphins" is heavily enjambed. In fact, of the poem's 36 lines, only are end-stopped. This intense use of enjambment has several noticeable effects.

First off, the use of enjambment encourages the reader to keep moving forward—resulting in a sense of perpetual motion, of ever-building anticipation. In the first stanza, for example, all six lines are enjambed. Combined with the lack of punctuation (the first punctuation mark doesn't arrive until the middle of line 6!), this creates an initial sense of fluidity. There is a sense of the poem directing the reader's attention the way a film would, visually sweeping across the scene at hand.

Enjambment also creates a sensation of inevitability, of being pulled forward through the poem. This, perhaps, reflects the way that the passengers are pulled towards the bow by their intense desire to see the dolphins—figuratively speaking, the way that they are propelled forward by their deep longing to find a sense of meaning and purpose. The enjambment, then, is directly tied to the poem's sense of momentum. The ship is moving across the sea, bringing the passengers closer and closer to the end of their vacations. Enjambment gives the poem a sense of urgency; if the passengers are going to see dolphins and have some kind of life-changing experience in doing so, it has to happen soon. They are running out of time.

There is also a sonic element here. Although there are plenty of rhymes or near rhymes at the ends of lines, the enjambment keeps the reader from stressing those rhyming words too heavily (because there is no time for a pause at the end of the lines). This allows the reader to feel some of the anticipation and attentiveness of the passengers.

Finally, it's worth noting how enjambment interacts with caesura throughout the poem. Phrases and sentences regularly spill across line breaks, and indeed across the stanzas themselves, only to come to rest in the middle of later lines. As such, there are many commas, periods, and other punctuation marks that appear in the middle of lines. In a way, this might reflect the passengers' seesawing emotions—the way that their longing and desire builds and builds, only to be quickly quashed when no dolphins appear.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Piraeus / One"
- **Lines 2-3:** "rose / From"
- **Lines 3-4:** "serious / Looks"
- **Lines 4-5:** "purpose / Passed"
- **Lines 5-6:** "bows / To"
- **Lines 6-7:** "lose / Every"
- **Lines 7-8:** "lovers / Turned"
- **Lines 8-9:** "man / Hung"
- **Lines 9-10:** "occasion / Stared"
- **Lines 11-12:** "they / Would"
- **Lines 12-13:** "day / Or"
- **Lines 13-14:** "gazed / Undecided"
- **Lines 14-15:** "favourable / Or"
- **Lines 15-16:** "raised / To"
- **Lines 16-17:** "fell / Screeching"
- **Lines 17-18:** "place / Sat"
- **Lines 18-19:** "face / After"
- **Lines 21-22:** "Aegean / Reverberate"
- **Lines 23-24:** "then / On"
- **Lines 25-26:** "oh / We"
- **Lines 26-27:** "up / Stranger"
- **Lines 27-28:** "leap / They"
- **Lines 28-29:** "centred / On"
- **Lines 30-31:** "go / Further"
- **Lines 31-32:** "soon / We"
- **Lines 32-33:** "chains / In"
- **Lines 33-34:** " dolphins / But"
- **Lines 34-35:** "down / With "
- **Lines 35-36:** "company / Dispersed"

ALLITERATION

The speaker uses a variety of sonic devices to propel the poem and create resonances between words, lines, and images. These devices often overlap, creating musical passages that stand out in relation to other parts of the poem. Alliteration, for example, overlaps heavily the poem's use of sibilance, which is discussed in its own entry in this guide.

There are plenty of moments of non-sibilant alliteration as well, however. For instance, note the repeated /p/ sounds dotted throughout the first stanza:

> ... to Piraeus
> One noticed that certain passengers soon rose
> From seats in the packed saloon and with serious
> Looks and no acknowledgement of a common
> purpose
> Passed forward ...

These popping sounds imbue the stanza with little flickers of excitement, hinting at the building anticipation of the passengers as they rise to go look at the dolphins.

Alliteration is again used to great effect in lines 21 and 22. The passage describes a sea that is reverberating, or echoing, as if

from percussion instruments. The use of alliteration to introduce this description gives the reader a chance to *hear* that echo themselves in the initial /uh/ sounds of "abused Aegean," as well as in the initial /s/ and /k/ sounds of "sky," "clang," and "cymbal." A similar thing happens in line 17, as the harsh /sk/ of "Screeching from the sky" reflects the squawking sound the seagulls make.

Later, alliteration is used to contribute to the overall musicality of the fifth stanza, which is easily the most musical stanza in the poem. Along with the other devices as work in this passage (sibilance, assonance, consonance, repetition), the gentle alliteration of "laughed" and "lifted" along with "leap" and "left" pulls the reader through the paragraph in a very pleasant way. The pleasantness of the passage is not beside the point: this passage represents the climax of the poem, the part in which the speaker imagines the passengers' desires being fulfilled.

By contrast, the next stanza features alliteration of the heavier /b/ and /d/ sounds, the round, woeful /w/ sound, and the harsh /k/ sound:

> ... deep parts. But soon
> We were among the great tankers, under their chains
> In black water. We had not seen the dolphins
> But woke, blinking. Eyes cast down
> With no admission of disappointment the company
> Dispersed ...

The movement from rich, sonic play in the fifth stanza to the more flattened language in the final stanza creates a juxtaposition between imagination and reality, between desire and disappointment. Much of the poem's meaning, its ability to be interpreted, rests on the way sound is used from one passage to the next.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "summer," "Piraeus"
- **Line 2:** "certain," "passengers," "soon"
- **Line 3:** "seats," "packed," "saloon," "serious"
- **Line 4:** "purpose"
- **Line 5:** "Passed"
- **Line 8:** "fat"
- **Line 9:** "photograph"
- **Line 10:** "Stared," "saint," "focals"
- **Line 12:** "dolphins," "Day," "day"
- **Line 13:** "on," "opportunity," "all"
- **Line 14:** "flat," "favourable"
- **Line 15:** "sea," "sun"
- **Line 16:** "sign"
- **Line 17:** "Screeching," "sky"
- **Line 18:** "Sat," "silent," "school"
- **Line 19:** "character," "sea"
- **Line 21:** "sky," "clang," "abused," "Aegean"
- **Line 22:** "cymbal"
- **Line 23:** "could," "they," "then"
- **Line 24:** "climax," "come"
- **Line 25:** "Smiling," "snub," "satyrs"
- **Line 26:** "laughed," "lifted"
- **Line 27:** "Stranger," "stranger," "leap"
- **Line 28:** "They," "left," "their"
- **Line 30:** "felt"
- **Line 31:** "Further," "further," "deep," "But"
- **Line 32:** "We," "were"
- **Line 33:** "black," "water," "We," "dolphins"
- **Line 34:** "But," "woke," "blinking," "cast," "down"
- **Line 35:** "With," "disappointment," "company"
- **Line 36:** "Dispersed"

SIBILANCE

Unlike some of the other sonic devices in the poem, which are heavily present for a few lines or at most a stanza or two, sibilance is sprinkled throughout the *entire* poem. It is especially present in the first stanza, where it coincides with a lack of punctuation. As punctuation becomes more prevalent in the later stanzas of the poem, the sibilance becomes a little less obvious. For this reason it seems sibilance serves as a way of pacing the poem, forcing the reader to slow down and pay attention to each word. Here's a closer look at the intense sibilance of lines 1-3:

> In the summer months on every crossing to Piraeus
> One noticed that certain passengers soon rose
> From seats in the packed saloon and with serious

The other function of sibilance in this poem may be to imitate the hushed atmosphere of the passengers' reverence for the dolphins they so hope to encounter. Because sibilance is particularly present in the first stanza, it's easy to draw a relationship between it and the passengers rising from their seats and, not acknowledging one another, going to watch for dolphins. One can imagine the steady sound of the sea being the only noise, and perhaps the shuffling of passengers as they head into the bows of the ship. These sounds—the sea and the shuffling—have a steady, background quality to them, just as the sibilance has a kind of background effect against which all the other sonic effects of the poem are placed.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "summer," "months," "crossing," "Piraeus"
- **Line 2:** "noticed," "certain," "passengers," "soon"
- **Line 3:** "seats," "saloon," "serious"
- **Line 4:** "Looks," "purpose"
- **Line 5:** "Passed," "small"
- **Line 6:** "saw"

- **Line 8:** "sea"
- **Line 10:** "Stared," "saint," "sad"
- **Line 11:** "Hopeless," "themselves"
- **Line 12:** "see"
- **Line 13:** "last"
- **Line 14:** "Undecided"
- **Line 15:** "sea," "sun"
- **Line 16:** "likeness," "sign"
- **Line 17:** "Screeching," "sky," "place"
- **Line 18:** "Sat," "silent," "school," "face"
- **Line 19:** "sea"
- **Line 20:** "unaccustomed"
- **Line 21:** "sky"
- **Line 22:** "cymbal"
- **Line 25:** "Smiling," "snub-nosed," "satyrs"
- **Line 27:** "Stranger ," "stranger,"
- **Line 28:** "centred"
- **Line 29:** "grace"
- **Line 31:** "parts," "soon"
- **Line 33:** "seen"
- **Line 34:** "cast"
- **Line 35:** "disappointment"
- **Line 36:** "Dispersed," "city"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is sprinkled throughout the entirety of the poem. In some places the assonance is subtle, such as in the first line of the poem, where the /uh/ sounds created by "summer," "months," and "Piraeus" contributes to the poem's gentle lyricism.

As the poem progresses, though, assonance is used more and more often at the ends of lines, or sometimes in the middle, to create rhyme. Because there is no fixed rhyme scheme, and because there are so many sonic devices at play in any given line, the result is a subtle but complex musicality. Take the second and third stanzas, where the long /ay/ sound is woven throughout the lines:

> ... the occasion
> Stared like a saint ...
> ... looked to the children for they
> ... Day after day
> ... all gazed
> ... a flat calm were favourable
> ... between them raised

Assonance is heavily at play in the fifth stanza as well, where, along with alliteration, sibilance, consonance, and repetition, it creates a sense of climax through rich sonic textures. In other words, the poem feels especially *poetic* in this stanza, which makes sense given that these lines describe the passengers' imagined joy upon seeing the dolphins. Here's a closer look at the assonance in lines 25-27, which have lots of /o/, /ah/, and /ay/ sounds:

> Smiling, snub-nosed, domed like satyrs, oh
> We should have laughed and lifted the children up
> Stranger to stranger,

Different assonant sounds then pick up in lines 27-30. Note the short /eh/ and long /ee/ sounds:

> ... with a leap
> They left their element, three or four times, centred
> On grace, and heavily and warm re-entered,
> Looping the keel. ...

Assonant sounds again weave in and out, creating end rhymes ("centred," "re-entered") whose sounds are then echoed *within* the lines as well. Overall, then, the assonance in the poem has a very fluid effect, similar to the way waves gather and break against the hull of a ship—or the way dolphins leap and leap and then disappear into the depths.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "summer," "months," "Piraeus"
- **Line 2:** "soon"
- **Line 3:** "saloon," "serious"
- **Line 4:** "purpose"
- **Line 5:** "forward," "door"
- **Line 6:** "watch," "dolphins," "saw," "lose"
- **Line 9:** "occasion"
- **Line 10:** "saint"
- **Line 11:** "they"
- **Line 12:** "Day," "day"
- **Line 13:** "gazed"
- **Line 14:** "favourable"
- **Line 15:** "raised"
- **Line 16:** "likeness," "sign"
- **Line 17:** "sky," "place"
- **Line 18:** "silent," "face"
- **Line 19:** "sea"
- **Line 20:** "epiphany"
- **Line 21:** "Praying," "clang"
- **Line 22:** "drum."
- **Line 24:** "come"
- **Line 25:** "snub," "nosed," "domed," "satyrs," "oh"
- **Line 26:** "have," "laughed"
- **Line 27:** "Stranger," "stranger," "leap"
- **Line 28:** "left," "element," "three," "centred"
- **Line 29:** "heavily," "re," "entered"
- **Line 30:** "keel"
- **Line 31:** "Further," "further"
- **Line 32:** "great," "tankers," "chains"

- **Line 33:** “black,” “water,” “had,” “not,” “dolphins”
- **Line 34:** “blinking”
- **Line 35:** “company”
- **Line 36:** “prepared,” “land,” “ city”

CONSONANCE

The poem is filled with consonance, the many repeated sounds creating a feeling of richness throughout. As with assonance, instances of consonance often overlap with each other. In the first stanza, the /k/ sounds created by "packed," "Looks," "acknowledgement," and "common" help to break up the smoothness created by the intense sibilance of these lines, introducing more sonic texture into the poem. The same could be said for the many /p/ sounds in this stanza, which, as noted in our discussion of alliteration, feel like little pops of energy and excitement within the more hushed, reverent tone of the poem at large.

It is worth comparing stanzas 5 and 6, as both employ heavy consonance, but not to the same effect. Stanza 5 relies on the repetition of /l/, /p/, and /f/ sounds, which creates a playful, joyous tone:

> Smiling, snub-nosed, domed like satyrs, oh
> We should have laughed and lifted the children up
> Stranger to stranger, pointing how with a leap
> They left their element, three or four times, centred
> On grace, and heavily and warm re-entered,
> Looping the keel. We should have felt them go

On the other hand, stanza 6, starting with line 32, utilizes heavier, often less pleasant sounds. Note the consonance of harsh /k/, guttural /r/, and heavy /b/ and /d/ sounds:

> We were among the great tankers, under their chains
> In black water. We had not seen the dolphins
> But woke, blinking. Eyes cast down
> With no admission of disappointment the company
> Dispersed and prepared to land in the city.

There are many /p/ sounds here as well, but in combination with the rest of the consonant letters, even these feel less bright and energetic than they felt in the previous stanza. Overall this final stanza has a sort of hardness to it, created through consonance, that the earlier stanza lacked. This makes sense, because this stanza sees the passengers returning to the drudgery of their lives on land.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “summer months,” “crossing,” “Piraeus”
- **Line 2:** “noticed,” “certain passengers soon,” “rose”
- **Line 3:** “seats,” “packed,” “saloon,” “serious”
- **Line 4:** “Looks,” “acknowledgement,” “common,” “purpose”
- **Line 5:** “Passed,” “forward,” “through,” “small,” “door,” “bows”
- **Line 6:** “watch,” “lose”
- **Line 7:** “Every,” “Even”
- **Lines 7-8:** “lovers / Turned their desires”
- **Line 8:** “fat”
- **Line 9:** “equipment,” “photograph,” “occasion”
- **Line 10:** “Stared,” “saint,” “sad,” “bi-focals”
- **Line 11:** “Hopeless”
- **Line 12:** “Day,” “day”
- **Line 14:** “flat,” “favourable”
- **Line 15:** “sea,” “sun,” “wind between”
- **Line 16:** “likeness,” “dolphins,” “gulls,” “sign,” “fell”
- **Line 17:** “Screeching from,” “sky,” “unremarkable,” “place”
- **Line 18:** “Sat,” “silent school,” “face”
- **Line 19:** “character,” “sea”
- **Line 20:** “unaccustomed,” “epiphany”
- **Line 21:** “Praying,” “ sky,” “clang”
- **Line 22:** “cymbal”
- **Line 23:** “they then”
- **Line 24:** “climax,” “longing,” “come”
- **Line 25:** “Smiling,” “snub-nosed,” “domed,” “like,” “satyrs”
- **Line 26:** “laughed,” “lifted,” “children,” “up”
- **Line 27:** “Stranger,” “stranger,” “pointing,” “leap”
- **Line 28:** “left,” “element,” “four,” “centred”
- **Line 29:** “grace,” “heavily,” “re-entered”
- **Line 30:** “Looping,” “keel,” “felt”
- **Line 31:** “Further,” “further,” “deep,” “parts,” “soon”
- **Line 32:** “We were,” “among,” “great,” “tankers,” “under their”
- **Line 33:** “black,” “water,” “We,” “dolphins”
- **Line 34:** “But,” “woke,” “blinking,” “cast,” “down”
- **Line 35:** “With,” “admission,” “disappointment,” “company”
- **Line 36:** “Dispersed,” “prepared,” “land”

SIMILE

There are three similes in "Watching for Dolphins." The first occurs in line 10, where a "fat man" with a camera around his neck is described as having "stared like a saint." This is the most straight-forward simile of the three. Most readers will have a clear image in their minds of a man staring intensely, eagerly, maybe even devotedly, out at the ocean. The word "saint" introduces both an element of zeal as well as a sense of spirituality. It helps establish the poem's suggestion that the passengers' desire to see the dolphins is really a desire to have a spiritually meaningful experience.

The second simile pops up in line 16, when the wind and the sun together raise the sea "to a likeness of dolphins." This simile is a little more subtle, in part because of the word "likeness."

Rather than just saying that the waves looked like dolphins, the poem implies that for a moment the sea seemed to be miraculously turned into dolphins. The use of the word "raised" to introduce the simile does a lot of work. It echoes the spiritual themes already established in the poem, particularly the notion of raising the dead back to life. In a way the poem is comparing the "flat calm" of the passengers' ordinary lives with the desire to be "raised / To a likeness of dolphins." The passengers wish to resemble those wild creatures who are free to swim through the depths of the ocean, bound together by instinct and a communal purpose.

The final use of simile is perhaps the least clear. In line 25, the imagined dolphins are described as "domed like satyrs." While the simile works as an image—the dorsal fin of a dolphin curves over its back much the same way as the horns of a satyr curl over his head—it is worth considering what the reference to satyrs introduces into the poem. Satyrs are nature spirits from Greek mythology, associated with wildness and pleasure. More importantly, perhaps, they are depicted as part human, part animal. The mention of these creatures perhaps speaks to the intelligence, playfulness, and wildness of the dolphins. It may also speak to the passengers' desires to get in touch with the wild parts of themselves, the animal parts as well as the divine.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "Stared like a saint"
- **Line 16:** "To a likeness of dolphins"
- **Line 25:** "domed like satyrs"

CAESURA

In "Watching for Dolphins," the poet uses caesura in much the same way he uses enjambment and sibilance—as a way of pacing the poem. Because of the poem's heavy enjambment, there is a momentum to the lines which propels the reader to keep moving. Rather than lingering at the ends of lines, the reader is pulled from one line to the next. The use of caesura thus balances out the propulsive motion of the poem. In the first stanza, for instance, just when the reader thinks there will be no good place to stop and take a breath, a caesura appears in the middle of line 6:

> To watch for dolphins. One saw them lose

By ending the sentence in the middle of the line and giving the reader a chance to breathe, Constantine is able to create a sense of momentum between the first and second stanzas (the end of line 6 is enjambed right across the stanza break). Once this momentum is established, though, the poem then undermines the reader's expectation created by that first, very long sentence. The second sentence of the poem is actually very *short*. The second caesura divides line seven into two five-syllable breaths:

> Every other wish. Even the lovers

By moving back and forth between longer and shorter lines, the poem quickly teaches the reader not to get too comfortable. This reflects the rise and fall of the passengers' emotions—their building hope that they'll see dolphins, followed by disappointment after disappointment. Where enjambment propels the poem forward, the many caesuras bring it back down to earth.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "dolphins. One"
- **Line 7:** "wish. Even"
- **Line 8:** "sea, and"
- **Line 10:** "saint, through," "bi-focals; others"
- **Line 11:** "themselves, looked"
- **Line 12:** "would. Day"
- **Line 16:** "dolphins. Were," "sign, that"
- **Line 18:** "school? Every"
- **Line 20:** "All, unaccustomed, wanted"
- **Line 22:** "cymbal, gong"
- **Line 23:** "prayer, and"
- **Line 24:** "waves, on"
- **Line 25:** "Smiling, snub-nosed, domed," "satyrs, oh"
- **Line 27:** "stranger, pointing"
- **Line 28:** "element, three," "times, centred"
- **Line 29:** "grace, and"
- **Line 30:** "keel. We"
- **Line 31:** "parts. But"
- **Line 32:** "tankers, under"
- **Line 33:** "water. We"
- **Line 34:** "woke, blinking. Eyes"

IMAGERY

"Watching for Dolphins" uses a great deal of strong imagery. Broadly speaking, this imagery makes the poem feel more immediate for the reader; it plunges the reader into the scene at hand, helping them feel as though they, too, are on this ship.

In the first half of the poem, as the passengers watch and wait for the appearance of dolphins, there is an emphasis on visual imagery, and in fact the words "looks," "watch," stared," "bi-focals," "looked," and "gazed" all speak to the faculty of sight. This imagery conjures the scene at hand for the reader—of passengers seriously rising from their seats and moving with purpose towards the bows of the ship to try to spot dolphins. The emphasis on visual imagery here, in combination with the poem's intense use of sibilance, also automatically creates a kind of hushed tone, which speaks to the reverence of the passengers. But while they are looking at/for the same thing, the passengers are not looking at *each other*. In a way, then, the intense focus on visual imagery underlines the passengers' sense of isolation.

Towards the end of the third stanza, the poem introduces auditory imagery with the gulls "that fell screeching from the sky." It is here that the passengers' longing, and the speaker's longing in particular, takes on more significance. As the speaker notes the passengers' desires, they imagine the sky "would clang and [the sea] / Reverberate with cymbal, gong and drum." In other words, the passengers desire something thrilling, something big to interrupt their silence and their waiting. The move to auditory imagery signals the desire to be shaken out of complacency and isolation and ordinariness into something more meaningful. The auditory imagery of these lines is enhanced by their consonance and cacophony. Note the harsh /sk/ and /ch/ sounds of "Screeching from the sky," for example. The combination of heavy /d/, /g/, /b/, and /k/ sounds in "sky would clang and the abused Aegean / Reverberate with cymbal, gong and drum" mimics the clamor described in the line as well, bringing this auditory imagery to life for the reader.

As the speaker imagines the dolphins arriving, the poem employs not only visual imagery ("smiling, snub-nosed, domed like satyrs") and auditory imagery ("we should have laughed") imagery, but tactile imagery as well. It is significant that the sense of touch arrives on the heels of the speaker's fantasy: the desire for this experience, it seems, is also a desire to be touched.

The speaker imagines lifting the children into the air, turning to each other, pointing out the dolphins. But the speaker also imagines *being* the dolphins, "centred / On grace, and heavily and warm re-entered, / Looping the keel." The speaker imagines what it would *feel* like to swim into the ocean depths. This indicates that the speaker not only longs for connection with their fellow humans, but for connection with something vast and mysterious and decidedly *not* human, whether that be nature or divinity or both. The emphasis, here, on touch points to the fact that the passengers don't just wish to *see* dolphins. They wish to *feel* something meaningful.

Finally, as the passengers approach land without having encountered dolphins, the poem returns to its focus on the faculty of sight. "We had not seen the dolphins," the speaker says, "But woke, blinking. Eyes cast down ..." The shift back to visual language renders the passengers again isolated from one another. The suggestion here is that as the passengers return to the city and their ordinary lives, they "wake" from the province of feeling, of touch. There is a sense of surfacing, of returning to a world of surfaces rather than depths.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-4
- Line 5
- Lines 8-10
- Lines 15-16
- Lines 16-18
- Lines 21-22
- Lines 23-25
- Lines 25-31
- Lines 31-33

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem uses juxtaposition to highlight what is missing from the ordinary lives of the passengers. In lines 14-16, a "flat calm" sea is juxtaposed with a sea "the sun and the wind between them raised / To a likeness of dolphins." Neither a calm sea nor an agitated one brings the passengers what they desire—dolphins. But by comparing the two, the poem is always comparing the "flat calm" of the passengers' day-to-day existence with the desire, agitation, and vigilance they are currently experiencing. By comparing these two states of being, the poem poses a subtle question: is it better not to be disturbed, not to get one's hopes too high? Or is it better to wish and pray and long for something to happen, something meaningful, and risk the chance of being disappointed?

In lines 30-33, the poem juxtaposes the feeling of swimming "further and further into the deep parts" with the feeling of being submerged "among the great tankers, under their chains / In black water." Both states of submersion are imagined; the speaker's body remains firmly located on the ship. But the ways in which the speaker conceptualizes their location is telling.

In imagining the freedom and wildness and communal instincts of the dolphins, the speaker is drawn into the mysterious, far-away parts of the sea. There is a sense of longing to this feeling, as if the speaker wishes to go with the dolphins as far as their imagination will take them. On the other hand, the speaker's image of returning to shore is dark and heavy. The word "chains" implies a lack of freedom, and the "black water" reveals a deep unease in regard to the industrialized world, which pollutes the wild and mysterious sea (in a literal sense with leaked petroleum, though the image is vague enough to invite interpretation).

This ties into a broader sense of juxtaposition that pervades the final two stanzas of the poem. The fifth stanza focuses on how the speaker imagines the passengers would react if they actually were to see dolphins: they would be filled with joy and laughter, and would have engaged with one another ("Stranger to stranger"). By contrast, when no dolphins appear and the passengers reach land once more, they disembark with "Eyes cast down" and "no admission of disappointment."

These two descriptions of the passengers are starkly different—in the first, they are happily sharing an experience, acknowledging their desires as well as one another's presence. In the second, they once again refuse to admit their true desires and turn away from the other passengers. Their ultimate isolation and disappointment is made all the more poignant for being juxtaposed against their potential for

connection and joy.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-16:** "Undecided whether a flat calm were favourable / Or a sea the sun and the wind between them raised / To a likeness of dolphins."
- **Lines 26-28:** "We should have laughed and lifted the children up / Stranger to stranger, pointing how with a leap / They left their element,"
- **Lines 30-33:** "We should have felt them go / Further and further into the deep parts. But soon / We were among the great tankers, under their chains / In black water. "
- **Lines 34-36:** "Eyes cast down / With no admission of disappointment the company / Dispersed and prepared to land in the city."

REPETITION

"Watching for Dolphins" employs a couple of different kinds of repetition. Broadly speaking, the repetition in the poem underscores the intensity of the passengers' longing; it reflects the fact that they keep returning to this deep desire to see dolphins (which, again, is really a desire to find a sense of spirituality, connecting, and purpose in their lives).

For example, the repetition (technically, polyptoton) of "Praying" and "prayer" in lines 21 and 23 reflects exactly what the poem is saying in this moment: that the passengers "could not imagine" praying *more* than they are right then. Using the root word "prayer" twice in close succession reflects just how *much* prayer is happening.

Earlier on, the first moment of repetition in the poem is more specifically an example of diacope. This comes in line 12, with the phrase "Day after day." Rather than "every day" or "for days in a row," the speaker uses the repetition of "day" to enact the passage of time aboard the ship. "Day after day" also creates a sense of rhythm which is similar to the bobbing motion of the ship.

Later on, line 27 contains another instance of diacope. The phrase "Stranger to stranger" is similar to "Day after day," but because of the context and the use of the word "to," the effect is that of mirroring. This mirroring implies that whatever their differences, the strangers recognize themselves, their own desires, in each other.

The last instance of diacope is in line 31, with the phrase "Further and further." This instance is very similar to the first one, where the repetition is being used to signal the passage of something, though in this case the poem is referring to distance rather than time. Without the use of "Further and further" here, the feeling of the dolphins passing into the deep parts would feel quick, easy, and not all that mysterious. The diacope allows the reader to experience that sense of distance.

The other maim kind of repetition used in the poem is anaphora. Anaphora appears most strikingly in line 24, with the phrase "On the waves, on the climax ..." The repetition of "On the" creates a mounting sense of urgency. The poem doesn't just introduce its climax explicitly with the use of the word "climax." It also *enacts* it, creating for the reader the feeling of momentum which it is describing.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "Day after day"
- **Line 13:** "Or"
- **Line 15:** "Or"
- **Line 21:** "Praying"
- **Line 23:** "prayer"
- **Line 24:** "On the waves, on the climax"
- **Line 27:** "Stranger to stranger"
- **Line 31:** "Further and further"

ASYNDETON

Just as the use of anaphora in the preceding line creates a sense of urgency and momentum, the use of asyndeton in line 25 creates a sense of climax, of something being arrived at or reached:

> Smiling, snub-nosed, domed like satyrs, oh

Of course the dolphins haven't *really* arrived, but in the speaker's imagination they have, and the language takes on the ecstatic feeling of having one's most pressing desires satisfied. The lack of coordinating conjunction between "snub-nosed" and "domed like satyrs" allows the descriptions to all arrive in a rush of pleasure. The asyndeton also means that descriptions kind of pile up, eventually toppling into the word "oh," "oh" being the ultimate, inarticulate uttering of the speaker as well as the word all the passengers would likely sigh together in unison as they catch sight of the dolphins.

The asyndeton also does some work sonically. While the poem does not adhere to any particular meter or rhyme scheme, it does employ musicality in a variety of ways. This line in particular nearly falls into perfect trochaic tetrameter (meaning there are four trochees in a row; a trochee being a poetic foot with a stressed-unstressed beat pattern). The exception to the meter is that final "oh," which just kind of slips out, not so much a word as a joyous exhalation.

> Smiling, snub-nosed, domed like satyrs, oh

A coordinating conjunction between "snub-nosed" and "domed like satyrs" would interrupt the meter, as well as slow down the line. The asyndeton allows for a moment of sonic smoothness, and also emphasizes the assonance of the "oh" sounds, all of which adds up to a sense of desire being fulfilled, if only for a brief moment.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 25:** "Smiling, snub-nosed, domed like satyrs,"

VOCABULARY

Piraeus (Line 1) - Piraeus is a large port city in Greece.

Saloon (Line 3) - Here, a "saloon" refers to a large lounge or, possibly, a bar located on the ship.

Bows (Line 5) - This refers to the forward-facing part of a ship.

Bi-focals (Line 10) - "Bi-focals" are glasses with dual lenses, each with a different prescription.

Implored (Line 19) - To "implore" is to beg or plead with earnestly.

Epiphany (Line 20) - "Epiphany" indicates the manifestation or sudden appearance of a divine being, or an occurrence of sudden insight.

Aegean (Line 21) - This is a reference to the Aegean Sea, which lies between the Greek and Anatolian peninsulas.

Reverberate (Line 22) - To "reverberate" is to echo, resound, or vibrate in response to a loud sound.

Satyrs (Line 25) - Drunken, woodland gods from Greek and later Roman mythology. Satyrs are depicted as having the legs, ears, and horns of a goat, and are associated with the deities Pan and Dionysus.

Keel (Line 30) - A "keel" is the base of a ship, on which the hull (or the main body of the ship) is built.

Tankers (Line 32) - A "tanker," also known as a freighter, is a cargo ship which is equipped to carry large amounts of liquid—usually petroleum.

Dispersed (Line 36) - To "disperse" is to distribute or spread something over a wide area.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Watching for Dolphins" is broken up into six sestets, or six-line stanzas. The line lengths within these stanzas vary, but only to a degree—there are no one or two word lines, for example, or lines that go on much longer than others. The relative steadiness of the stanzas helps pace the poem, which otherwise might feel rather disjointed due to the fact that most lines are enjambed, and, as such, topple down the page and across stanza breaks.

The progression of the stanzas can also be seen to reflect the progression of the days passing or of the waves breaking against the ship—roughly equal, nothing out of the ordinary.

While enjambment helps create a sense of urgency, the relative regularity of the stanzas keeps the poem in check, so there is a push and pull between the importance of what the passengers are feeling, and the fact that they will soon be returned to their "real" lives. Although the passengers are filled with desire for something to *happen*, nothing does. They land in the city disappointed, their lives unruffled, having not experienced epiphany, or even a situation in which epiphany might have occurred.

METER

The poem does not employ a set meter and instead is written in free verse. This choice contributes to its feel, at first, of being a casual observation. Lines are as long or as short as they need to be, though perhaps because of the speaker's composure, they remain relatively regular. The lack of meter also seems to speak to the poem's central concern, which is a desire for some kind of spiritual, communal purpose. The lack of a governing principle such as meter could be said to reflect the lack of spiritual purpose in the passengers' lives. They reach toward what is missing, and that might be felt in the poem when the reader longs for a more obvious rhythm.

That being said, there is a significant moment in line 25 when meter does come into play. As the speaker imagines the arrival of dolphins and what that would mean for the passengers, the poem slips into nearly perfect trochaic tetrameter, for just a line. This means there are four trochees—poetic feet with a stressed-unstressed beat pattern:

Smiling, | snub-nosed, | domed like | satyrs, | oh

The line falls short of *perfect* trochaic tetrameter only because of the extra syllable created by the "oh" at the end, which feels less like a word and more like a sigh of joy that just kind of slips out. This moment is significant because as the poem comes closest to fulfilling the speaker's desires—even though this moment occurs in the speaker's imagination, not in reality—the poem comes very close to being metered. The meter seems to imply the perfection of this moment, this fantasy. It suggests that had the dolphins arrived, it would have *meant* something.

RHYME SCHEME

"Watching for Dolphins" does not adhere to a rhyme scheme—there's not clear pattern regarding where and when rhymes appear in the poem. That said, it does employ a good deal of rhyme throughout. Some of these rhymes are perfect rhymes ("they" and "day" in lines 11 and 12, for example, or "place" and "face" in lines 17 and 18).

Often, however, the poem instead relies on patterns created by assonance and consonance to add a sense of musicality to the end of lines. One example of this is in the first stanza, where lines 2, 5, and 6 do not rhyme ("rose," "bows," and "lose" all

deploy a different vowel sound). In place of perfect *rhyme* there is instead the *consonance* created by the repetition of the /z/ sound. These could be characterized as slant rhymes.

While rhymes often occur at the end of lines, they occur internally as well. In lines 2 and 3, "soon" rhymes with "saloon," and the presence of that internal rhyme encourages the reader to emphasize those words.

Another important example of internal assonance occurs within line 25, where "snub-nosed," "domed," and "oh" all employ the same long /o/ sound. These words don't rhyme, exactly, but the clear repetition of the /o/ sound creates a kind of echo. This is not only pleasing to the ear, but also tells the reader that something significant is happening within the line (and, indeed, this begins the moment when the speaker imagines what it would be like if the passengers' dream came true and the dolphins actually appeared).

Just as it is important to note the ways in which the poem uses rhyme, it is equally important to think about the times that it *doesn't*. The poem often sets up an expectation of rhyme that it then fails to deliver. For example, lines 11-15 feature some clear end rhymes that are abruptly stopped by line 16:

... looked to the children for **they**
... Day after **day**
... all **gazed**
... were favourable
... between them **raised**
... that fell

The assonance created by the /ay/ sounds in "g**a**zed," "f**a**vourable," and "r**ai**sed" also echoes the perfect rhyme between "th**ey**" and "d**ay**." The speaker is thus able to create the expectation of rhyme and/or similar vowel sounds. So when one reaches the word "fell," there is a sense of surprise, even disappointment, as the rhyme falls away. This kind of movement imitates the growing sense of anticipation felt by the passengers, who desire a sign but do not get one.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Watching for Dolphins" is one of the passengers aboard the ship bound for Piraeus, a port city in Greece. Throughout most of the poem, the speaker is hesitant to refer to themselves or to identify with the other passengers. Rather than saying "I noticed" or "I saw," the speaker removes themselves from the scene by saying "**One** noticed" and "**One** saw." Rather than acknowledging that the speaker, too, is watching for dolphins, the speaker describes and interprets the actions of the *other* passengers, imbuing those actions with the speaker's own feelings and desires.

The speaker undergoes a subtle transformation towards the end of the fourth stanza. While thinking about how much the passengers long to see dolphins, so much that the longing feels like prayer, the speaker suddenly *includes themselves* along with the other passengers, saying, "**We** could not imagine more prayer."

This shift is important because it seems to imply that the action of prayer has the power to bring people together. Even *imagining* a spiritual experience is enough to temporarily diminish some of the distance between the speaker and the other passengers.

For the next 12 lines, the speaker feels a kinship with the other passengers, a feeling which renders the speaker less isolated. Unfortunately, this feeling is fleeting; by the end of the poem, everything has returned to normal. The speaker once again withdraws into omniscience, referring to "the company" rather than to "us."

SETTING

"Watching for Dolphins" takes place on board a ship bound for Piraeus, a port city in Greece, during the summer months.

This setting implies a couple of things which help to contextualize the poem. Because the poem takes place over the summer, on a ship crossing the Aegean Sea—i.e., a popular tourist destination—it is safe to assume that the passengers are returning from some kind of vacation (the passengers might be returning to Greece from the Greek Islands, for example, or be on a Mediterranean cruise). This gives the poem a degree of gravity as the reader understands these people will soon be returning to their ordinary lives and routines.

It also helps to define the passengers' motivations. People go on vacation because they want to experience something outside the realm of their ordinary lives. As their vacation wanes, the desire for something memorable and/or meaningful to occur becomes stronger. The passengers are running out of time. If they don't experience something extraordinary now, who knows when they will have another chance.

The setting also helps establish the groundwork for the poem's thematic ideas surrounding spirituality and purpose. There is a sense of "passage" driving the poem. The ship is sailing across the sea, passing from one destination to another. The passengers are returning from vacation, not quite returned to their ordinary lives yet, but every minute feeling the gap between themselves and their daily reality closing. The city to which they are returning is Piraeus, whose name means "the place over the passage." Even the word "passenger" implies travel, passage, a sense of movement, direction, and therefore purpose.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

David Constantine has talked about his work as belonging to a tradition of English Romantic poetry—a genre of poetry that often focuses on the power and mystery of nature as well as a search for the sublime, a feeling of intense awe and transcendence not felt in day-to-day life. These Romantic ideas can clearly be seen in this poem, as the passengers long to achieve some sort of spiritual experience by witnessing the majesty of nature (i.e., seeing the dolphins).

Romantic poetry was a reaction to the intense focus on science, logic, and reason of the Enlightenment, and peaked in the late 18th century. Famous Romantic poets include William Wordsworth ("The World Is Too Much With Us," "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"), John Keats ("Ode to a Nightingale"), and William Blake ("London"), all of whom often focused on the power and beauty of the natural world in their work. Romantic writings also were typically critical of the demands and isolation created by modern urban life—something that is echoed by this poem, with its focus on an escape from the passengers' humdrum city lives.

Constantine has also been influenced a great deal by the German Romantics, whose work he has translated. In particular, he has described Friedrich Hölderlin's work as addressing "a human reality ... in which sense—religious or existential—is not given to us: we make it, the best we can. He is the poet of hope and disappointment, the more passionate the hope, the more grievous the disappointment." He goes on to describe Hölderlin as a "deeply religious poet, but the gods are absent." Constantine's description of Hölderlin's work is a helpful context in which to view "Watching for Dolphins," a poem that so clearly deals with the desire to make sense of the world, the cost of hope, and religiosity in the face of absent divinity.

"Watching for Dolphins" was written many years after the hey-day of the Romantics, of course. Constantine published the poem in 1983, and its free verse, casual language, and sprawling enjambment are features common to more contemporary poetry.

Constantine's poetry also leans on his experience as a translator of the German language. He has described learning about new possibilities for syntax from studying and translating Hölderlin, whose "long sentences developing over many lines and, often, from stanza to stanza" can be seen at work in the complex syntax of "Watching for Dolphins."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Constantine was born in Salford, Manchester, England in 1944, a year before World War II ended. Though he is a British poet, he has traveled extensively and is a translator of German Romantic poets, philosophers, and dramatists such as Hölderlin, Kleist, and Goethe. Both the British and German Romantics were influenced by the Greek classics, and indeed Greek mythology can be seen to frame "Watching for Dolphins." While Piraeus is still an important port city, it would have been at its most glorious in ancient times, when Greece was at its most powerful. Satyrs, too, are a reference to Greek mythology, and dolphins themselves would have been associated with the sea god, Poseidon.

In fact, Constantine's poem can easily be interpreted as a longing for the return of the Romantic spirit, a spirit much indebted to Greek mythology. The Romantics valued deeply felt emotion, a sense of heroic purpose, and the freedom and power of the imagination, all of which are at play in this poem. Furthermore, Romantic poets placed a lot of importance on the experience of encountering nature in all its wildness and beauty, especially as a response to the growing industrialization of the world, which is clearly a concern of the poem.

However, as Constantine wrote "Watching for Dolphins" in a post WWII world, it fails to entertain the idealism of the Romantics. The passengers long for inspiration and epiphany, but are ultimately disappointed.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — A recording of David Constantine reading "Watching for Dolphins." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=th56jeso6fc)
- Romanticism — A brief guide to Romantic poetry. (https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-romanticism)
- David Constantine's Biography — Info regarding the poet's life and contribution to literature, including bibliography and awards. (https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/david-j-constantine)
- More of Constantine's Poems — More info on David Constantine, including recordings of some of his other poems. (https://poetryarchive.org/poet/david-constantine/)
- An Interview — Joseph Hutchison interviews David Constantine for Cerise Press. (http://www.cerisepress.com/04/10/going-abroad-poet-novelist-translator-and-editor-david-constantine/view-all)
- Another Interview! — Rupert Dastur interviews David Constantine for Word Factory. (https://thewordfactory.tv/a-word-factory-interview-with-david-constantine/)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Mottram, Darla. "*Watching for Dolphins.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 29 Oct 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mottram, Darla. "*Watching for Dolphins.*" LitCharts LLC, October 29, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/david-constantine/watching-for-dolphins.