

# The Most Beautiful Passage on Sorrow in Literature

Several years ago, I was reading one of those lists ranking the 100 greatest novels ever written. It was TIME magazine's list, if I recall correctly.

Many of the books I had read, some of them I had not, but nearly all of them I had at least heard of. One of the books I had not heard of was [\*Three Men in a Boat \(To Say Nothing of the Dog\)\*](#), a novel written by English humorist Jerome Jerome (not a pseudonym, believe it or not) that was published in 1889.

It involves three friends who take a voyage down the Thames River, enjoying nature, good company and life's oddities along the way. That plot sounded interesting enough to me, so I decided to give it a try.

To my delight, I slipped into *Three Men in a Boat* like a warm bath. The story-telling was reminiscent of [Patrick MacManus, whose books](#) I used to take on hunting trips as a youngster. (My hunch is that MacManus was influenced by Jerome's humor and style.) Jerome's sense of irony and the absurdity of human beings was profound. He was a nineteenth century version of Larry David (minus the adult humor).

As funny as the book is, however, the parts of the book that really stand out are those in which Jerome flips the script. A handful of times in the book, the author pivots from humor to explore other parts of the human experience.

One part involves the unexpected discovery of a poor, young mother who had thrown herself into the river. It is a tragic scene full of poetry, beauty, and wisdom. (Just months before Jerome wrote *Three Men in a Boat*, he took a boating trip on the Thames with his new bride. My theory is that the couple

actually encountered a scene like this in their travels.)

But one part of the book I found especially stirring. It occurs when the narrator steps out for a breath of cool air on a beautiful evening. After a day of travel, jokes, and laughter, the restless narrator feels something powerful as he stands alone before the glory of Creation.

*It was a glorious night. The moon had sunk, and left the quiet earth alone with the stars. It seemed as if, in the silence and the hush, while we her children slept, they were talking with her, their sister – conversing of mighty mysteries in voices too vast and deep for childish human ears to catch the sound.*

*They awe us, these strange stars, so cold, so clear. We are as children whose small feet have strayed into some dim-lit temple of the god they have been taught to worship but know not; and, standing where the echoing dome spans the long vista of the shadowy light, glance up, half hoping, half afraid to see some awful vision hovering there.*

*And yet it seems so full of comfort and of strength, the night. In its great presence, our small sorrows creep away, ashamed. The day has been so full of fret and care, and our hearts have been so full of evil and of bitter thoughts, and the world has seemed so hard and wrong to us. Then Night, like some great loving mother, gently lays her hand upon our fevered head, and turns our little tear-stained faces up to hers, and smiles; and, though she does not speak, we know what she would say, and lay our hot flushed cheek against her bosom, and the pain is gone.*

*Sometimes, our pain is very deep and real, and we stand before her very silent, because there is no language for our pain, only a moan. Night's heart is full of pity for us: she cannot ease our aching; she takes our hand in hers, and the little world grows very small and very far away beneath us,*

*and, borne on her dark wings, we pass for a moment into a mightier Presence than her own, and in the wondrous light of that great Presence, all human life lies like a book before us, and we know that Pain and Sorrow are but the angels of God.*

*Only those who have worn the crown of suffering can look upon that wondrous light; and they, when they return, may not speak of it, or tell the mystery they know.*

The brief tale that follows these lines is almost as beautiful as the passage above. It involves a knight who loses his comrades and becomes lost in a dark forest. When he later emerges, his face glows with a wondrous light, and he professes thanks to that which had led him astray into that forest called Sorrow.

I still haven't figured out exactly what the parable means. But I think I'm starting to.