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The Sea-Change

Sylvia Townsend Warner

The Sea-Change

Opera Libretto in Six Scenes for Paul Nordoff.
(with love)

Characters:

SHELLEY
MARY SHELLEY
EDWARD WILLIAMS
JANE WILLIAMS
CLAIRE CLAIRMONT – half-sister to Mary
TRELAWNEY¹

CHORUS OF MEN'S VOICES, AND THREE SOLO MALE VOICES,
OFF-STAGE.

The action takes place in the year 1822, at the Villa Magni on the Bay of Spezia. The scene is a large room on the upper floor, with a door L. and five french windows in the back wall. These windows have slatted shutters, opening outward on to a flat roof, which extends the whole length of the five windows, and has a low balcony. Beyond is the sea. The room has a faded decoration of frescoed garlands on the walls, which are stained with damp. The furniture is scanty, 18th cent. in date; it has been handsome and now is shabby. In the opening scene the room must appear disused.

The producer should note that all the characters are young. TRELAWNY, the eldest among them, is thirty.

JANE	Soprano)	
)	
MARY	Mezzo-soprano)	or vice versa

CLAIRE	Contralto
EDWARD	Bass
SHELLEY	Tenor
TRELAWNY	Baritone

SHELLEY stands in the window when he first enters after his vision of Allegra.

The Sea-Change

[Act 1]² Scene i.

The time is spring and summer of the year 1822. The scene is the sala on the first floor of Casa Magni, at Lerici. Door on L. five french windows on the back wall. These are now closed with slatted shutters. The walls have a faded decoration of frescoed garlands. The furniture is scanty, a makeshift of shabby 18th cent. magnificence, and rough wooden stools. The ceiling is cracked and stained with damp, the whole room looks disused and out of condition.

Enter MARY, CLAIRE, and TRELAWNY, in travelling dress. MARY and TRELAWNY are preoccupied with some interior anxiety, which they conceal from CLAIRE.

TRELAWNY, *with a gesture of displaying the room.*

Here, is your sala, Mary. How does it please you?

MARY

If I were a lady in a poem, it would do well.

Penelope might sit here, weaving and grieving,

Or Hero trim her lamp for a drowned Leander.

But I am a poet's wife.

CLAIRE

Then it should please you;

For this is the very room for a poet,

Full of stains and shadows

With lyres and laurels on the walls.

Oh, it is certainly the room for Shelley!

TRELAWNY

But that's not all. Laurels and shadows are not all.

Laurels and shadows are everywhere in Italy;

But when I open this window, everything changes:

The house turns to a ship, we are at sea,

We suffer a sea-change. (*Goes towards window.*)

MARY

Not yet, Trelawny. Do not open the window.

No, Trelawny! Do not let in the daylight yet!

CLAIRE

My eyes are tired with the journey!

Let us wait till Shelley and the others come.

We will be changed together. Let the sea wait!

MARY

Trelawny wants us to be turned to coral.

CLAIRE

Trelawny wants to set the sea-nymphs tolling.

(Singing)

Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell,

Hark, now I hear it! Sing, Trelawny!³

TRELAWNY Ding dong bell! Ding dong bell!
MARY Listen!
CLAIRE, TRELAWNY Hark, now I hear it! Ding dong, ding dong.
MARY Listen! *(They are silent.)*
TRELAWNY Only the sea.
CLAIRE Only the sea.
MARY I thought... No, I thought nothing. My nerves trouble me.
I am tired with travelling.
CLAIRE Why did we travel here so fast, so suddenly[?]
MARY It was Shelley's wish. You know how impetuous he is.
CLAIRE It seemed to me that we were running away.
And that I had left something behind.
Was it a letter, telling me of my child?
My sweet lost child. *(Turning to TRELAWNY.)*
You have not seen my Allegra.
Byron sent her to be brought up among nuns –
A mother were better.

(TRELAWNY approaches her with a look of intense compassion, then turns away.)

MARY What shall we do to make this room less awkward
Before the others arrive?

(She begins to move chairs about. CLAIRE and TRELAWNY help her. Enter, in travelling dress, SHELLEY, EDWARD and JANE WILLIAMS. JANE glances enquiringly at MARY. MARY shakes her head.)

CLAIRE *(Wildly)* What is your secret? What is it you know
And do not tell me? O Shelley, dearest Shelley,
You are a poet but compassionate.
You have lost children. Is my child dead?

(He looks at her in silence. She leans on a chair, weeping.)

MARY, JANE Across the threshold of the spring.
TRELAWNY, EDWARD Brief as the shadow of a linnet's wing,
TRELAWNY A shadow falls.
JANE Light as a blossom shaken loose,
MARY And wept by April dews,
A child is dead.

CLAIRE, to SHELLEY Why did you bring me to this desolate place
To tell me I am desolate?

(SHELLEY leads her to the centre window, which he opens. It gives on to a flat roof, overlooking the sea. The afterglow of the sunset fills the room.)

SHELLEY Look out! Look round us! In what quietude
The mountains stand, and gaze upon the sea!
Cloaked in their woods, do they not seem like travellers,
Spell-bound, lost in arrival?
They hear the assenting murmur of the wave,
The salt sweet air fingers their stoic brows;
Here is their journey's end, here is the sea,
Hither their brooks, their cataracts, their rivers,
Have run, like children, before them.
Weep, weep, dear Claire, weep on this solemn strand!
Weep, while the yearning wave clings to the rock,
Sighing, and falls back, sighing. Weep, while the light
Mutely relinquishes the mountain.
Here, in this innocent desolation, unlearn
Hate and remorse and sophistries of comfort,
And as the mountains gaze upon the sea
Gaze on death's patient face till it grows beautiful.

(Close.)

Scene ii

Morning. Brilliant light. The centre window is open, JANE sits by it with her guitar, trying to pick up the tune sung by the fishermen on the strand.

CHORUS *off* Nicholas sailed to Jerusalem
(Pray for us, Nicholas!)
When the storm came down an angel took the helm.
Sail with us today, O good Saint Nicholas!

JANE, *sotto voce* Sail with us today, O good Saint Nicholas!

(Enter EDWARD. While chorus continues he goes affectionately to JANE.)

EDWARD My morning love! You sit there like a flower.

JANE What are they doing, the fishermen down there[?]

EDWARD They rig the boat,
And make it ready for sea.

JANE And sing of storms, do they not?

CHORUS, *rising* Sail with us today, O good Saint Nicholas!

EDWARD If I were Nicholas, I would go with them.
One would quit heaven to sail
On such a sea, under so blue a sky.
Look, how the ripples fold, one into another,
Like feathers on the breast of a dove.
So blue, so fair, so folded, our summer lies before us,
O my love

What happiness!

JANE When the storm came down... Not all are happy.
Claire, sorrowing for her child, has gone away,
To visit graves and lawyers.
Shelley grieves for Claire;
And Mary – grieves for Mary.

EDWARD Why does she grieve?

JANE Shelley loves her no more.
Why must all poets be inconsistent in love?

EDWARD Where is the rainbow's wandering foot?
(JANE looks at him, puzzled.)

EDWARD Have you never run,
To find the rainbow's foot? Now, it is in the meadow,
Now in the orchard. Now, it has crossed the brook

And is planted on the hillside. Track it as you will
It is always some other-where.
And still the rainbow arches overhead.
That is how Shelley loves, being a poet.

JANE Poor Mary!

EDWARD And now the rainbow's foot is on the sea.

Enter SHELLEY Why do they sing no more? Have they set sail?
I wanted to go with them; for while I sat
Looking in my empty heart for rhymes and jingles
I heard their song, rolling suddenly as Acheron
And the midge counterpoint of Jane's guitar, till
I thought
These fishermen learn their music from their lives,
Savage, suppliant, and inexorable.
Why should I wait for my smart new pleasure-boat?
I will go with them
Till I discover the true note of the sea.

(He goes to the edge of the platform and looks down.)

There is the boat,
Abandoned, as though the waves had cast her up.
And the fishermen are standing by her, idle.

VOICES, *below* Here it comes, here it comes!

Look, to the northward. Make the boat fast!

SHELLEY What do you see?

VOICE, *below* A storm, out over the bay.

That little darkness to the northward. A storm.

JANE, *rising* A storm? A storm, out of this blue sky?

VOICES, *below* A storm, a storm, travelling this way!

(SHELLEY, EDWARD, JANE, stand on the platform looking out to sea. The lighting changes to a leaden grey.)

JANE Faster than a dream it travels hither.
Our little world darkens and dwindles as the clouds
gather.

EDWARD The wind has whirled the blue out of the sky.
The sea is shaken with a cold fever.
Arrowy sleet and leaping spray struggle together.
The rooks answer with an iron cry.

SHELLEY Out of the abyss the storm boils up and over.
 Waves toss and winds blow me hither and thither.
 Like music from the stricken lyre I fly.

*(They move out of sight along the platform. The room is now almost dark.
Enter MARY.)*

MARY Shelley! Shelley! Where are you. Merciless God,
 Where is he? Oh, he is merciless as you.
 There is no mercy in God, no mercy in Shelley,
 Why should I cry to either when neither hears me?
 I will sit here like a patient wife and listen to the wind.

(She sits down. She remembers:)⁴

SHELLEY'S voice off-stage Listen, listen, Mary mine,
 To the whisper of the Apennine...

MARY But that was four years ago, when he loved me.

SHELLEY'S voice O Mary dear, that thou wert here,
 With thy brown eyes, bright and clear,
 And thy sweet voice like a bird
 Singing love to its lone mate.

MARY Ah, my lone mate, my phoenix, I love you still.
 But I can only croak like a raven! Where is he?
 Shelley, where are you? Why do you leave me?

(SHELLEY, entering through a window.)

SHELLEY Mary!

(She throws herself on his breast, then starts back, affectedly.)

MARY Cold, so wringing-wet and cold,
 It is a drowned sailor I hold.

SHELLEY Then warm me at your breast.

MARY Cold without and within,
 I feel your cold heart under your cold skin.

SHELLEY Take pity on the ghost.

MARY So cold and bitter as the brine.

Cold as your love are your cold lips on mine.

SHELLEY Yet I came at your call,

And came from further than you know.
MARY And in a moment you will go,
And that will be all.
SHELLEY Cold, cold as a stone.
Reasonable as a skeleton.
MARY Cold as the forsaken nest.
SHELLEY Cold and witty as an adder's tongue,
MARY Tedious as an old song,
TOGETHER That is the worst, that is the worst.

Scene closes.

(SHELLEY goes out slowly by the door, L. Mary half-rises as though to follow him, then sinks back. JANE and EDWARD slowly resume their chess match. Enter TRELAWNY.)

EDWARD Trelawny!
 JANE Trelawny!
 MARY The Pirate! what wind blows you here?
 TRELAWNY A rising off-shore breeze, my ladies. One that will blow
 Your husbands out to sea, and leave you bird-alone.
 I have ridden from Genoa, where the boat is building
 And ready to set sail. Where is Shelley?
 MARY Not far. I heard his footstep on the beach.
 Only a minute ago.
 JANE Oh, call him in.
 He is in one of his melancholy moods.
 This news will revive him.
 MARY He will come when he pleases. Time enough.
 There will be all the summer for sailing!
 For steering, tacking, heave-ho, and ship-ahoy!
 Time enough, too, to grow tired of his summer
 plaything.
 TRELAWNY No plaything, Mary, but a lively schooner:
 Fast, strongly built, and Torbay-rigged.
 (*Turning to Edward*) It needed
 Two tons of iron ballast to sober her
 And make her manageable.
 EDWARD So much the better. I can feel her under me already
 Impassioned,
 Nobly obedient to the helm,
 Proud as a stag and limber as an eel.
 TRELAWNY Aye, but no ship to dream in, or rhyme on.
 Shelley must brush the visions out of his eyes
 And heave his books and papers overboard.
 He cannot put to sea with Plato.

(SHELLEY re-enters, pale and exalted. He walks about the room while the others watch him with growing concern.)

SHELLEY I have seen... Oh, I have seen...
 The moon had made a pathway on the water,
 The night was intensely calm.

I saw the surf whiten and fade at my feet.
I heard the mile-long crash of the wave. And my own
heart beating.

I saw a naked child rise up out of the sea,
And clasp her hands upon her breast as though with joy
And smile at me!

Oh, it was she! Allegra! Allegra!

EDWARD, TRELAWNY He saw the moonlight on the water.

MARY Can such things be?

SHELLEY I saw the surf whiten and fade at my feet,

EDWARD, TRELAWNY He saw the surf whiten and fade at his feet.

SHELLEY I heard the mile-long crash of the wave,
And my own heart beating.

EDWARD, TRELAWNY He saw the moonlight and the fleeting spray.

MARY, JANE How can a dead child rise up out of the grave?

SHELLEY I saw a naked child rise up out of the sea.
And clasp her hands upon her breast as though for joy.

EDWARD, TRELAWNY Was it the moonlight or the fleeting spray?

JANE And not the dead at rest?

SHELLEY And smile at me.

MARY Woe is me! Woe is me!

It is Claire's child, not mine, that he would see!

SHELLEY Oh, it was she, Allegra! Allegra!

I saw Allegra rise up out of the sea!

EDWARD, TRELAWNY A dead child, rising joyful from the sea.

JANE Is it a shadow of things past? Is it an omen of things
yet to be?

Scene closes.

ACT II
Scene iv.

Mid-day. All five windows stand open. MARY and JANE on the platform. SHELLEY, EDWARD, TRELAWNY are grouped round a table, on which are maps and charts, which they are studying.

TRELAWNY So, rounding the northernmost point of Corsica, we
 anchor here
 Then homeward, through the straits of Bonifacio.
SHELLEY Then onward to the Balearic Islands, onward to Spain!
 Why should we not sail into the Atlantic itself
 On a wind blowing from Africa? But when will she
 come?
 When will our boat come?
TRELAWNY Here, from Cap Testa, there is a strong current.
SHELLEY Or shall we sail to Greece?
EDWARD Here, one would need to stand well off from shore.
MARY She has come!
SHELLEY, EDWARD She has come?

(MARY and JANE enter the room as the three men hurry to platform and stare about.)

MARY You look for her in the wrong place.

(CLAIRE comes in by door L. taking off her bonnet and shawl. The three women form an embracing group, as the men re-enter.)

MARY, JANE Welcome, dear Claire!
 Welcome as snow in the heat of midsummer,
 Welcome as a spar to a drowning mariner.
CLAIRE Why, who is fainting, and who is drowning?
MARY, JANE Who but we?
 Drowning in charts, in talks of currents and soundings,
SHELLEY, EDWARD Who but we?
 Stormbound in wedlock, here we must toss and
 flounder,
 Longing for sympathy.
CLAIRE There, there!
TRELAWNY Women are always vexed when husbands go to sea.

(SHELLEY turns to window.)

SHELLEY A sail!

(He hurries to the platform, and presently returns, dejectedly.)

CLAIRE How strange it is
 To find Shelley longing for something not impossible...
 Not moon, not unicorn, not even the regeneration of
 mankind,

 But a boat, an ordinary wooden boat!

TRELAWNY That is the sea-change I promised you.

CLAIRE The sea-change!
 Yet no boat Shelley sailed in could be an ordinary boat:
 He can work changes, too.

(SHELLEY, EDWARD, MARY, and JANE, who have [been] disputing in the background, now come forward.)

MARY, JANE Pity us Claire!
 Perched on these rocks in this crazy dwelling!
 With a smokey chimney and a cracked ceiling.

SHELLEY, EDWARD Pity us Claire!
 Teased by our wives from day's end to day's end...

TRELAWNY While our faithless vessel coquets with our patience.

MARY, JANE Why, who are the craziest, the lords or the ladies?

MARY, JANE Here we must stay,
 Combing our love-lorn hair,
 Weeping like mermaids,
 While they go jaunting away.

SHELLEY, EDWARD Away! Away!
 Scolding like sea-mews, they flutter round us
 upbraiding.

 Why does our boat delay?

CLAIRE Chafing, disputing, contending,
 They only quarrel to make it up in the end.

MARY I cannot endure it! Everything in this house
 Is changed into fantasy, into sea-mews and mermaids.
 Only *my* blood remains human; heavy with care,
 Rocking my heart with wave on wave of foreboding,
 I, alone, listen to the sea.

(As she turns from the others, SHELLEY and JANE come forward.)

SHELLEY I know you do not love the thought of our boat
Yet every day you watch the boats go to and fro,
Lightly, safely, as butterflies over a meadow.
Why should you be afraid?

JANE I have all the songs and ballads
On my side,
Where bright ladies grow dim,
Waiting for a ship
That never comes again.

SHELLEY Not all the songs are written.
I will bring back songs for you, far lovelier,
More strange, more flowing...
Lovelier, stranger, more magical...

A VOICE FROM THE SEA Ahoy!

VOICES ON SHORE Ahoy! Ahoy!

VOICES FROM THE SEA Is this the Englishman's house?

SHELLEY Joy! Joy!

(They hasten to the platform.)

VOICES ON SHORE Here! Here! Steer this way. So. Now clear
The reef.

Easy! Easy! Now let her go!

VOICES FROM THE SEA, *nearer.* Let her go!

VOICES ON SHORE Look, how she comes about. How she finds her
way.

EDWARD How smoothly she comes on!
Proud, painted, and new
Like the Virgin going in procession.
Going above the heads of the crowd.
How she comes in!
Easily riding like the rising moon.

(The sails of a ship come in sight at back of stage.)

SHELLEY My soul flies into her sails. I am gone. I am gone.

Scene closes.

Scene v.

Curtain down. All voices off.

TRELAWNY, *narrative* On the eighth day of July, I watched them sail from the port of Livorno on their homeward voyage.

A SAILOR, *conversational* They start too late. They should have sailed two hours ago.

TRELAWNY, *conversational* Soon, they will have the land-breeze.

SAILOR, *conversational* They will have more than a land-breeze. Look at those ragged clouds hanging in the south-west. Look at smoke on the water. There is a storm brewing.

TRELAWNY, *conversational* The sea-fog gathers round the boat.

SAILOR, *conversational* She carries too much sail.

TRELAWNY, *conversational* I can see her no more.

(Curtain rises. Stage in semi-darkness, all windows open, faint light beyond. The three women are grouped before the centre window, in silhouette. Lighting diminishing by degrees.)

TRELAWNY *narrative* It had grown dark as night. The sea was leaden colour, solid and smooth as lead. Gusts of wind swept over it without ruffling it. Large drops of rain fell on it, rebounding as though they could not pierce its oily swell. There was a commotion in the air, a hubbub of threat and danger coming upon us from the sea.

VOICES, *distant* Down with the topsails! Haul away! Make for the harbour!

TRELAWNY, *narrative* Fishing craft under bare poles come crowding, jostling into port, running before the squall.

VOICES, *nearer* Ahoy there! Make way, make way!

(The storm breaks with a crash of thunder. The stage is in darkness, except for distant lightning across back scene. Storm music dies down, stage slowly lightens.)

TRELAWNY, *resuming narrative* When the horizon cleared I looked to
seaward...

(Stage has lightened enough to reveal the bare shine of the sea.)

TRELAWNY I looked to seaward...
I looked to seaward...

Scene closes.

Scene vi.

Candlelight. All windows are shuttered, and the room is back as in scene i, except for some bales and boxes on the floor, ready for departure. MARY, in widow's dress, sits at the table, writing: Enter TRELAWNY, who approaches her in silence.

MARY, *after a pause* Do you remember how you came,
And stood, as you do now, saying no word,
Until at last I said, Is there no hope? And you were
silent.

(Noise of the sea, as in scene i.)

Do you remember our arrival,
And how I said, Listen! – and you said, Only the sea?

(She glances at what she was writing, and crumples it impatiently.)

TRELAWNY You tire yourself with writing. Do not do so.
MARY I must write down my recollection of Shelley.
I must; and yet I cannot. Tears come, and they are
true,
But my words betray him. What shall I write?
TRELAWNY Write, above all, that he was never-failing.

(She looks up, momentarily disconcerted by this unexpected word.)

TRELAWNY Do you remember, remembering our arrival,
How we stood here, huddled in fear and falsehood,
Being afraid of a dead child?
And how, when Shelley came, we were suddenly
ransomed,
Our cautious fetters struck off, our hearts recalled.
To the truth of living, and the truth of dying?

(MARY'S attitude and expression gradually animated by passionate attention.)

TRELAWNY Do you remember how he would flash and frolic
His spirit of delight through our dull vapours,
And how his twilight enfolded our garish day?
How he was wings to every joy, and glamour

To every hope; and a cold clay
 Sepulchre darker than our utmost melancholy?
 MARY Being a poet, a poet!
 TRELAWNY A poet!...
 How, from our mortal remembrance
 He is wafted;
 He rises to that untrammelled region
 Where poets as poems survive.
 Dying, he has reversed the sea-change.
 The sea enriched by him,
 And the wave lovelier
 His winding-sheet forever after.
 A poet. But not as the timid world would belie him:
 One dwelling in a dream's enclosure
 Whose blood dropped from a painless wound
 Whose imagination complied with a whim's disposal;
 No! But like his own Prometheus Unbound
 To extremity suffering, forgiving, and defying.
 MARY "To love, and bear, to hope
 Till hope creates from its own wreck
 The thing it contemplates...
 Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent:
 This, like thy glory"⁵ ...like thy glory
 ...thy glory...

(The curtain falls slowly.)

MARY, *to herself, intensely.* To love, and bear, and hope.
 TRELAWNY Now from our mortal remembrance he is wafted
 MARY, *as before* Till hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates
 TRELAWNY He rises untrammelled to that region
 Where the poets as poems survive
 MARY Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent:
 TRELAWNY Dying, he has reversed the sea-change:
 MARY This, like thy glory...like thy glory...
 TRELAWNY The sea enriched by him, and the wave
 Lovelier his winding sheet forever after
 MARY Thy glory!

Scene closes.

Notes

- 1 Warner spells the last name of Edward John Trelawny as 'Trelawney' throughout the libretto, except for once in the note on staging.
- 2 Editorial additions and corrections to Warner's typescript appear in square brackets.
- 3 The underlinings are reproduced as in Warner's typescript. See *The Tempest* 1.2.400–9.
- 4 Nordoff's score notes at this point '(She remembers the poems he wrote her.)' The lines from Shelley's offstage voice are 'The Passage of the Apennines', lines 1–2, and 'To Mary ----', lines 1–4.
- 5 Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 4. 570–6.