

Whales Weep Not!

D. H. Lawrence

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Overview

“Whales Weep Not!” was written by the English poet D. H. Lawrence. It was posthumously published in a collection curated from Lawrence’s notebooks called *Last Poems* (1932). A highly anthropomorphized vision of the behavior of whales, “Whales Weep Not!” plunges its reader into a sea of sensory images, mysticism, and eroticism. This curious pastiche is a useful sample from a poet intensely interested in the connections between humanity and the animal world, particularly the shared pleasures of physical sexuality.

While D. H. Lawrence is best known for his novels (e.g. *Sons and Lovers*, *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love*, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*), he was first published as a poet and produced an astoundingly large corpus of poetry: over 1,000 poems. Like many of his literary contemporaries, Lawrence is difficult to categorize in terms of poetic school or style—not just because his writing saw significant evolution over the course of his career. There are elements of Modernism in his dedication to free verse and his use of images to express abstract concepts and feelings. The influence of the Romantics appears in his attention to interior, individual emotion and introspection, while his highly personal (and often provocative) subject matter also takes influence from confessional poets like Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. Finally, Lawrence was obsessed with animals and the natural world—an interest on full display in “Whales Weep Not!”—putting him in conversation not only with other nature poets like William Carlos Williams, but also with novelists like Herman Melville. (For a thorough exploration of these influences and more, see Helen Sword’s chapter in the section Further Reading).

“Whales Weep Not!” is a late addition to Lawrence’s literary oeuvre and displays the hallmarks of Lawrence’s interests and style near the end of his life. While the poems of *Last Poems* can be examined individually, they are interconnected with each other, forming a thematic unit best appreciated as a whole. There is a deeply personal quality to *Last Poems*, and the collection’s overarching message is two-fold. First, Lawrence criticizes the cerebral, machine-like rationality of modern man. Second, he encourages a return to a more primitive, animalistic, and sensory means of interacting with the world. Both themes are at play in “Whales Weep Not!”, though more attention is paid to the latter.

Poet Biography

David Herbert Lawrence was born in 1885 in Eastwood, Nottinghamshire, England, to a decidedly working-class family. His father, Arthur John Lawrence, was a coal miner; his mother Lydia, a teacher-turned-factory worker. While Lydia had fallen on hard times, she had been educated in her youth, and she passed down her lifelong love of literature to her son. Books and nature—in the form of the nearby Sherwood Forest—were escape hatches for Lawrence, who felt stifled not only by the industrial atmosphere of Eastwood, but also by his poor health and by the ostracization he suffered at the hands of his classmates.

As a young man in the early years of the 1900s, Lawrence worked first as a factory worker, then as a teacher. His colleague at school, Jessie Chambers, encouraged him to try writing. In 1906 Lawrence left Eastwood to attend college at the University College of Nottingham, where he earned a teaching certificate in 1908. Publishers began to take notice of the young writer. His first book, *The White Peacock*, was published in 1911.

1912 saw a titanic shift in Lawrence's life. He fell deeply in love with Frieda von Richthofen, the wife of his literary mentor Ernest Weekley. The couple eloped in the same year, with Frieda leaving Ernest and their children behind to adventure with Lawrence throughout Europe. This was a prolific period for Lawrence. He quickly published his first volume of poetry, *Love Poems and Others*, in 1913, and soon followed it with one of his most famous novels, *Sons and Lovers*.

In 1914 Lawrence and Frieda returned to England and married. In 1915 Lawrence published the sequel to *Sons and Lovers*, *The Rainbow*, which quickly drew fire for its obscene sexual content. Unwelcome in England, but unable to leave due to World War I, Lawrence and Frieda relied on the goodwill of friends from 1916-9, moving constantly. Despite the hardship, Lawrence continued to write and publish.

After the war ended in 1918, Lawrence and Frieda embarked on a two-year voluntary exile from England, travelling to locales as far-flung as Australia and Sri Lanka. In 1922 the Lawrences immigrated to the United States, where they established an artists' commune in Taos, New Mexico. There Lawrence published *Studies in Classic American Literature*, a collection of critical essays on American writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville.

Lawrence was prepared to settle permanently in the United States, but a nearly fatal bout of malaria and tuberculosis contracted in Mexico in 1925 forced him and Frieda to return to

Europe in 1927. There he wrote his last great novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, to even more vocal outrage than *Sons and Lovers* and *The Rainbow*. Increasingly ill and sensing death was near, Lawrence produced his later works—including *Last Poems*—before passing away in France on March 2, 1930 at the age of 44.

Poem Text

They say the sea is cold, but the sea contains
the hottest blood of all, and the wildest, the most urgent.

All the whales in the wider deeps, hot are they, as they urge
on and on, and dive beneath the icebergs.
The right whales, the sperm-whales, the hammer-heads, the killers
there they blow, there they blow, hot wild white breath out of
the sea!

And they rock, and they rock, through the sensual ageless ages
on the depths of the seven seas,
and through the salt they reel with drunk delight
and in the tropics tremble they with love
and roll with massive, strong desire, like gods.
Then the great bull lies up against his bride
in the blue deep bed of the sea,
as mountain pressing on mountain, in the zest of life:
and out of the inward roaring of the inner red ocean of whale-blood
the long tip reaches strong, intense, like the maelstrom-tip, and
comes to rest
in the clasp and the soft, wild clutch of a she-whale's
fathomless body.

And over the bridge of the whale's strong phallus, linking the
wonder of whales
the burning archangels under the sea keep passing, back and
forth,
keep passing, archangels of bliss
from him to her, from her to him, great Cherubim

that wait on whales in mid-ocean, suspended in the waves of the
sea
great heaven of whales in the waters, old hierarchies.

And enormous mother whales lie dreaming suckling their whale-
tender young
and dreaming with strange whale eyes wide open in the waters of
the beginning and the end.

And bull-whales gather their women and whale-calves in a ring
when danger threatens, on the surface of the ceaseless flood
and range themselves like great fierce Seraphim facing the threat
encircling their huddled monsters of love.
And all this happens in the sea, in the salt
where God is also love, but without words:
and Aphrodite is the wife of whales
most happy, happy she!

and Venus among the fishes skips and is a she-dolphin
she is the gay, delighted porpoise sporting with love and the sea
she is the female tunny-fish, round and happy among the males
and dense with happy blood, dark rainbow bliss in the sea.

Lawrence, D.H. "Whales Weep Not!" 1932. *Academy of American Poets*,
<http://www.poets.org/poem/whales-weep-not>.

Summary

The poet opens by claiming that while some say the sea is cold, it also contains "the hottest blood of all" (Line 2). Lawrence describes who this blood belongs to in the second stanza: whales—right whales, sperm-whales, hammer-heads, and killer whales (Line 5)—who dive beneath icebergs (Line 4) and rise again, spouting air from their blowholes as they crest the surface (Lines 6-7).

In the third stanza, Lawrence describes whales mating. Like people, they "reel with drunk delight" and "tremble [...] with love" (Lines 10-1). In the blue depths of the sea, an enormous

bull whale joins with his “bride” (Line 13). Lawrence concentrates first on the image of the red ocean of blood inside the bull whale (Line 16). The blood inside him propels his erection to “come[s] to rest” in the female whale’s body (Lines 17-20). The whales are now linked by the bull whale’s phallus, which serves as a bridge for oceanic angels, Cherubim, “archangels of bliss,” to pass pleasure back and forth between them (Stanza 4). This scene, says Lawrence, is the “great heaven of whales” (Line 29).

The poem shifts to an image of mother whales suckling their calves and dreaming, open-eyed, in the “waters of / the beginning and the end” (Lines 30-3). In dangerous situations, the bull-whales form a protective circle around their “women” and the baby whales, protecting them like “great fierce Seraphim” (another order of angel) (Line 36). Lawrence reaffirms the setting: This all happens in the sea, he says, where God is “love, but without words” (Line 39), and the Greek sea goddess of sexual desire, Aphrodite, is the happy wife of the whales (Stanza 5).

In the sixth and final stanza, Lawrence expands on Aphrodite, this time in her Roman aspect, Venus. Venus skips among the fishes—she is a she-dolphin, then a porpoise, then a female tunny-fish (i.e., a tuna). Venus seems to be transforming before the reader’s eyes. She is “happy among the / males” and as full of blood as they are (Lines 44-5). The poem concludes with an enigmatic summary image: “dark rainbow bliss in the sea” (Line 45).

Poem Analysis

Analysis: "Whales Weep Not!"

D. H. Lawrence opens his poem with an aphorism, or pithy common saying, from a mysterious "they" (Line 1). The poet does not expound on who these people are—perhaps, given Lawrence's broader poetic philosophy, he's referencing modern thinkers or writers (see Themes essay "Ancient Sensibility Versus Modern Rationality"). What is clear is that "they," unlike Lawrence, consider the sea to be "cold" (Line 1). The poet knows better. He does not dispute the coldness of the water, but counters with a nuance of their observation: The sea may be cold, but it contains not only the hottest blood of all, but also the "wildest" and "most urgent" (Line 2).

Lawrence dramatically delays revealing whom this blood belongs to until Stanza 2. The ocean's whales, he contends, are hot-blooded, and that hot blood propels them forward in constant, passionate motion. Lawrence introduces here the metaphorical, highly sexual language which permeates the rest of the poem. The whales "urge" on and on—a verbal form of the adjective describing their blood in Stanza 1, "urgent"—and Lawrence's use of sonic repetition here mimics the repetitive, thrusting nature of the sex act. The whales (phallic symbols themselves) repeatedly dive beneath the rounded form of the "icebergs," which evoke the mons pubis of human women. This connection between the whales' activity and sexual intercourse is made explicit in Lines 6 and 7. Lawrence makes a double entendre on the famous whaler cry of "there she blows": the spray from the whales' blowholes, "hot wild white breath" (Line 6), alludes to orgasm and male ejaculation.

Lawrence keeps the sexual force of the poem rolling with more repetition at the beginning of Stanza 3, but he pulls the lens back a bit, not only in space—he references all the seven seas (Line 9)—but also in time ("the sensual ageless ages," Line 8). His whales are apparently uninhibited by such human concepts. They are ageless, reveling in the very human feelings of drunkenness and desire, "like gods" (Line 12). The salt mentioned in Line 10 and later, in Line 38, recalls not only the salinity of the sea, but also sexual intercourse. The sweat and bodily fluids produced in sex are salty, too.

Lawrence again zooms in, this time on one of the poem's set-piece images: a bull whale having sex with his "bride," another example of anthropomorphism (Stanzas 3 and 4). Lawrence returns to the image of the blood which so fascinated him in Stanza 1, this time

more explicitly tying the fluid's heat and vitality—and the pulsing thud of the heart—to sexual intercourse. In practical terms, the bull whale's blood swells his erection (Lines 16-7), but it also represents the very source of his life force, and perhaps of all life.

This union between the bull whale and the female whale, Lawrence suggests, has something distinctly holy about it. The bliss of their mutual pleasure is ferried back and forth by angels—Cherubim, to be specific (Lines 21-9). This theme is continued in the next image, where whale mothers suckle their young in the depths and dream “in the / waters of / the beginning and the end” (Lines 32-3). This wording mimics the Biblical language of alpha and omega, God as both the beginning, end, and everything in-between.

But Lawrence's vision of whales is not entirely metaphysical. He quickly returns to more concretely biological behaviors, like the bull whales circling and protecting the female whales and their young at the approach of danger (Lines 34-7). But again, these biological observations are tempered by a heavy dose of not only anthropomorphism, but spirituality. The whales are not just female whales, but “women,” and the bull whales protect them like fiery angelic Seraphim (Lines 34-6).

Lawrence is especially interested in using “real” whale behavior to model idealized human behavior. Here in the ocean, he explains, love can thrive “without words”—that is to say, without the many artifices human beings assign to it. The love of whales is an animalistic love, rooted firmly in sensual pleasure; it is love from a time before civilization, a theme Lawrence returns to again and again. He often rejects modern cerebralism in favor of primordial, animalistic sensuality.

Lawrence drives this connection home by shifting first to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of sexual desire, in Lines 40 and 41. *Last Poems* often, in fact, uses imagery from Greek mythology to paint a poetic universe before the corruptive entrance of civilization. First Lawrence describes Aphrodite as the wife of the whales, a role which makes her incredibly happy (Lines 40-1). Then, in the form of Venus (the Roman equivalent of Aphrodite), the goddess not only refuses to shy away from male attention; she delights in being in their midst (Line 44). She seems to rapidly transform from one line to the next—she is first a she-dolphin, then a porpoise, then a tuna—hammering home Lawrence's dedication to poetic fluidity and a lack of rationality. Like the male whales, Venus is “dense with happy blood” (Line 45). In concentrating on her feelings, Lawrence shifts from the male experience to the female experience, ultimately suggesting that both sexes are best served by giving in to their

irrational, natural desires.

The poem's final image, "dark rainbow bliss in the sea" (Line 45), completes the descent into the deep ocean. It mimics *katabasis* here, a Greek word for the journey into the Underworld. This fixation on darkness is seen elsewhere in Lawrence's *Last Poems*, most famously in "The Ship Of Death," where, like many poets, Lawrence equates darkness with death and human mortality. But interestingly, in "Whales Weep Not!" the darkness has a rainbow hue, evoking, perhaps, the prismatic sparkling of water and its ability to refract color. This paradoxical combination of darkness (the absence of light) and rainbows (light's purest and most beautiful form) may signal the power of the procreative act, the power of purely sensual "bliss," to beautify the dreary mortal experience.

Contextual Analysis

Literary Context

As an oceanic poem, “Whales Weep Not!” can be situated in a long literary history portraying the sea as an adversarial force to humankind, particularly the human individual. Lawrence’s warm-blooded whales, whom he identifies with people, are contrasted strongly with the cold, unfeeling depths of the ocean. While such characterizations find their origins in the classical literature which inspired *Last Poems*—namely Homer’s *Odyssey*, where the sea and its gods play primary antagonists to the hero Odysseus—similar themes can also be found in more contemporary works. The English Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example, touched on similar themes in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1798). Later, Ernest Hemingway presents perhaps the most famous literary depiction of this antagonism in his 1951 short novel, *The Old Man and the Sea*.

The most important literary intertext for “Whales Weep Not!”, though, is Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*. Published in 1851 to resoundingly negative reviews, *Moby Dick* is now recognized as one of the great American novels, lauded for diving not only into cetacean behavior, but also, human nature. Like Lawrence, Melville was as much a naturalist as he was a poet. *Moby Dick* is (in)famous for its long-winded, scientific descriptions of whale behaviors, which Melville apparently sourced from both his own experience as a whaler and from his immersion in Nantucket whaler literature and culture.

D. H. Lawrence was unabashedly obsessed with *Moby Dick*. In his essay on Melville in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, he describes *Moby Dick* as “one of the strangest and most wonderful books in the world” and “the greatest book of the sea ever written” (*Studies in Classic American Literature*, D. H. Lawrence, edited by Ezra Greenspan, Lindeth Vasey, and John Worthen, Cambridge University Press (2003), pages 40 and 146). Lawrence’s effusive praise revived interest in a novel which, in Melville’s own day, was ruthlessly maligned. An especially informative quote sees Lawrence describe the great white whale, Moby Dick, as being “the last phallic being of the white man. [...] Our blood-self subjected to our will” (ibid., page 146). The influence of this correlation between masculine sexuality and whales is deeply felt in “Whales Weep Not!”.

Lawrence arguably adapted from Melville not only this metaphorical framework, but also his highly utilitarian perspective on marine life. Lawrence’s detailed (if not always accurate)

descriptions of the habits and behaviors of whales may, in fact, be drawn directly from Melville's book, as Robert Hogan details in his article on whale symbolism in Lawrence ("The Amorous Whale: A Study in the Symbolism of D. H. Lawrence," Robert Hogan, *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 5 No. 1 (1959), pages 40-1).

Historical Context

D. H. Lawrence was a complex and controversial figure in his time (and our own). Lawrence was noted by contemporaries as harboring potentially anti-democratic and fascist tendencies; he was enamored, for example, with the concept of a benevolent dictator, though he leaned tentatively into a more socialist outlook in his later years (as reflected in his establishment of an artistic commune in New Mexico). Lawrence's elitist politics were seemingly at odds with not only his own background as the son of working-class parents, but also with the vivid and sympathetic portraits he painted of working-class people in his novels.

Lawrence's works were also noted for their unusually frank treatment of sexuality and their detailing not only of explicit sexual acts, but also of then-unprintable sexual expletives. "Whales Weep Not!" fits neatly into this category. Lawrence's most famous novels, *The Rainbow* (1915) and its sequel, *Women in Love* (1921), were highly controversial; both were banned in the UK for obscenity. The overt sexuality between the upper-class Constance Chatterley and her gamekeeper in Lawrence's later novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, meant it was not published in the UK until 1960, despite being released in Italy and France decades earlier (1928 and 1929, respectively). Even then, *Lady Chatterley's* UK publisher, Penguin Books, quickly found itself at the center of a sensational censorship trial in the UK in 1960, a full 30 years after Lawrence's death. The publishing house was accused of being in violation of the Obscene Publications Act of 1959. Penguin was ultimately found not guilty, with the prosecutors ridiculed as being out of touch with the times. This shift in the reaction to Lawrence presaged his reception today, where Lawrence is largely seen as a flawed, difficult individual who nonetheless drove an important conversation forward for "men and women to be able to think about sex, fully, completely, honestly, and cleanly" (*A Propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover' and Other Essays*, D. H. Lawrence, Penguin Books (1961), page 89).

Themes

Ancient Sensibility Versus Modern Rationality

In the notebooks from which the *Last Poems* collection are drawn, Lawrence sets the scene in the Mediterranean sea, the vast expanse of water tucked between Europe to the north, and Africa to the south. For Lawrence, the Mediterranean is an ancient body of water, a quasi-mythological space where humans and gods and those in-between could interact with and impact each other. He wanted to return his readers to a mental space in mankind's distant past; the collection opens, in fact, with "The Greeks Are Coming!", a poem detailing the return of Greek gods and heroes on their ships.

The ancient Greeks held special significance for Lawrence as representatives of a more "primitive," and therefore idealized, form of man. In contrast to modern people, Lawrence envisions the Greeks not only as assigning a mysterious spiritual value to all things—as Lawrence himself was inclined to do—but also as displaying a comfort with constant change and metamorphosis (as evoked by Venus's many transformations in "Whales Weep Not!"). Most importantly, Lawrence believed the Greeks to be hyperattentive to physicality and sensory experience. As he wrote in his *Apocalypse*, "We have lost almost entirely the great and intricately developed sense-awareness, and sense-knowledge, of the ancients. It was a great depth of knowledge based not on words but on images [...] the connection was not logical but emotional" (*Apocalypse and the Writings of Revelation*, D. H. Lawrence, edited by Mara Kalnins, Cambridge University Press (2002), page 91).

In Lawrence's poetic universe, modern man's greatest sin is his willingness to allow his mind to subjugate his more animalistic, sensory-oriented self. The poet's use of striking, tactile images and lyrically beautiful verse are meant to be provocative, to jar the reader out of their patterns of rational thought. "Whales Weep Not!" is a great microcosm of this technique. In the poem's lovely, colorful world, the whales—which can be interpreted as idealized humans—are directly likened to the Greek gods that swim alongside them (Line 12). The line between classical deities and humans and animals is blurred, a phenomenon Lawrence would have conceived of as especially Greek. His classical allusions often signify the triumph of this "primitive" desire over modern rationality.

Sex as the Epitome of the Animal (and Human) Experience

While Lawrence looked above to the Greek gods as poetic models for human behavior, he also looked “below” to the animal kingdom. In his private life, Lawrence was fascinated by the natural world. He studied biology in teacher’s college and remained something of a naturalist during his subsequent literary career. One of his earlier collections of poetry, *Birds, Beasts, and Flowers* (1923), features many works inspired by the natural world. Most, like “Whales Weep Not!”, are sexually charged. Lawrence finds common ground with living things first and foremost in their shared compulsion to reproduce, and he uses musings on this specific subset of animal behavior and motivation to understand human nature more clearly.

For Lawrence, the desire to procreate and the desire to live are inextricably entwined. He makes this connection clear in “Whales Weep Not!” when the body’s life force—the blood—propels the bull whale’s erection and brings him into union with the female whale. Lawrence often equates the act of sex to life itself: To have sex is, fundamentally, to be alive. For Lawrence, this is a truth never forgotten by animals, though apparently forgotten by modern man. As the poet describes in one of his letters, “The source of all life and knowledge is in man and woman, and the source of all living is in the interchange and the meeting and mingling of these two: man-life and woman-life [...]” (*The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, edited by James T. Bolton, Volume 2, Cambridge University Press (1979-2000), page 181). In his 1929 poem [“We Are Transmitters”](#) Lawrence further clarifies: “As we live, we are transmitters of life. / And when we fail to transmit life, life fails to flow through us / That is part of the mystery of sex, it is a flow onwards. / Sexless people transmit nothing.”

Symbols & Motifs

Whales

The whales in “Whales Weep Not!” perform several symbolic functions. First and foremost, in their oblong, blunted shape they resemble phalluses. Lawrence cements this association by naming a few whale species which explicitly evoke male sexuality (hammer-heads, sperm whales, Line 5). The way the whales are invigorated and propelled forward by blood suggests the biological process of a phallus becoming erect. While female whales and calves are present in the poem, Lawrence is most interested in using whales as symbols of masculine sexuality, especially in the first half of the poem.

The whales also represent an almost Leviathan, spiritual force. Lawrence emphasizes their overwhelming hugeness (“and roll with massive, strong desire,” Line 12; “as mountain pressing on mountain,” Line 15), elevating the whales to a mythological, primordial status. The ancient Greeks imagined their gods as being physically larger than humans—literally larger than life—and Lawrence provides a lingering sense that his whales might stand for something greater too, something inscrutable. As timeless, god-like beings, they paradoxically represent people, but also exist entirely separate from destructive human artifices like civilization and time.

But Lawrence is careful to fix his highly metaphorical poem in rote biology too. There is no doubt that despite the poet’s anthropomorphizing and sacramentalizing, his whales are also animals which behave as whales do. Lawrence repeatedly alludes to real behaviors of whales in the wild—their presence in Arctic and the tropics, their breathing, their protective circling—to root his poem in the brand of physicality which is so important to his poetic vision.

Venus and Aphrodite

The last portion of “Whales Weep Not!” concentrates on two aspects of the “same” goddess: the Greek Aphrodite and the Roman Venus. Lawrence invokes Aphrodite first, “the wife of whales” (Line 40). As the goddess’s older and more primal form, Aphrodite was concerned with base sexual desire. She was a primordial goddess for the Greeks—in some myths, she even predates the Olympian pantheon—and she is definitively oceanic. One version of Aphrodite’s origin story sees her birthed not through traditional means, but rather from the contact of the sky god Ouranos’s severed genitals with sea foam (an allusion to semen). Like

Lawrence (Lines 10 and 38), the Greeks saw a natural connection between the salinity of the ocean and its role as a cradle of life and fertility. In “Whales Weep Not!”, the sea goddess Aphrodite embodies these characteristics and more.

Aphrodite’s Roman incarnation, Venus, on the other hand, is more associated with “proper” romantic love than raw sexual passion. Her transformation was largely affected by the Roman general Julius Caesar and his heir Augustus, Rome’s first emperor. Because their family claimed descent from Venus, the Julio-Claudians had vested interest in stripping the goddess of her unseemly sexual elements. In referencing both Aphrodite *and* Venus, Lawrence attempts to encapsulate love in all its forms: romantic and sexual.

Lawrence also uses Aphrodite/Venus to allude to some of the more evocative—and provocative—concepts of ancient sexuality. He describes Aphrodite as a “wife of whales” (Line 40), and Venus, too, loves the attention of various male marine animals (Stanza 7). Their apparently free-spirited seduction of animals recalls various ancient myths of bestiality, which detail explicit sexual relationships between human women and animals. As always, Lawrence challenges the reader to imagine making their human rationality subject to their baser, animalistic desires.

Finally, Lawrence uses Venus on a metaliterary level to suggest the transmutability and ever-changing aspects of good poetry. The goddess transforms repeatedly in the final stanza—she is first a she-dolphin, then a porpoise, then a female tunny-fish. Her fluidity reflects Lawrence’s literary philosophy, his determination that a poet never commit to a specific meaning, value, or form. Rather, Lawrence—like other Modernists—seeks to be a conduit for spontaneous thoughts, passively recording truths even as they mutate and change. In this schema, “truth” is never fixed, but is rather believed to be as transient and malleable as human nature itself.

Cherubim and Seraphim

Lawrence’s later works are distinguished by his interest in religious themes and imagery. This interest manifests not only in allusions to “primitive” Greco-Roman mythology (as in his mention of Aphrodite and Venus), but also to elements of Judeo-Christianity. Lawrence’s late poems touch on questions that are often associated with religious (or atheistic) thought: What happens after we die? How should we behave in life? Who (or what) is God? These spiritual questions counterbalance Lawrence’s trademark fascination with earthly, sensory experience. In “Whales Weep Not!”, there is a creative equivalence of whales mating—that is,

base physicality—with the movement of “archangels of bliss” (Lines 21-9).

Lawrence even specifies which orders of angel he means: Cherubim (Line 26) and Seraphim (Line 36). In Abrahamic faiths, Cherubim and Seraphim occupy the highest order of the angels, an organizational hierarchy Lawrence nods to in Line 29 (“old hierarchies”). Cherubim is the plural form of cherub, the angels commonly associated with courtship and romantic love. Seraphim, too, are significant for Lawrence’s themes: They are usually portrayed as fiery six-winged beings and are especially associated with ardor and fire (finding natural parallels with the heated blood and passion of Lawrence’s whales). The Cherubim and Seraphim here symbolize Judeo-Christian reflections of the pagan Aphrodite and Venus: complementary embodiments of romantic love (Cherubim, Venus) and sexual desire (Seraphim, Aphrodite).

Literary Devices

Form and Meter

Like the works of William Wordsworth, Emily Dickenson, and Walt Whitman (an especially important influence), D. H. Lawrence wrote “Whales, Weep Not!” in free verse, an open form which does not adhere to any formal rhythm or metrical scheme. While some of Lawrence’s earlier poems did use more rigid forms, the poet was by and large a vocal proponent of this format. As he wrote in his essay on poetic theory, [“The Poetry of the Present.”](#) Lawrence believed,

We can get rid of the stereotyped movements and the old hackneyed associations of sound or sense. We can break down those artificial conduits and canals through which we do so love to force our utterance. We can break the stiff neck of habit.

Lawrence wanted his poetry to feel immediate and of the moment, like a spontaneous flow of thought. He was not overly concerned with perfection or with polishing a perfect piece of prose—or at least, he wanted to project an illusion of carefree spontaneity.

In “Whales Weep Not!”, the flexibility of free verse allows the poem to ebb and flow like the sea itself. Lawrence’s controlled use of punctuation and alternating line lengths both aurally and visually imitates the crashing and receding of waves on the shore. This rocking rhythm, combined with natural pauses in the movement of the poem, also evokes the thrusting, repetitive rhythm of the sex act. Strongly stressed sounds and syllables rush in and press on each other, mimicking intercourse. On a more subtle level, Lawrence uses this pattern of peaks and valleys to reflect not only the movement of the ocean and of sex, but also on the turmoil and mutability of deep water (that is, subconscious human emotion).

It is useful to contrast the lyrical, almost musical qualities of “Whales Weep Not!” to Lawrence’s more mundane and formulaic use of verse in other poems like “Kissing and Horrid Strife” (see Further Reading). While “Whales Weep Not!” revels in animalistic fluidity, transformation, and freedom—as reflected in its carefree form—other poems fixate on the modern lifestyle Lawrence hates: a senseless (literally), reason-dominated existence. They are a useful photo negative to understand the “positive” image in “Whales Weep Not!”.

Repetition (Anaphora/Refrain, Alliteration)

Lawrence mimics and reinforces his poem's metrical rocking with repetitive phrases and sounds. Easiest to recognize is his use of anaphora, or the repetition of a certain word or phrase; the poem is littered with examples ("on and on," Line 4; "there they blow, there they blow," Line 6; "And they rock, and they rock," Line 8; "And through [...], and in [...], and roll [...]," Lines 10-2; "she is the gay, delighted porpoise [...], she is the female tunny-fish," Lines 43-4). Lawrence also uses alliteration, or words which start with the same letter(s), to similar effect (e.g. "wild white," Line 6; "tropics tremble," Line 11; "wonder of whales," Line 22).

These many forms of repetition also lend a hint of liturgical quality to the poem. Religious rituals like prayers and masses often involve the stock repetition of certain mantras and phrases. Lawrence is certainly interested in inviting this association in the middle portion of the poem, where angels suspended in the sea sanctify the sexual union of the whales. These religious undertones imbue the poem with a sense of timelessness and sacrality.

Color

As a poet interested in gut-punch sensory images, D. H. Lawrence frequently leverages colors (and their psychological undertones) in his works. He is noted for being primarily interested in three colors—green, black, and red—which makes "Whales Weep Not!" an interesting outlier for its focus on blue. As a cool color, blue is a fitting choice for the ocean, which the poet admits in the first stanza is characterized by its coldness. But Lawrence also describes the undersea "bed" of the whales as "deep" blue (Line 14), and there may be invoking the color's more subliminal, chthonic elements. The other poem in the collection which spotlights blue, "[Bavarian Gentrions](#)," aligns the color closely with darkness and infernality, as the Underworld deities Pluto and Persephone are dimly illuminated in the deepest, black-like blue. By extension, the sea in "Whales Weep Not!" could be understood not only as a vision of heaven, but also of the Underworld—it is both "the waters of / the beginning and the end" (Lines 32-3).

The other color featured in "Whales Weep Not!" is red. Predictably, red and its variants tend to stand for passion in Lawrence's poetry, particularly the brand of ruthless bestial passion Lawrence detects (and idolizes) in animals. He opens the poem with a slice of red cutting the blueness of the sea; the contrast of the colors emphasizes his superlatives in Line 2. Against a dull, cold, blue backdrop, the hot redness of the color becomes even more pronounced. Here red is tied to blood, recognized in many cultures as the essence of life and vitality.

Further Reading & Resources

Related Poems

[The Elephant Is Slow To Mate](#) by D. H. Lawrence (1929)

A useful comparandum for “Whales Weep Not!”, “The Elephant Is Slow To Mate” deals with similar themes. Lawrence’s elephants, like his whales, are large and mysterious mammals. Again, Lawrence concentrates on their sexual passion, especially as powered by their “massive blood” (Line 22). But unlike the spry and seemingly ageless whales of “Whales Weep Not!”, Lawrence’s elephants are tempered and slowed by their age (and, by extension, their wisdom).

[Tortoise Gallantry](#) by D. H. Lawrence (1921)

“Tortoise Gallantry” is another Lawrence poem focused on sexual relations between animals. Unlike in his mammal poems, the poet distances the male tortoise as other and strange. Where the whales are driven on by their hot-blooded passion, the “reptilian” tortoise seems strangely emotionless, driven to reproduce by nothing more than “grim necessity.”

[Kissing and Horrid Strife](#) by D. H. Lawrence (1932)

In “Kissing and Horrid Strife,” another entry in the *Last Poems*, Lawrence explicitly contrasts “the evil world-soul of today” with the blissful “tiny wavelets of the sea.” This poem solidifies Lawrence’s image of the natural opposition between civilization and the primordial, sensual ocean.

Further Literary Resources

“Lawrence’s poetry” by Helen Sword in [The Cambridge Companion to D. H. Lawrence](#) (2006)

Poet, scholar, and teacher Helen Sword provides a useful primer on D. H. Lawrence’s poetry, which is often overlooked in favor of his novels. She covers Lawrence’s major literary influences and details the evolution of his poetry from its early, formal “Georgian” phase to the later, more Modernist works like “Whales Weep Not!”.

[“Lawrence As Poet”](#) by Hebe Bair (1973)

Like Sword, Hebe Bair focuses on rehabilitating Lawrence’s poetry, which she describes as long being treated like “a critical stepchild, a closet baby brought out with apologies only because of its obvious kinship with Lawrence’s other work.” Bair partially attributes this lack of academic interest to the poems’ spotty publication history, but summarizes and encourages scholarly reconsideration of Lawrence as a fully mature poet with a clear literary vision and voice.

[“The Colour Ambience in Lawrence’s Early and Later Poetry”](#) by Chaman Nahal (1975)

While Sword and Bair offer broadscale, holistic views of Lawrence’s poetry, Chaman Nahal’s “Color Ambience” is a good example of a more focused line of study. He explores Lawrence’s use of color symbolism and imagery in *Look! We Have Come Through!* and—more importantly for this guide—his *Last Poems*, including “Whales Weep Not!”.

Listen to Poem

[D. H. Lawrence – Whales Weep Not! \(read by Dylan Thomas\)](#)

The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas (1914-1953)—another controversial and difficult to categorize Modernist and author of the famous poem “Do not go gentle into that good night”—reads D. H. Lawrence’s “Whales Weep Not!”.

[“Whales Weep Not! \(Overture\)” – Whales Alive](#)

Star Trek actor Leonard Nimoy reads “Whales Weep Not!” on the opening track for Paul Winter and Paul Halley’s *Whales Alive*, a 1987 album which combines jazz music, poetry, and humpback whale song. The mid-20th century saw a revival of interest in whales, due in no small part to the tireless efforts of cetologist Roger Payne in the 1960s. Payne used recordings of the eerily beautiful “songs” of humpbacks to revitalize marine conservation efforts, sparking the immensely popular and successful “Save the Whales” movement.

“Whales Weep Not!” also has special relevance for the Star Trek franchise. The first two lines of the poem are quoted by Captain Kirk in the film *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986), which sees the crew of the Enterprise travel back in time to save humpback whales from extinction.

