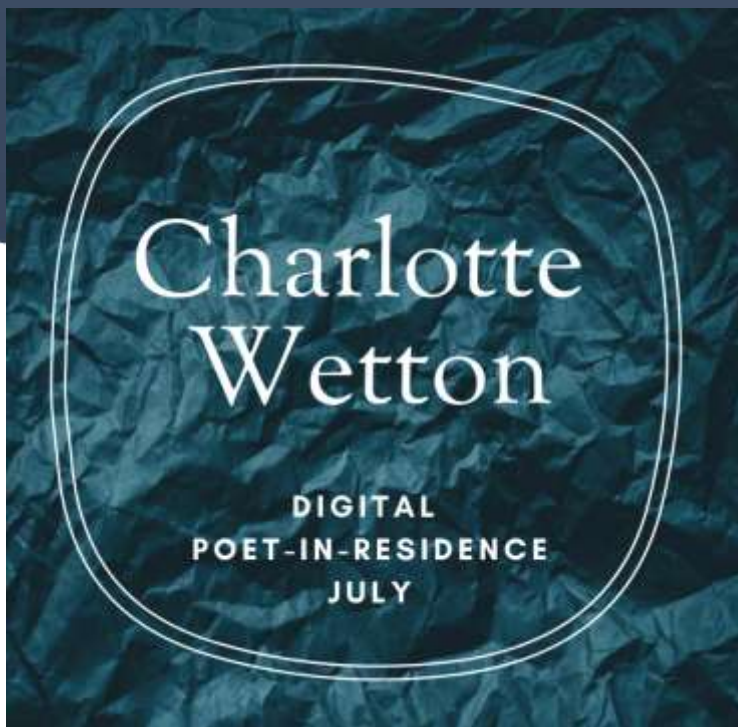


Charlotte Wetton.
“The Sirens” (2001)
Close reading
(Seminar 3)



The Sirens

by Charlotte Wetton

Spring 2001

(<https://poetrysociety.org.uk/poems/the-sirens/>)

Was it just sea cows peacefully suckling?

When scurvy set in they carried on,
until even the captain lay below,
his gums red and swollen
in his dry face.

And then the wind died.
Long, long days of the sail sagging.
Thin and weak they sprawled on the deck
dreaming of oranges, limes and red peppers,
only small waves, breaking softly against the bows,
white as a hand
that grips
that grips the hull...

A thump on the wooden prow, once, twice –
and then the singing begins.

They had no Circe, no bees wax.
If they were deaf and blind they might stand a chance.

The tiller creaked, the ship lurched,
coming, coming
towards the rocks.
Their voices rise
her fin slaps the stone, faster and faster,
one spreads her arms
chests heave the crescendo –
There is the first awful boom,
and the creaking, splintering of tarred planks,
and the pouring rush of water.
A sailor screamed, high as a woman
some cursed, and scrabbled for muskets, for clubs,
one shouted a prayer to the Virgin.

Later, in engravings
they showed the men brave and strong and handsome.
And the women's silky hair soft billows against the dusky sky,

scallop shells for modesty.
That was later.

Now the men reeled against the bucking floor,
dizzy and hungry, their ears full of song,
full of song, full of song.
Great gashes in the curved planks
broken like a rib-cage.

Now smooth arms hauled themselves up
hair plastered back
streaming salt down their breasts,
the flick and thrust of those muscular tails, terrifying.
Already dying of salt-pork
the men were weak in those wet arms,
oxygenless kisses
before the freezing plunge of water.
They bubbled and turned blue,
gouts of water,
no blood – only cold fingers at their lips.
And still the chanting like sonar calls of mammals,
notes they'd never heard before
not meant for mortals.
Still they struggled,
sluggish under water,
a cracked splinter, two foot long, scratched deep
a scream of pain, of rage,
and her hands were round his throat
her tail between his legs.

Embracing as the fathoms pass
– unheavenly choir
seducing them to chilly boudoirs
in ladylike blue-green,
and darker places,
not so ladylike.
This is no cold-blooded androgyny, no sexless fish.
The sea-bed approaches,
A nuptial, welcoming,
lungs bursting,
waves sweep nausea
and peels of song,
face on face, eyes clouding with beauty, and death.
Down here there is no sun to flash against silver scales

nor sails for shrouds,
only the wet enfold of the sea, of the mermaids, no longer maids.

Step 1: First Reading & Annotation

- Read “*The Sirens*” aloud (use <https://luvvoice.com/> to help you).
- Translate the words into Ukrainian, locate them in the text and explain specificity of their usage:

Word / Phrase	Definition	Ukrainian Translation
scurvy		
gums		
prow		
tiller		
lurch		
creak / creaking		
crescendo		
an engraving		
a billow		
planks		
hull		
gashes		
fathoms		
boudoir		
nuptial		
enfold		
mortals		

Answer the following questions:

- a) What surprises you in this version of the myth?
- b) How does the poem describe the sailors’ condition before they meet the Sirens?
- c) What kind of atmosphere does the poet create at the beginning of the poem?
- d) What event changes the sailors’ situation and introduces danger?
- e) How does the poet describe the Sirens’ singing? What images or sounds stand out?
- f) What happens to the sailors once they hear the Sirens’ song?
- g) How are the Sirens portrayed physically? How is this similar or different from traditional myths?
- h) What emotions or sensations dominate the middle part of the poem (fear, beauty, hunger, fascination)?
- i) How does the tone change between the description of the sea, the attack, and the ending?

- j) What do you think the final lines (“no longer maids”) suggest about the poem’s message or reinterpretation of the myth?

Step 2: Analyzing the Passage

Aspect	Focus	Prompts
1. Diction & Imagery	Identify key adjectives and sensory details.	What kind of atmosphere do these words create? What colors, textures, or sounds dominate?
2. Narrative Voice & Tone	Who speaks? What is the emotional distance?	Is the narrator detached or involved? What tone—fearful, ironic, compassionate—do you hear?
3. Sound & Rhythm	Note repetition, rhythm, or musical patterns.	How does the poem’s sound echo the idea of the Sirens’ song?
4. Symbolism & Theme	Identify main symbols and interpret them.	How are sea, song, and death connected? What might the Sirens represent here?

Do these devices romanticize or demystify the Sirens?

How does Wetton’s Siren differ from Homer’s seductive singers?

Step 3: Constructing an Argument

Individual writing task:

Write a short analytical paragraph (approx. 100–120 words) responding to: “How does Charlotte Wetton use language to reinterpret the myth of the Sirens in a modern, human way?”

Prompts for support:

- What emotions dominate?
- Which images or sounds suggest the Sirens are both beautiful and deadly?
- How does the poem challenge gender or mythic expectations?

Possible sentence starters:

- *The poet’s diction creates a sense of...*
- *Through repetition of the word “song,” the poem suggests...*
- *The tone shifts from... to... revealing...*

Step 4. Comparative Reflection & Wrap-up

- How does a modern poem like Wetton's reinterpret myth compared to ancient texts?
- What do "the Sirens" symbolize today — temptation, death, creativity, female power?

Step 5. Sirens as depicted in modern female poetry

Table 1

	Character/ Detail	Characteristics in the myth	as portrayed in M.Atwood's poem		as portrayed in Ch.Wetton's poem	
			feature	quotation	feature	quotation
1	Sirens: - portrayal - lineage - behaviour - destiny/death					
2	Sailors: - behaviour - relations/encounter with the sirens - destiny					
3	Sirens' dwelling place:					
4	Siren song and its influence on the sailors					

Table 2

<i>Aspect of analysis</i>	<i>In M.Atwood's poem</i>	<i>In Ch.Wetton's poem</i>
<i>Diction:</i>		
<i>Details of observation:</i>		
<i>Structure:</i>		
<i>Narrative Voice:</i>		
<i>Tone:</i>		
<i>Rhetorical and Literary Devices:</i>		