

The Purse-Seine¹

Robinson Jeffers

Our sardine fishermen work at night in the dark of the moon; daylight or moonlight
They could not tell where to spread the net, unable to see the phosphorescence of the shoals of fish.
They work northward from Monterey, coasting Santa Cruz; off New Year's Point or off Pigeon Point
The look-out man will see some lakes of milk-color light on the sea's night-purple; he points, and the helmsman
5 Turns the dark prow, the motorboat circles the gleaming shoal and drifts out her seine-net. They close the circle
And purse the bottom of the net, then with great labor haul it in.

I cannot tell you
How beautiful the scene is, and a little terrible, then, when the crowded fish
Know they are caught, and wildly beat from one wall to the other of their closing destiny the phosphorescent
10 Water to a pool of flame, each beautiful slender body sheeted with flame, like a live rocket
A comet's tail wake of clear yellow flame; while outside the narrowing
Floats and cordage of the net great sea-lions come up to watch, sighing in the dark; the vast walls of night
Stand erect to the stars.

Lately I was looking from a night mountain-top
15 On a wide city, the colored splendor, galaxies of light: how could I help but recall the seine-net
Gathering the luminous fish? I cannot tell you how beautiful the city appeared, and a little terrible.
I thought, We have geared the machines and locked all together into interdependence; we have built the great
cities; now
There is no escape. We have gathered vast populations incapable of free survival, insulated
From the strong earth, each person in himself helpless, on all dependent. The circle is closed, and the net
20 Is being hauled in. They hardly feel the cords drawing, yet they shine already. The inevitable mass-disasters
Will not come in our time nor in our children's, but we and our children
Must watch the net draw narrower, government take all powers—or revolution, and the new government
Take more than all, add to kept bodies kept souls—or anarchy, the mass-disasters.

These things are Progress;
25 Do you marvel our verse is troubled or frowning, while it keeps its reason? Or it lets go, lets the mood flow
In the manner of the recent young men² into mere hysteria, splintered gleams, crackled laughter. But they are
quite wrong.
There is no reason for amazement: surely one always knew that cultures decay, and life's end is death.

Questions for Discussion

What is the tone of the poem? Discuss the aspects of the poem that help establish this tone: structure, diction, style, imagery, etc.

What is the primary theme of the poem? Discuss the aspects of the poem that help convey this theme: imagery, metaphor, direct commentary, allusion, etc.

What is unusual about the “beauty” of the fish and of the city? What literary devices does the phrase “a little terrible” (lines 8 and 16) contain?

In what ways are the people of our society like sardines? In what ways are they different? Given this comparison, what is ironic about the activity of sardine fishing? What is ironic about our society's “Progress”? What is the nature of the “purse-seine” in which we are caught?

Discuss the predictions the speaker makes about our society in lines 20-23. What do you think the speaker's comment that “they shine already” (line 20) refers to?

Interpret the question the speaker asks in line 25. What is the young men's “reason for amazement,” and why are they wrong to be amazed? What literary devices does the phrase “mere hysteria” (line 26) contain?

¹ **seine:** a kind of net used in fishing

² **the recent young men:** perhaps a reference to jazz musicians or literature's “Lost Generation”