

The Sea View, by Charlotte Smith

The Spenserian sonnet, *The Sea View*, by Charlotte Smith creates a stark contrast between how the shepherd views the sea as a natural beauty and how he views the sea overtaken by the violent behaviors of men. Smith uses blazon to describe physical features of the sea, but these features were either positive or negative depending on whether you were looking these features before or after the volta. The first 8 lines of this sonnet capture the true beauty of the sea by describing it in an angelic and serene tone. Smith uses descriptive words such as soft, bright, celestial, purple radiance, magnificent, tranquil, joy, and serene to illustrate to the reader the perfection of the natural (undisturbed) state of the sea. We also see this same pattern of peacefulness through Smith's use of rhyme scheme in the first 8 lines. The pattern of *ababbcd* creates an even flowing description of the sea and helps to create the harmonious sea view.

The volta occurs at line 9, and from that point Smith completely transforms the adjectives used in her blazon and the overall tone in the following 6 lines. Following the volta, the reader is exposed to a negative blazon of the sea with descriptions such as dark, plague spots, demon, death, war freighted, fierce, red, destructive, dead, dying, pollute, and blood. In comparison to the first 8 lines of the sonnet, these descriptions are the extreme opposite of those presented in that section. In doing this Smith creates a strong sense of anger and resentment toward the men who overtake and disturb the natural beauty of the sea. We feel the impact that these men have on the poor shepherd who enjoys the sea view without the presence of violent men. The rhyme scheme for this section of the sonnet is also very sporadic and irregular. With a rhyme scheme of *dcddce* the poem does not allow for a smooth read, and often causes the reader to stop and reflect on the line just read.

I feel that Smith's use of diction and rhyme scheme accurately portrayed the shepherd's distress toward the men who have taken over God's beautiful and peaceful creation and have filled it with their man-made violence and hatred. This extreme comparison, broken up at the volta, helps to narrow the reader into the heart-felt emotions of being angry of no longer being able to view the sea with such tranquility and peace and leaves the reader also feeling resentment toward the men for overtaking the beauty that the sea offers.

In her sonnet entitled "The Sea View," Charlotte Smith describes a shepherd's reaction to his view of a natural paradise that appears to be out of reach of the dirty and corrupting touch of human society. The eloquence with which she illustrates the virgin environment through his eyes using precise language and imagery is both perceptive and poetic, with descriptions that both invigorate our imaginations and make us yearn for the quietude and tranquility that the shepherd experiences while reclining on the soft turf.

However, even though the poem begins as a salutation to the awesome power and elegance of the natural world, Smith eventually turns to a darker and more pessimistic theme, introducing the “plague-spots” of human conflict and violence and the stains that they leave behind. She describes the warships and the dying victims as “fierce and red” pollution that utterly ruin the beautiful imagery of the sea. The poem is obviously a commentary on human society’s undeniable tendency to intrude into and destroy any haven that remains sheltered from human corruption, despite whether that intrusion’s intentions are harmful or benign. Human beings, Smith suggests, are blundering oafs, shattering every fragile ecosystem and environment with which they come into contact.

War has always been a blight upon the history of Mankind, causing and guaranteeing misery and hardship around every corner of our bloody existence. Charlotte Smith lived and wrote during an age of constant conflict and war, when nations were fighting for independence on one side and the retention of imperial colonies on the other. This poem is simply her attempt to uncover the brutalities and stains of conflict, and to show her disdain for mankind’s bloody additions to Heaven’s masterpiece.