

# SEA FEVER

## BY JOHN MASEFIELD



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I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,  
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by,  
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,  
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.

I must go down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide  
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;  
And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,  
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying.

I must go down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,  
To the gull's way and the whale's way, where the wind's like a whetted knife;  
And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover,  
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over.



# VOCABULARY

- **denied – overlooked**
- **flung – thrown**
- **spume – foam**
- **vagrant- wandering**
- **whetted- sharpened**
- **merry yarn – happy story**
- **rover – wanderer**





## SUBJECT MATTER

In this poem, Masefield expresses an overwhelming urge “to go down to the seas again.” In the first stanza, he asks for “a tall ship,” “a star” to guide him and the wind. In the second stanza, he emphasises the fact that he cannot deny this call.

## SUBJECT MATTER (cont.)

Meanwhile, in the third stanza, he compares the life of a seafarer to that of a gypsy. He then wishes for a “fellow rover” to narrate him a “merry yarn” (a humorous story) so that he can have a good night’s sleep.



## **SUBJECT MATTER (cont.)**

**It is worth noting that the last line is symbolic and could be referring to death and the afterlife. In fact, one may interpret the poem as a metaphor of the journey of life and the challenges life poses.**

# THEME

- the poet's call of the sea. This can be seen in the refrain "I must go down to the seas again" and in the title itself. The poet's urge for the sea is being compared to a fever.
- One can also discern the theme of longing for freedom and an adventurous life. This could be taken literally as the sea gives a sense of freedom as well as metaphorically where the persona yearns for an unrestricted and carefree life.

## MOOD / TONE

- **The tone is light, positive and quite happy. The persona feels a strong sense of freedom simply by talking about the sea. This sense of positivity is reinforced in the last line when he refers to death as “the long trick.”**



## STRUCTURE

- The poem is made up of three quatrains. The line length is varied and the lines range from 14-17 syllables. This seems to follow the movement of a tall ship in rough waters.

# DICTION

- The choice of words is very much related to the theme and subject matter of the poem. In fact, we find several words related to the sea such as 'seas', 'ship', 'steer', 'wheel', 'wind', 'sail', 'tide', 'spume' and 'seagulls'.



## DICTION (cont.)

- There are also some words related to wanderers such as ‘vagrant’, ‘gypsy’ and ‘fellow-rover’.



## DICTION (CONT.)

- **The use of –ing verbs like ‘shaking’, ‘breaking’, ‘running’, ‘crying’, ‘laughing’ and ‘flying’ give a sense of urgency to the poem. The persona does not want to wait any more; he has to answer the call of the sea sooner rather than later.**



## IMAGERY

- The poem is quite rich in figures of speech and these images portray a clearer image of the sea to the reader and so help us to empathise more with the persona.
- ‘lonely sea’ – personification. The sea is being compared to a lonely person and the persona wants to ease the loneliness felt by the sea by answering to its call.

## IMAGERY (cont.)

- “the wheel’s kick” – personification as if the ship’s steering wheel is spinning out of control and taking a life of its own. It also suggests the ship sailing through stormy seas.
- “the call of the running tide” – metaphor/personification –it seems as if the tide is luring the persona to it.

## IMAGERY

- “to the vagrant gypsy life” – metaphor where the speaker is comparing life on the ocean to that of a wandering gypsy.
- “the wind is like a whetted knife” – simile in which the wind is being compared to a sharp knife which conveys an image of the wind being so cold that it hurts your skin.
- “when the long trick’s over” – metaphor where the speaker is referring to death. Life is being euphemistically compared to a trick.

# SOUND

- “a tall ship and a star to steer her by”
- “and the wheel’s kick and the wind’s song and the white sail’s shaking”
- “grey dawn breaking”

Here, we can find a predominance of harsh sounds which reflect the poet’s strong urge to obey the call of the sea and his urgency to do it as quickly as possible.



## **SOUND** (cont.)

- “to the gull’s way and the whale’s way where the wind like a whetted knife” – the alliteration of ‘w’ mimics the sound of the wind and waves and gives the feeling of the sense of freedom these creatures have.
- The predominance of harsh sounds throughout the whole poem echoes the deafening sound of the wind and waves crashing against the ships and rocks.

## RHYME

- The poem is made up of rhyming couplets throughout and the rhyme scheme is AABB CCDD EEFF. Despite the varied metre and line length, the rhyme scheme is uniform as if the persona wants to show us that his mind is clear about what he wants.

# RHYTHM

- The rhythm is varied and this, along with the frequent use of punctuation give 'Sea fever' a natural rhythm that coincides with the movement of the sea. It could also reflect the movement of a tall ship through high seas and strong winds. 'Sea fever' may be classified as a sea chantey due its natural rhythm that gives it a song-like quality.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Poetry Worksheet

### **Sea Fever by John Masefield**



#### A. Read to understand

1. Write a summary of the poem.

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2. What must the poet do in the poem "Sea Fever"? And, why?

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_

3. What does the poet need to do this?

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4. How does the poet describes the sea?

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5. How is the life of a sailor on the sea? Give evidence from the poem.

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6. Why is the poem called "Sea Fever"?

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7. Do you think the poet enjoys life on land?

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### Discuss

1. How many different seas can you name?

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2. What makes the sea and the sky seem lonely?

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3. What is the mood of this poem? Share your thoughts with your class.

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**B. Read to appreciate**

Read the poem again and see how the poet ends every line in the poem. Write down the rhyming words from the poem.

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Write the rhyming scheme for the poem “Sea Fever”.

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Are there any figures of speech in this poem? Give examples.

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