

The Chambered Nautilus

Oliver Wendell Holmes

This is the ship of pearl, which, poets feign,¹
Sails the unshadowed main,—
The venturous bark that flings
On the sweet summer wind its purpled wings
5 In gulfs enchanted, where the Siren² sings,
And coral reefs lie bare,
Where the cold sea-maids rise to sun their streaming hair.

Its webs of living gauze no more unfurl;
Wrecked is the ship of pearl!
10 And every chambered cell,
Where its dim dreaming life was wont to dwell,
As the frail tenant shaped his growing shell,
Before thee lies revealed,—
Its irised ceiling rent,³ its sunless crypt unsealed! **A**

15 Year after year beheld the silent toil
That spread his lustrous coil;
Still, as the spiral grew,
He left the past year's dwelling for the new,
Stole with soft step its shining archway through,
20 Built up its idle door,
Stretched in his last-found home, and knew the old no more.

Thanks for the heavenly message brought by thee,
Child of the wandering sea,
Cast from her lap, forlorn!
25 From thy dead lips a clearer note is born

A METER

Although the basic meter of this poem is **iambic**, what kind of **foot** is substituted for the iamb at the beginning of many of the lines? How does this variation affect the feel of these lines?

1. **feign**: imagine.

2. **Siren**: a partly human female creature in Greek mythology that lured sailors to destruction with sweet, magical songs.

3. **its irised ceiling rent**: its rainbow-colored ceiling ripped apart.



ANALYZE VISUALS

As the nautilus grows, it adds a new chamber to its spiral shell, abandoning the old chamber for the new one. What might this process of growth suggest about the role of change in life?

Than ever Triton blew from wreathèd horn!⁴
While on mine ear it rings,
Through the deep caves of thought I hear a voice that sings:—

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
30 As the swift seasons roll!
Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou at length art free,
35 Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea! **B**

B MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 29–35. What inference can you make about what it might mean for the soul to escape its shell?

4. **Triton . . . wreathèd horn:** Triton, a sea god in Greek mythology, is usually pictured blowing a wreathed, or coiled, conch-shell horn.