The Peace of Wild Things

SUMMARY

Whenever I start feeling increasingly upset about the world, so on edge that the slightest sound wakes me up at night and I'm scared about how my life and my children's lives will turn out, I get out into nature and rest nearby a duck sleeping beautifully on the water and a great heron eating its food. I embrace the calmness and serenity that comes with being surrounding by the untamed world, in which animals don't waste their time thinking about future sorrows. I get close to tranquil water. I sense the presence of the stars above me, which you can't see during the day, waiting until it's nighttime so they can shine. For a little while, the beauty and simplicity of nature calm me and frees me from worry.

THEMES

THE SOOTHING POWER OF NATURE

"The Peace of Wild Things" celebrates nature's ability to refresh and restore the human mind. The speaker, full of despair and fear, finds a kind of "peace" among the "wild things" of the natural world, which—unlike humans—don't worry about whatever might happen next and instead live in the present. The poem implies that, for all humanity's complexity and advancement, nature remains a vital source of wisdom and consolation.

The speaker's anxiety suggests that human beings, uniquely among all creatures, have a talent for being afraid of things that haven't even happened yet. The speaker often wakes during the night, full of "despair for the world" and fear for the future. In this state, the "least sound" suggests danger and threat. The speaker gets so worked up that the whole world seems menacing, even though nothing is immediately wrong.

This kind of anxiety, the poem suggests, isn't unusual, but rather is part of the human experience: the speaker describes these late-night fears matter-of-factly, as if certain that the rest of humanity has similar anxieties.

But the everyday course of the natural world offers the nervous speaker comfort. Nature is "wild" and instinctive, full of "beauty"—and doesn't seem to worry about what might happen next. When the speaker's worries are at their worst, the speaker goes outside to "rest" and finds that everything in nature is just calmly doing what it does, rather than fretting about the future.

The wood drake "rests in his beauty on the water," a lake or pond lies quiet and still, and stars in the sky go about their starry business. For the speaker, this *lack* of anxious "forethought" in nature gives the natural world a beautiful and rejuvenating sense of "grace" and "peace."

The poem thus encourages its readers to learn from nature and not to get too lost in anxious "forethought." Because nature exists fully in the present, not in fear of the future, it can both act as a kind of safety valve (relieving the pressures of everyday life when they become unbearable) and as a teacher. Simply "rest[ing]" in nature while it goes about its business helps the speaker to feel "free," and to understand just how futile anxiety really is.

The speaker's sense of natural freedom and wisdom doesn't last forever, of course: it's just "for a time." Even for a moment, though, nature grounds the speaker in reality, settling this person's spirit. Overall, then, the poem implies that humanity should cherish, nurture, and learn from the natural world that it calls home.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-11

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

When despair for ...
... lives may be,

The poem's first three lines capture the speaker's anxious, fretful state of mind. Sometimes the speaker is so full of sorrow and anxiety that even the slightest sound can wake them up at night. They're totally on edge thinking about how life will turn out for both them and their children.

The "fear" the speaker talks about in these lines isn't anything specific, but a kind of general worry about what is going to happen in the future. Given the poem's focus on ecology and nature, the "despair" that the speaker feels could relate to the future of the planet itself. Or, considering this poem was written around the time of the Vietnam War and the Cold War, perhaps the speaker worries about humankind destroying itself.

Keeping things general, though, gives the poem a universal feel. The lack of specifics is part of the poem's power: most people can relate to that visiting sense of dread when the mind runs away with itself during the small hours.

Of course, this all starts with a "When"—when the speaker feels these things, something happens. The speaker delays that something for these three lines, however, which evokes the

sense of mounting anxiety. The deliberate delay of the response to that "When" creates tension, the reader searching for grammatical relief that takes a long time to come.

Enjambment contributes to this sense of restlessness too, the speaker's thoughts seeming to run away with themselves across multiple lines. Line 3 also uses subtle repetition, highlighted below:

> in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,

The repetition of "my" and "life/lives" (the latter being polyptoton) make the line feel jumpy and pained, evoking the way an anxious mind cycles repeatedly through patterns of thought. If the speaker's not worrying about their own life, they're worrying about their children's future, or that of the entire world—and these worries keep coming back during the night, bubbling up from the subconscious mind and waking the speaker up.

LINES 4-5

I go and ...
... great heron feeds.

If the poem's first three lines build tension, the fourth and fifth offer sweet relief. The response to that opening "When" finally arrives, and it's a decisive one, full of intention and purpose: "I go," the speaker says.

The speaker can't fight back the tide of fears directly, it seems. That is, they can't go back to sleep now that nightmarish visions of the future have brought them awake. But what the speaker can do is go outside, away from the human world, and seek the comforts of nature. More specifically, the speaker goes to rest alongside waterbirds like the "wood drake" and "great heron."

The deep consonance (all those /d/ sounds) and soft alliteration (those /w/ sounds) in line 4 mark a shift from worry to calm, from trouble to peace:

> I go and lie down where the wood drake

Here, things seem to make sense, the wood drake and the heron going about their business as they always do. They don't worry about the future, and so being in their presence offers the speaker a brief reprieve from worrying too.

The caesura after "water" (in the form of a comma) carves out a little space for the "great heron" to do its thing, also slowing the poem down to mimic the calming effect of these sights on the speaker's state of mind. The end-stop adds to this effect too, finally offering a definitive break in the poem's momentum.

LINES 6-8

I come into ...
... of grief.

Lines 6 to 8 are the heart of the poem. To the speaker, the natural world embodies the "peace of wild things," a phrase of such significance to Berry that it became a title for one of his books of selected poems many years after this was first published.

Of course, there is a paradox at work here. Peace and wildness, while not quite opposites, don't generally go together. Wildness often suggests violence and unpredictability, peace the lack of such threats. But it's precisely the instinct and intuition of the natural world that makes the speaker appreciate it so much.

Animals, plants, rivers, stars—none of these "tax their lives" with the fear of future "grief." The word "tax" implies that there is a metaphorical cost to the "forethought of grief"—that fear of the future takes its toll (another tax-related word) on people. But nature doesn't bother worrying, "taxing," itself with thoughts of potentially being sad in the future. It simply is what it is. And the speaker values the *break* from the human world that nature provides.

Notice how this sentence, as with the rest of the poem to come, follows a similar grammatical construction as the "I go" in line 4. That "I go" signaled the speaker setting out for nature; this "I come into" suggests the sense of stepping into a vast, wilderness, and of nature welcoming the speaker.

There's also a full stop caesura right in the middle of line 8:

> of grief. I come into the presence of still water.

That period inserts a meaningful pause after "grief," evoking the way that the natural world allows the speaker to stop worrying for a moment and just be.

LINE 8

I come into ... of still water.

After the caesura following "grief" in line 8, the speaker says:

> I come into the presence of still water.

The stillness of the water here mirrors the soothing effect of the natural world on the speaker's state of mind. The word "presence" can be taken both literally and figuratively: the speaker is literally in the presence of a calm lake or pond, and that water has a "presence" in the sense of radiating an aura of peace.

The wording of the phrase "still water" makes this a possible allusion to Psalm 23 in the Bible: "[The Lord] maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul."

Berry's work is rarely explicitly religious, but it is often grounded in his Christian faith. Here, nature serves a similar role to God in the psalm. It "restores" the speaker's soul, placing this person's life in a wider context that makes earlier

fears seem less heavy. The end-stop at the end of the line, combined with the earlier full-stop caesura, almost completely stops the flow of the poem. That is, the text becomes as "still" as it possibly can, conjuring the "peace of wild things" on the page.

LINES 9-11

And I feel ...
... and am free.

Having spent some time with the earth below, the speaker now thinks about the sky above. The speaker can "feel" the stars, which suggests a sense of deep connection with the universe itself. Of course, the speaker also can't see the stars because it's daytime: they're hidden by the bright light of the sun, but the speaker knows that they're there.

The speaker also describes the stars as metaphorically "day-blind": they can't see during the day, which in turn suggests that they watch over the earth during the night. The natural world here has a kind of benevolence: the stars "wait[]" with their light to offer it as a kind of gift during the night to those who need it. This emphasizes the way the stars—together with the rest of nature—offer comfort and solace to the speaker. The full-stop caesura after "light," meanwhile, again slows the poem down to create a calming effect on the page.

Though the "peace of wild things" provides salvation, the poem doesn't sentimentalize this effect. The speaker can now "rest in the grace of the world," feeling "free" from worry about the future—but this is only "for a time." Nature can't completely absorb all of humanity's anxiety, the poem suggests, but it does play an important role in managing it.

Life, suggests the poem, is a kind of constant negotiation between the extremes of the human mind and the relief of the natural world. And it's this ability to offer relief—of any kind, for however long—that constitutes the world's "grace." Though temporary, the speaker feels truly liberated in this environment, the caesura creating a clear, refreshing space for the poem's final words: "and [I] am free."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

In line 8, the poem makes what may be an allusion to Psalm 23:

> I come into the presence of still water.

Psalm 23 appears in the Old Testament of the Bible:

> The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
> He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he
> leadeth me beside the still waters.

Both poem and psalm focus on the restoration of the soul/state of mind, and both suggest this is achieved through "lying down" in the beauty of nature. Notably, though, there is no God to act as a shepherd in Berry's poem. Instead, the poem focuses purely on the natural world. Nature has a kind of presence that might feel like God to some, but the poem isn't explicitly religious.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "I come into the presence of still water."

CAESURA

Caesura helps to control the poem's pace. It makes sense, then, that these mid-line pauses only pop up once the speaker has "come into" the natural world.

The poem opens with a fretful, frantic tone, the enjambment between the first three lines capturing the speaker's building sense of dread about the future—the "despair" and "fear" that wake the speaker up in the middle of the night.

Nature, though, saves the day (or night), offering the speaker some tranquility. Once the speaker is among "the peace of wild things," the poem slows down, and that's in part thanks to caesura. The first caesura appears in line 5:

> rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron
> feeds.

The comma here grants a pause after the word "water," allowing the speaker, and reader, a beat to rest and appreciate the image of the "wood drake" before moving onto that of "the great heron."

Later, the full stops in lines 8 and 10 bring the poem to a momentary halt:

> of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
> [...]
> waiting with their light. For a time

Readers get the sense that the speaker is no longer rushing around, filled with worry. Instead, there's time to pause, to simply sit with the world.

The poem's last line features one final caesura that again slows things down, reiterating the sense that one need not be filled with frantic worry when in nature:

> I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

The comma here makes the speaker seem that bit *more* free and untroubled. It's like the speaker has taken a deep, restorative breath before declaring "[I'm] free."

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "water, and"
- **Line 8:** "grief. I"
- **Line 10:** "light. For"
- **Line 11:** "world, and"

CONSONANCE

For the most part, "The Peace of Wild Things" uses sparse, simple language. Consonance does appear, but it's very subtle.

Perhaps the strongest consonance appears in lines 4 and 5, which, not coincidentally, mark the shift from the speaker's anxiety over the future to the "peace of wild things" that nature provides. Here, the poem fills with heavy /d/ sounds, crisp /t/ sounds, and breathy /w/ sounds (which are also an example of alliteration):

> I go and lie down where the wood drake
> rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron
> feeds.

Together, the lines feel richly textured, musical, and soothing. In a way, the lovely sounds of the lines evoke the simple but powerful beauty that the speaker discovers when hanging out in nature.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "down," "where," "wood drake"
- **Line 5:** "rests," "beauty," "water," "great," "feeds"
- **Line 8:** "still water"
- **Line 10:** "waiting with"
- **Line 11:** "rest," "grace"

END-STOPPED LINE

End-stopping slows the poem down, creating a sense of increasing calm (or decreasing fear). The speaker makes a journey from "despair" to feeling "free," which plays out in the way the poem's sentences are structured: the poem opens with one long introductory clause that captures the speaker's mounting "fear," and then the poem's end-stopped lines add moments of rest as the speaker's mood improves (through lying down in nature). Caesura contributes to this effect too, slowing down the poem's back half.

The first end-stop shows up in line 3:

> in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,

This is a subtle end-stop, the slight pause of the comma signaling that the poem is about to switch gears: right after this moment, the speaker steps out into nature.

Each one of the poem's other end-stops is a strong period, pushing the reading to really linger on the poem's beautiful, positive images at these moments:

> rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron
> feeds.
> [...]
> of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
> [...]
> I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

The full stop after "feeds" makes the heron seem majestic and unhurried. Then, the full stop after "water" creates a brief moment of silence, the poem's own version of being "still." And, finally, the full stop in the last line emphasizes the speaker's sense of freedom, which is only made possible through "the peace of wild things" (the natural environment). Ending on the word "free" makes this freedom seem all the more precious.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "be,"
- **Line 5:** "feeds."
- **Line 8:** "water."
- **Line 11:** "free."

ENJAMBMENT

Most of the lines in "The Peace of Wild Things" are enjambed, lending the poem a smooth, free-flowing feel. The enjambment of the first three lines is especially striking: in stretching the first part of the poem's first sentence over three lines without pause, the poem evokes the speaker's mounting anxiety through its form.

In this opening section, the speaker describes waking up in the night full of worry for the future:

> [...] grows in me
> and I wake in the night at the least sound
> in fear [...]

Enjambment makes this sentence feel frantic and restless. The poem begins with the word "When," which makes readers anticipate a response to this opening statement: *when this happens... then what?* The enjambment builds a sense of tension that mirrors the speaker's state of mind.

After this, the poem still uses enjambment, but caesurae and end-stops control the pace to create an overall sense of calm and perhaps even tranquility.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "me / and"
- **Lines 2-3:** "sound / in"

- **Lines 3-4:** "be, / I"
- **Lines 4-5:** "drake / rests"
- **Lines 6-7:** "things / who"
- **Lines 7-8:** "forethought / of"
- **Lines 9-10:** "stars / waiting"
- **Lines 10-11:** "time / I"

METAPHOR

The metaphors in "The Peace of Wild Things" are subtle. The first appears in the opening line:

> When despair for the world grows in me

This isn't a particularly obvious metaphor because it fits in with how people often discuss their feelings. But using the word "grow" makes "despair" sound like a kind of living organism, a parasite perhaps—something that needs nourishment in order to survive and grow larger. The speaker thus gestures to the way that fear sometimes begets more fear.

Along similar lines, the speaker admires the natural world because animals (or any part of nature, really) don't "tax their lives with forethought / of grief." In other words, they don't worry about the future; they don't ruin the present with fear of what may or may not come to pass. "Tax" can mean simply "put under strain," but could also suggest that worry for the future is a kind of regular down payment on being human.

The speaker also personifies the stars, characterizing them in lines 9 and 10 as "day-blind" and "waiting with their light." They're "day-blind" in the sense that they can't see when the light of the sun gets in the way. That they patiently wait to release their light onto the world below paints them in an aura of benevolence, as if they exist, in part, to help people through hard times.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When despair for the world grows in me"
- **Lines 7-8:** "who do not / their lives with forethought / of grief."
- **Line 7:** "tax"
- **Lines 9-10:** "the day-blind stars / waiting with their light"

PARADOX

Paradox is at the heart of the poem, appearing in the title phrase itself:

> I come into the peace of wild things

Peace and wildness are *almost* opposites, but not quite. They aren't usually associated with one another, at least.

Here, though, "wild things" is a catch-all term to describe the non-human natural world. The speaker finds peace in nature because the animals (and other elements) do not share the same fears for the future as humans do. Anxiety over what will happen, the poem implies, is a curiously human phenomenon.

The speaker thus admires wildness because it represents living in the present: living a life based on instinct, intuition, natural rhythms, and so on. Lying on the ground near the ducks and herons makes the speaker feel like a part of that wildness, far from concerns about what goes on in the human world.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "the peace of wild things"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism is an important part of the poem, adding emphasis to its ideas and a sense of building rhythm to its language.

This device first pops up in the poem's second line, where it also dovetails with diacope (the repeated "my") and the polyptoton ("life"/"lives"):

> in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,

On the one hand, this parallelism emphasizes that the speaker is concerned not just for themselves, but for those around them. At the same time, it subtly gives the impression of a fretful mind, one that keeps circling back on itself, overwhelmed by recurring fears for the future. The repetition here, then, builds tension that is released by the speaker's escape into "the peace of wild things."

Once the speaker goes to "lie down" in the thick of nature's beauty, the poem's tone shifts. The speaker turns again and again to the same phrase, "I [verb]": "I go," "I come," "I feel," "I rest." This parallelism (and the anaphora of that "I") creates a sense of steady, building momentum that leads to the release and resolution of the final line. Here, the speaker declares "I [...] am free." Putting themselves in nature has changed the speaker's very *being*.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "my," "life," "my," "lives"
- **Line 4:** "I go"
- **Line 6:** "I come"
- **Line 8:** "I come"
- **Line 9:** "I feel"
- **Line 11:** "I rest"

VOCABULARY

Least (Lines 2-2, Line 2) - Most insignificant, slightest.

Wood Drake (Lines 4-5, Line 4) - A kind of duck.

Heron (Lines 5-5, Line 5) - A large waterbird.

Tax (Lines 6-8, Line 7) - Place a strain upon.

Forethought (Line 7, Line 8) - Considerations of the future (thinking ahead).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Peace of Wild Things" is made up of 11 lines written as one single block of text. There's no standard form here (unlike, say, a sonnet), nor any regular meter or rhyme scheme. This works for a contemplative, contemporary poem about the delights of "wild things" and living in the moment rather than fretting about the future. Having no set, predictable form makes the poem itself seem all the more natural and wild.

METER

The poem is written in free verse, meaning it has no regular meter or rhyme scheme. As a result, it feels casual, conversational, and reflective, rather than strictly controlled. The relative looseness of the poem's language evokes the "peace of wild things"—the beauty and serenity of nature left to do its thing. The speaker intentionally *escapes* the human world, including its complex metrical schemes.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "The Peace of Wild Things" doesn't have a rhyme scheme. Instead, its language is loose, simple, and organic. The speaker admires the wildness of nature, and, accordingly, the poem is a little wild too (like a hedge that hasn't been trimmed into neat rhyming shapes).

That said, there is a very *distant* rhyme between "me" in line 1 and "free" in line 11, the first and last end words of the poem. These words, taken as a pair, tell the poem in miniature, the natural environment offering the speaker freedom ("free") from the maze-like constructions of their own mind ("me").

SPEAKER

Though the poem is written in the first person, the reader learns little about the speaker's identity beyond the fact that this person is an adult, has a family, and often worries about the future.

The poem doesn't specify the nature of these worries, either. Keeping things vague helps keep the poem's message more universal: anyone who's ever been jolted awake at night by fears about what's to come can likely identify with the poem's speaker, and thus with the poem's message about finding a sense of peace and release within nature.

It's also very easy to read the speaker as Wendell Berry himself. Berry is a committed environmentalist, and there's thus an overlap between his own views and this speaker's gratitude for "the peace of wild things" (that is, nature).

SETTING

The poem has two implied settings:

- The action begins "when" the speaker is overtaken by despair and has woken in the night. Presumably, then, the poem starts in the speaker's house.
- Then, the poem moves outside. The speaker goes to "lie down" near a calm body of water, like a lake or pond.

The contrast between these two settings is part of the poem's message. In the orderly human world, the speaker gets overwhelmed by anxieties about the future. The speaker then finds peace in nature, where "wild things" don't spend time worrying about what's to come, but simply exist: ducks are just being ducks, herons are just being herons, lakes are just being lakes, and so on. The setting thus plays a crucial role in the poem, rescuing the speaker from "despair" and offering "the grace of the world," in which the speaker feels "free."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Wendell Berry, born in 1934, is an American poet, essayist, environmental activist, and farmer. Born into a farming family in Kentucky, Berry grew up close to nature and would go on to buy his own farm in 1965. This agricultural work has informed Berry's writing, which often displays a clear-eyed admiration for and concern over the natural world.

As an artist, Berry has won numerous prizes and in 2010 was awarded the National Humanities Medal by President Obama. "The Peace of Wild Things," Berry's best-known poem, was published in *Openings*, his second collection (1968).

In his focus on nature, Berry has drawn comparisons with Romantic poets like John Clare and William Wordsworth. In Romantic poetry, nature often offers a kind of escape from the pressures of modern, urban life. Berry turns to nature in much of his poetry, but he rejects being overly sentimental or mythological about it. Berry's work often focuses on the idea that learning to respectfully coexist with the natural world is essential to humanity's survival.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Peace of Wild Things" was first published in 1968, during an era of political and social upheaval in the U.S. The Cold War

with the U.S.S.R. had peaked with the Cuban Missile Crisis just a few years earlier, while the country was continuing to send soldiers to fight in—and was spending huge amounts of money on—the Vietnam War.

Both subjects are mentioned in the same collection that houses "The Peace of Wild Things": "Against the War in Vietnam" lambasts the American state for its "lies" and bloodthirsty longing for "millions of little deaths," while "To a Siberian Woodsman" sees Berry empathizing deeply with a man who is supposed to be his enemy.

Berry's work as the time clearly reflects the poet's anxiety over the direction of the world and a desire to find solace by stepping away from the "despair" of human-made catastrophes like war and environmental destruction.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading by the poet himself. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ewB0WL3bNw)
- Berry in the New Yorker — Check out a rare interview with the poet exploring contemporary political issues. (https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/going-home-with-wendell-berry)
- Berry's Biography — Read more about Berry's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/wendell-berry)
- Berry on Life — An interview with the poet that discusses his principles and way of life. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMIvvZvXcPY)

HOW TO CITE

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