

Done with the compass, done with the chart
or Tristan and Yseult

The story

Tristan is fetching Yseult the Beauty from Ireland
so she can marry his beloved uncle,
the rough and ready King Mark of Cornwall.

Yseult knows she must love King Mark
so she's got hold of a sure-fire potion
that will make them fall in love
but – naughty girl – she shares it with Tristan
because she's fallen hopelessly in love with him
(even though he killed her brother)
and he thinks she's just about the fittest girl ever.

The potion sends them mad as a box of fish
and they make a lot of incredibly hot love
on a slow boat to Cornwall
where she marries King Mark
whom she also loves, but in a different way.
She continues to enjoy wild sex with Tristan
which makes them both feel good, but also bad
so Tristan marries another Yseult
(from Brittany, just over the sea)
and no-one lives happily ever after,
although they all, in a strange way,
respect each other, and of course,
it ends in death, and bitter tears.

The poem

On that boat journey after the potion,
and after the howls of the Irish cliffs,
they cling to each other like barnacles.
They grab and claw like crabs in a trap.
They delve and giggle through one long day
and one stargazy, crazy night.
They kiss, they stroke, they squeeze
and bite, and so much more.

When Yseult meets King Mark,
she sees a cuttlefish, no cuddle-fish,
with two greedy tentacles
and pads covered in suckers,
ready to hypnotise his prey.
She gets used to his ways
though she keeps swimming off
to explore the deep ocean floor
in the flowing body of her lover.

But all is not fine
because natural light cannot shine
into the oh so beautiful dark
and Tristan cannot breathe
so he rises up and up and up
until he finds another mate,

another Yseult, another beauty.
He lithely swims away with her
to an ocean of forgetting
and leaves his true love floundering
with old cuttlebones.

Though he kisses away his new wife's
white face, strokes and squeezes,
all Tristan can see is his first Yseult
so he seeks thrilling distraction.
He rescues a damsel in distress
from six spiny, slithery knights
but one scars poison into his skin
making a wound that will not heal
until his one and only love
touches it with her knowing fingers
so he sings across the seas
again and again and again
until she hears his echo-music
but Yseult the wife, Yseult the liar,
arrives first and tells him his soulmate
lies in the blackness of the depths
where fangteeth and viperfish
swim through her skull.

Tristan flips himself out of the life-water
to die on the harsh swelter of a rock.
When Yseult the sweetheart arrives,
well, you can guess the rest –
their cuddling bones picked clean
by briny crows who caw out their tragedy.

Some say old cuttlebones found them,
gave them some dignity on a gaunt headland
where two trees, honeysuckle and hazel,
grew out of their graves
and the branches entwined like lovers' fingers.
Still devoted to his Irish Queen
and jealous of that clinging clutch,
King Mark cut and cut and cut
but each time the trees grew back
and the branches entwined like lover's fingers
so he gave up, and let them grow
and grow and grow.