

# To a Waterfowl



## POEM TEXT

- 1 Whither, 'midst falling dew,
- 2 While glow the heavens with the last steps of day,
- 3 Far, through their rosy depths, dost thou pursue
- 4 Thy solitary way?
  
- 5 Vainly the fowler's eye
- 6 Might mark thy distant flight, to do thee wrong,
- 7 As, darkly seen against the crimson sky,
- 8 Thy figure floats along.
  
- 9 Seek'st thou the plashy brink
- 10 Of weedy lake, or marge of river wide,
- 11 Or where the rocking billows rise and sink
- 12 On the chaféd ocean side?
  
- 13 There is a Power, whose care
- 14 Teaches thy way along that pathless coast,—
- 15 The desert and illimitable air
- 16 Lone wandering, but not lost.
  
- 17 All day thy wings have fanned,
- 18 At that far height, the cold thin atmosphere;
- 19 Yet stoop not, weary, to the welcome land,
- 20 Though the dark night is near.
  
- 21 And soon that toil shall end,
- 22 Soon shalt thou find a summer home, and rest,
- 23 And scream among thy fellows; reeds shall bend,
- 24 Soon, o'er thy sheltered nest.
  
- 25 Thou'rt gone, the abyss of heaven
- 26 Hath swallowed up thy form, yet, on my heart
- 27 Deeply hath sunk the lesson thou hast given,
- 28 And shall not soon depart.
  
- 29 He, who, from zone to zone,
- 30 Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,
- 31 In the long way that I must trace alone,
- 32 Will lead my steps aright.



## SUMMARY

Addressing the waterfowl referenced in the title, the speaker wonders where the bird is going, as dew falls and the sky glows at sunset. In particular, the speaker notes the apparent distance of the bird's flight and the fact that it is all alone.

The speaker notes that a fowler (someone who hunts birds) might unsuccessfully aim at the waterfowl to shoot it down because the bird is visible against the sunset, flying on its journey.

The speaker wonders whether the waterfowl's destination is a marshy, weed-filled lake, the bank of a wide river, or a coastline where waves crash on the shore.

According to the speaker, a higher power (namely, God) benevolently guides the waterfowl as it flies over a coast with no clear route. The speaker stresses that, although the sky the bird flies through is empty and limitless, the bird may be alone but is not truly lost because God is guiding it.

The bird has flown all day, the speaker notes, high in the sky where the air is cold and thin. However, the waterfowl has not given up and descended to the land out of fatigue, even though night has almost fallen.

The speaker assures the waterfowl that its difficult journey will soon be over and that it will be able to find a haven in warmer climates. There, it will be able to rest and sing or squawk among other waterfowl, as reeds or tall grasses create a roof over its nest.

Now, the speaker can no longer see the waterfowl, as it has vanished into the sky. However, the bird has taught the speaker a lesson, which the speaker will not forget anytime soon.

God, the speaker has learned, who guides the waterfowl from one place to another through the endless sky, will also lead the speaker through their own long and solitary journey.



## THEMES



### FAITH IN GOD

"To a Waterfowl" expresses the speaker's faith in God. Watching a waterbird in flight, the speaker reflects that this animal's long, lonely journey to its cozy nest mirrors the speaker's own difficult journey through life. The speaker believes that both humans and waterbirds can trust in God to get them where they're going, even when the path seems dangerous. Such faith in God's guidance, the speaker argues, offers comfort in times of hardship and solitude.

The waterfowl's perilous flight toward its nest represents humanity's journey toward heaven—and the fact that this flight is full of challenges thus speaks to the fact that life isn't always easy. The "fowler," an ominous figure who seeks "to do [the waterfowl] wrong" by hunting it, is just one of many threats the bird faces. It must also fly through the "desert and illimitable" air, for example, which is "cold [and] thin." Even the destinations the speaker imagines for the bird appear characterized by ruggedness, such as a "chaféd," or weather-beaten, oceanside.

The speaker identifies with all these struggles, seeing them as a reflection of the speaker's own. That is, the bird's journey reflects the "long way" that also awaits human beings as they navigate through life's many difficulties "alone."

At the same time, the speaker sees the bird's flight as evidence of the caring and benevolent presence of God. Though the waterfowl's path seems unclear and scary, the speaker marvels at its "certain flight"—that is, the unflagging faith that it will reach its destination. Witnessing such confidence as it navigates the challenges of its journey, the speaker realizes that the waterfowl is "lone wandering, but not lost." God "teaches" and "guides" the waterfowl, giving it a sense of direction that keeps it from losing its way.

In fact, the speaker seems to suggest that such faith or certainty is its own form of companionship—that faith in a higher power can act as a sort of reassuring presence that overcomes solitude or individual hardship. Eventually, the speaker believes the waterfowl will reach its "summer home," a "sheltered nest" where it will be surrounded by its fellow birds. For the speaker, such a peaceful and comforting nest where the bird is no longer alone stands as proof of heaven: just as the waterfowl is eventually "swallowed" by the "abyss of heaven," so too will the speaker reach an afterlife beyond earthly struggle.

The speaker thus takes a "lesson" from this bird: people can and should trust God even when life seems lonely, confusing, and dangerous. The same force that guides the waterfowl "will lead [the speaker's] steps aright."

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-4

*Whither, 'midst falling dew,  
While glow the heavens with the last steps of day,  
Far, through their rosy depths, dost thou pursue  
Thy solitary way?*

The first stanza of "To a Waterfowl" sets the stage for the poem by conjuring a sense of wonder and awe—two things that are

directly related to the speaker's faith in God.

The poem's first word, "Whither," immediately establishes this sense of wonder, as the speaker questions where the waterfowl is flying. The speaker also uses vivid [imagery](#) here to evoke the lushness and beauty of the natural world: the bird flies "'midst falling dew," and "the heavens" (that is, the sky) "glow" from "rosy depths." Readers can picture the waterfowl soaring through the early morning air, the earth below damp with dew while the sun sets in the distance (creating those "rosy depths" on the horizon).

Such descriptions aren't just beautiful in themselves: they also suggest that nature is something divine. All this beauty is a testament to God's creation, in the speaker's mind, and the mention of "the heavens" in particular evokes God's presence.

The first lines, as well as the title, also use [apostrophe](#): the speaker of the poem does not just muse about the waterfowl but directly addresses the bird, speaking to it as though it could respond (when, of course, it can't). Framing the poem in this way suggests that the waterfowl holds significant meaning for the speaker—that, beyond simply being an animal that the speaker sees in the world, the speaker seems to identify with the waterfowl as an equal and empathizes with its lonely, "solitary" flight.

The beginning of the poem also establishes the poem's [meter](#). For the most part, the poem alternates between lines of [iambic trimeter](#) (the first and fourth line of each stanza) and [iambic pentameter](#) (the second and third lines of each stanza). An iamb is a poetic foot with an **unstressed-stressed** beat pattern; trimeter means there are three iambs, four **da-DUMs**, per line, while pentameter simply means that there are five.

That said, the meter isn't all that regular in the poem! The first two lines, in fact, immediately mess with this overarching meter:

*Whither, 'midst falling dew  
While glow the heavens with the last steps of day,*

That first foot is a [trochee](#) (a foot with a **stressed-unstressed** pattern, essentially the opposite of an iamb). The speaker uses lots of trochees throughout the poem, in fact, and also sometimes leaving extra syllables at the end of a line. In the next line, the most natural reading places two unstressed beats on "with the" (something called a **pyrrhic**) and two stressed beats on "last steps" (something called a [spondee](#)). Also note that "heavens" is read as a one-syllable word here (heav'ns).

In any case, things are clearly not all that strict meter-wise. Because the poem focuses on the struggles of the waterfowl and the speaker, such fluctuating meter could embody these struggles, as the poet struggles to reach the perfect meter just as the waterfowl struggles to reach its destination.

## LINES 5-8

*Vainly the fowler's eye  
Might mark thy distant flight, to do thee wrong,  
As, darkly seen against the crimson sky,  
Thy figure floats along.*

Lines 5-8 introduce the "fowler," an ominous figure who seeks "to do [the waterfowl] wrong" by hunting it. This fowler can see the bird as it "floats along" far up in the "crimson sky" (a phrase that again evokes the reddish glow of sunset), and might shoot at it.

Although the speaker understands such efforts to be in vain, or futile, the fowler's presence injects a sense of peril into the poem: the waterfowl's journey, which seemed peaceful (albeit solitary) in the first stanza is actually full of various dangers and obstacles.

The second stanza also features some important instances of [assonance](#) and [sibilance](#). The speaker threads a long /i/ sound through these lines, for example:

Vainly the fowler's eye  
Might mark thy distant flight

This assonance fills the line with rhythm and momentum, making the scene feel elevated and even epic.

Similarly, lines 7-8 contain lots of hushed /s/ and /z/ sounds:

As, darkly seen against the crimson sky,  
Thy figure floats along.

Sibilance can often have an insidious implication, like the hissing of a snake. The /s/ sounds here seem to evoke such a dangerous presence; if not literally conjuring a snake, the repetition creates an unsettling atmosphere, evoking the hissing of the wind the waterfowl flies through and contributing to a sense of menace facing the bird.

## LINES 9-12

*Seek'st thou the plashy brink  
Of weedy lake, or marge of river wide,  
Or where the rocking billows rise and sink  
On the chaféd ocean side?*

The speaker muses about the waterfowl's possible destinations, wondering if the bird is heading towards a lake, a river, or the dramatic seaside.

The way that nature is characterized begins to change in these lines. Note how each of these imagined locations seems rather brutal or rugged: the lake is filled with weeds, the river is wide and imposing, waves crash against the seaside.

Each destination also stands in an in-between, or border-like, space: the "brink" of a lake, the margin of a river, and a shoreline. The speaker seems to view the waterfowl's

destination as a sort of threshold, a point between two realms (an idea later reinforced in line 29 with "zone to zone")—much like the division between earth and heaven.

The [enjambment](#) between lines 9 and 10 echoes this idea:

Seek'st thou the plashy brink  
Of weedy lake [...]

By ending the line after "brink," the speaker creates a *literal* brink in the poem, emphasizing the significance of each destination as a place at the edge or end of something. Indeed, because of the line break, one can read line 9 alone as the speaker wondering whether the waterfowl seeks a more [metaphorical](#) brink: the end of life, and possibly the transition into heaven.

Lines 9-12 also use [consonance](#) and [alliteration](#) to bring each landscape to life for the reader. The repeating /w/ sound in "weedy lake," "river wide," and "where the rocking billows rise" conjures the whooshing of water and billowing waves, for example. The guttural /r/ and sharp /k/ sounds of "marge," "river," "rocking," "rise," and "sink," meanwhile, evoke the roughness of the natural world at this moment in the poem. Finally, the [sibilance](#) (and related /ch/ and /z/ sounds) of "billows rise and sink" and "chaféd ocean side" capture the hissing of crashing waves.

## LINES 13-16

*There is a Power, whose care  
Teaches thy way along that pathless coast,—  
The desert and illimitable air  
Lone wandering, but not lost.*

The speaker makes a major revelation in line 13: God is guiding the waterfowl on its journey. God is the "Power" who tenderly "[t]eaches" the waterfowl "the way" where none seems to exist. Thus, even though the bird seems "lone," it's not actually "lost."

The use of [caesura](#), [enjambment](#), and [end-stopped lines](#) here adds drama to the speaker's claim. The comma after "Power" creates a moment of pause within the line, for example, as if the mere mention is worthy of a moment of reverential silence. Line 13 is also enjambed after "whose care," a choice that gives extra emphasis to God's benevolence (in that it ends the line on the word "care"):

There is a Power, whose care

The line thus underscores God's power as a particularly tender or kind one. Indeed, the speaker here identifies God as a kind of "teacher" who leads the waterfowl and can, therefore, lead people as well.

Note that the phrase "that pathless coast" is actually a [metaphor](#) for the sky—that "illimitable," or limitless, "air" that

doesn't have any paths, roads, markers, etc. In this way, the sky is also "desert[ed]." Yet even where there seems to be no clear path at all, God will lead the bird (and, the poem implies, human beings) forward. While the bird seems to be wandering about with no destination, it's actually being guided by God the whole time.

### LINES 17-20

*All day thy wings have fanned,  
At that far height, the cold thin atmosphere;  
Yet stoop not, weary, to the welcome land,  
Though the dark night is near.*

Lines 17-20 express the difficulty of the waterfowl's journey: the bird has been flapping its wings all day, way up high where the air is "cold" and "thin." Yet the bird mustn't "stoop" towards "welcome land," which would offer the chance to rest, even as the darkness of night approaches.

The poem underscores the bird's toil through [alliteration](#) and [caesura](#). The speaker says that the waterfowl's wings "have fanned / At that far height," the /f/ sounds perhaps calling to mind the heavy breathing that comes with great physical effort. And in line 19, faltering [meter](#) and two caesuras, or pauses, slow the line down, evoking the way the bird must push forward when things get tough:

Yet **stoop not**, || **weary**, || **to the welcome land**

While the line begins with the expected [iamb](#) ("Yet **stoop**"), the next foot is a forceful [spondee](#) ("**not wea**"). This actually creates *three* stressed beats in a row ("**stoop not**, || **wea**") and thus reflects the bird's intense effort at this moment.

Also notice how there's a clear caesura interrupting that second foot, falling right after "not." There's then another comma right after "weary," causing the word to stand isolated in the middle of the line, and thus stressing the fatigue the waterfowl is feeling. Like the waterfowl, the poem seems to be struggling with weariness, almost giving up and returning to the "welcome land"—a rejection, possibly, of heavenward striving toward God. Indeed, alliteration connects "weary" to the "welcome land," suggesting that exhaustion can tempt one away from God, back to earth, so to speak.

Lastly, line 20 also uses [symbolism](#). Although the bird is literally trying to outfly nighttime, the "dark night" drawing near also represents death. The speaker is awed by the fact that, even in the face of the great uncertainty and scariness of death, the waterfowl's faith is unwavering. So, too, should people not lose faith in God, even as they grow weary and doubtful toward the end of their lives.

### LINES 21-24

*And soon that toil shall end,  
Soon shalt thou find a summer home, and rest,*

*And scream among thy fellows; reeds shall bend,  
Soon, o'er thy sheltered nest.*

Having established that the waterfowl's journey is an exhausting one, the speaker declares that "soon" all that "toil," or hardship, will be over: soon enough, the bird will arrive at its "summer home"—a warm, comforting nest, surrounded by other birds, where it can finally rest. That the "reeds shall bend" here suggests the natural world opening itself up to the waterfowl—that nature itself is preparing for the bird's arrival.

These lines feature [anaphora](#): the speaker repeats "soon" again and again, highlighting just how close the waterfowl to its destination. Yet, it's unclear if the speaker actually knows this to be true, or merely believes it; that is, the repetition of "soon" actually has a prayer-like quality, as if the speaker is praying for the end of the waterfowl's journey.

Again, the waterfowl's journey reinforces the speaker's own faith: in trusting that the bird is near its "sheltered nest," the speaker is finding solace in the fact that they, too, will soon reach the end of their struggles.

Whereas earlier in the poem [sibilance](#) seemed to suggest peril or danger, here the /s/ and /sh/ sounds add a gentle hush to the lines, making the waterfowl's destination seem peaceful and relaxing. The humming [consonance](#) of /m/ sounds adds to the soothing effect:

Soon shalt thou find a summer home, and rest,  
And scream among thy fellows; reeds shall bend,  
Soon, o'er thy sheltered nest.

Now, that sibilance also seems to evoke the singing of the waterfowl's fellow birds, capturing a sense of community and comfort.

### LINES 25-28

*Thou'rt gone, the abyss of heaven  
Hath swallowed up thy form, yet, on my heart  
Deeply hath sunk the lesson thou hast given,  
And shall not soon depart.*

In the second to last stanza, the waterfowl finally vanishes from the speaker's sight, leaving behind only a profound "lesson" on the speaker's heart. The bird disappears into the sky, here called the "abyss of heaven." The word "abyss" calls to mind a vast, bottomless space, while "heaven," of course, reminds readers that God is the one guiding the bird's flight. It's as though the bird has been gobbled up by heaven itself. And as it soars upward, its lesson "sinks" in.

The [alliteration](#) of /h/ throughout lines 25-28 show a glimpse of what that lesson is:

[...] the abyss of heaven  
Hath swallowed up thy form, yet, on my heart

Deeply hath sunk the lesson thou hast given,

The repeating /h/ sound links "heaven" and the speaker's "heart." Although in the literal sense, the waterfowl has merely disappeared into the sky, it also appears to have taught led the speaker to a religious revelation. Indeed, the alliteration seems to suggest an inherent connection between heaven and the human heart, suggesting either that God is present within every individual, or that one must hold God in their heart in order to reach heaven.

Note how line 25 breaks after "the abyss of heaven." This [enjambment](#) creates a literal gap or abyss in the poem, which again represents the great space of heaven. In fact, these lines can be read figuratively: rather than disappearing from sight, the speaker may be describing the waterfowl's passage from life to death.

### LINES 29-32

*He, who, from zone to zone,  
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,  
In the long way that I must trace alone,  
Will lead my steps aright.*

In the final lines, the speaker reveals the "lesson" the waterfowl has taught: that God, who guides the waterfowl to its destination, will also guide the speaker through their own hardships.

As with the poem's first reference to God in line 13, line 29 uses [caesura](#) to give particular weight to God's presence. Note the pauses in this line:

He, // who, // from zone to zone,

The commas cause both "he" and "who" to be stressed, as if any word that refers to God, even pronouns, deserves to be emphasized and stand out in the line.

In the next line, the speaker once again treats the sky as a "pathless" space, a vast "abyss" with no markers to guide one's way. The bird doesn't need any markers to make it through this endless, "boundless," space, however; its flight is sure, or "certain," because God guides it.

Likewise, God will guides the speaker's own "steps," setting them off on the right path. The fact that the speaker will "trace" this "long way" (i.e., the journey of life) emphasizes the idea that the speaker isn't lost. On the contrary, the speaker is following, or tracing, the "way" that God has laid out. The speaker might be facing a lonely journey, but the speaker isn't actually alone.



## SYMBOLS



### THE WATERFOWL'S JOURNEY

The waterfowl is the main [symbol](#) of the poem. The bird and its path symbolically represent the speaker and, more broadly, the faith the speaker believes is required to get through the journey of life—with all its hardships, dangers, and beauty.

The bird flies through the sky alone, which reflects the speaker's idea that human beings must "trace" the "long way"—the road of life—on their own. This journey is filled with obstacles, represented here by the fowler, the "cold thin atmosphere," and the bird's general weariness.

Yet the bird keeps on flying through adversity, even when there seems to be no clear path forward. It never flags in its perseverance to reach its destination, refusing to "stoop [...] to the welcome land" below (which might represent the temptation to lose faith in God). The waterfowl, like a pious person, has faith that it will reach its goal, therefore standing as a symbol of the faith people need to have in God to navigate their own personal struggles. The bird is never really alone, which symbolically reflects the speaker's belief that people are never really alone so long as they trust in God.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-4
- Lines 5-12
- Lines 14-27
- Line 30



### THE SKY

The sky [symbolizes](#) heaven and the unknowability of God.

In lines 2 and 25, the speaker actually refers to the sky directly as "the heavens." While such language is figurative, it contributes to a sense that the sky is linked to the divine. Yet, at the same time, the sky is "illimitable," "pathless," or an "abyss"—too large fully grasp or understand, much like God. Because it is impossible to fully conceive of heaven, the poem suggests, reaching it requires faith. People, like the waterfowl, must strive toward heaven by trusting in God's guidance, even when the way seems "pathless."

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "While glow the heavens with the last steps of day, / Far, through their rosy depths,"
- **Line 7:** "darkly seen against the crimson sky,"
- **Lines 14-15:** "along that pathless coast,— / The desert

and illimitable air”

- **Line 18:** “At that far height, the cold thin atmosphere;”
- **Lines 25-26:** “the abyss of heaven / Hath swallowed up thy form,”
- **Line 30:** “through the boundless sky”



## POETIC DEVICES

### APOSTROPHE

The entirety of "To a Waterfowl" is an [apostrophe](#), as the speaker sends the whole poem directly addressing a waterfowl. The bird, of course, can't respond to the speaker, but that doesn't matter: the animal's mere existence reinforces the speaker's faith.

On the one hand, this apostrophe makes the poem feel more intimate, as though readers are overhearing a private conversation. The speaker of the poem also identifies with the waterfowl, viewing its journey as a direct reflection of the speaker's own. Addressing the waterfowl in personal terms thus deepens the sense of a relationship or empathy between the speaker and the bird.

Apostrophe also reflects the speaker's sense of connection with God. The waterfowl here is not merely significant, but holy, a manifestation of God's power. In directing the poem to the bird, the speaker is in a sense addressing a part of God.

Finally, the speaker drawing a "lesson" from the waterfowl is an idea that stems from the Romantic notion that the natural world can provide insights into the divine world. Through apostrophe, the speaker regards the waterfowl with interpersonal respect, viewing the waterfowl as a teacher who can provide useful inferences for the speaker's own life and faith.

#### Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

### ALLITERATION

The [alliteration](#) in "To a Waterfowl" helps to add emphasis to certain words and phrases, and also simply makes the poem sound lovely and memorable.

Alliterative /f/ sounds weave through the second stanza, for example, in "fowler's," "flight," and "figure floats." These light, gentle sounds might evoke that "floating figure" in the sky.

In the next stanza, alliteration adds intensity to the speaker's description of the waterfowl's possible destination:

Of weedy lake, or marge of river wide,  
Or where the rocking billows rise and sink

The consonance of these lines—those internal /r/ and /k/ sounds—adds to the effect, making these landscapes seem rather harsh.

Alliteration can also work to draw links between words. Take "lone" and "lost" in line 16, where that shared /l/ sound emphasizes the fact that the bird is, in fact, neither alone nor lost: God is guiding it. In line 19, the /w/ sounds of "weary" and "welcome" stress how the bird's fatigue might tempt it to rest on the "welcoming" land below.

Later, in lines 25-28, /h/ sounds connect "heaven" and the speaker's "heart," drawing attention to the speaker's deep faith. This is also a very airy sound, and the fact that the speaker turns to it again and again in this stanza seems to evoke a sigh or breath. Not incidentally, this is also the stanza in which the speaker reveals that the waterfowl has taught a "the lesson." The /h/ sound might thus capture a sigh of revelation, a peaceful calming in the speaker's voice as the speaker reaches understanding.

#### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “depths,” “dost”
- **Line 5:** “fowler’s”
- **Line 6:** “Might mark,” “flight”
- **Line 8:** “figure,” “floats”
- **Line 10:** “weedy,” “wide”
- **Line 11:** “where,” “rocking,” “rise”
- **Line 16:** “Lone,” “lost”
- **Line 17:** “fanned”
- **Line 18:** “far”
- **Line 19:** “weary,” “welcome”
- **Line 20:** “night,” “near”
- **Line 25:** “heaven”
- **Line 26:** “Hath,” “heart”
- **Line 27:** “hath,” “hast”
- **Line 30:** “sky,” “certain”
- **Line 31:** “alone”
- **Line 32:** “aright”

### METAPHOR

"To a Waterfowl" uses many [metaphors](#) that relate to the sky and pathways or journeys. In line 2, for example, the speaker refers to the "last steps of day," a metaphor for the sunset that compares the sky at the end of the day to either a person nearing their final steps or the final steps of a staircase. In both cases, the metaphor draws a connection between the sky and the act of walking, a capacity it does not literally have. The metaphor seems to suggest that the sunset reflects the waterfowl's journey, which the speaker also believes is nearing its end.

The relationship between journeying and the sky is deepened in lines 14 and 15, when the speaker refers to the sky as a

"pathless coast." The sky does not literally have coasts, of course, but the idea of coastlines with no clear route stands as a metaphor for the sky, which the waterfowl must also navigate with no sense of where it is going.

Similarly, in the second-to-last line, the speaker refers to "the long way that I must trace alone." While this may literally indicate that the speaker has a long journey ahead, it can also be read as a metaphor for the speaker's life. To the speaker, life itself is a journey, an arduous route that one must travel like the waterfowl through the sky.

By using similar path-related metaphors for the sky and the speaker's own life, the speaker suggests that the waterfowl's journey is a representation of the speaker's life. Like the waterfowl, the speaker's life is characterized by a certain pathlessness, a journey without a clear route that therefore requires faith in God.

Indeed, in line 25, the speaker describes the waterfowl as eventually being "swallowed" by "the abyss of heaven." Heaven, in this case, is a metaphor for the sky, and in particular the night sky, but it also creates a notable connotation by comparing the sky to heaven. The metaphor suggests that the sky may also represent the afterlife, and that the journeys of both the waterfowl and speaker are journeys toward heaven, a place with no map besides faith in God.

#### Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "While glow the heavens with the last steps of day"
- **Lines 14-15:** "that pathless coast,— / The desert and illimitable air"
- **Lines 25-26:** "the abyss of heaven / Hath swallowed up thy form"
- **Line 31:** "the long way that I must trace alone"

## PERSONIFICATION

The speaker regularly [personifies](#) things, including the waterfowl itself. Indeed, the speaker directly addresses it throughout the entire poem and therefore treats it like a human that is capable of understanding the speaker. The speaker asks the bird questions about its destination, warns it about the danger of hunters, and even learns a "lesson," as if the waterfowl is a teacher capable of lecturing the speaker. Furthermore, the speaker more specifically [anthropomorphizes](#) the waterfowl in the sixth stanza, stating that it will soon reach a "summer home," a particularly human concept.

Elsewhere, the speaker personifies various aspects of nature. In the second line, for example, the speaker notes that the heavens glow "with the last steps of day," suggesting that the day is something that can walk like a human. Likewise, the "abyss of heaven" swallows up the waterfowl in line 26, an action that the sky is not literally capable of.

Each of these instances of personification adds to a sense in the poem that the natural world has meaning and significance beyond purely being part of the landscape. The speaker clearly treats nature and the waterfowl with particular reverence, seeing them as capable of providing useful lessons and insights into the speaker's life and religion.

#### Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Thy solitary way?"
- **Line 9:** "Seek'st thou"
- **Lines 13-14:** "There is a Power, whose care / Teaches thy way along that pathless coast,—"
- **Line 16:** "Lone wandering, but not lost."

## ANAPHORA

Lines 21-24 use [anaphora](#) to emphasize just how hard the waterfowl is working, and just how close it is to its goal.

The speaker, referring to the waterfowl's arduous journey and eventual destination, notes that:

[...] soon that toil shall end  
 Soon shalt thou find a summer home, and rest,  
 [...]  
 Soon, o'er thy sheltered nest.

The repetition of "soon" emphasizes the speaker's belief that the waterfowl is very close to the end of its journey. Less literally, repeating "soon" three times makes these lines sound something like an incantation or a prayer. It sounds as if the speaker is actually praying for the bird to reach the peaceful end of its journey.

Indeed, as readers later learn in the final stanza, the speaker actually identifies with the waterfowl and sees its toil as a reflection of the speaker's own. As such, the speaker's emphasis on how soon the waterfowl will reach the end of its struggles may actually reflect a personal hope, or even plea, that the speaker's hardship, too, will soon draw to a close.

Ultimately, the anaphora may stand as an instance of the speaker's faith: just as the waterfowl continues to strive, knowing its goal is near, so too does the speaker have faith in how close God is, and how near to the speaker's goal God's guidance has led the speaker.

#### Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 21:** "soon"
- **Line 22:** "Soon"
- **Line 24:** "Soon"

## IMAGERY

"To a Waterfowl" is filled with vivid [imagery](#), almost all of which

focuses on descriptions of the natural world. Over the course of the poem, the imagery stresses both the beautiful and forbidding, or perilous, qualities of nature.

The first image begins in the first line, as the speaker looks on in awe as the waterfowl flies :

[...] 'midst falling dew  
While glow the heavens with the last steps of day,  
Far, through their rosy depths [...]

This description of the "rosy depths" of the sunset conjures a peaceful, calming environment, which has clearly arrested the speaker with its beauty. Such descriptions also give the natural world a divine quality (especially with the use of the word "heavens").

Using such clear and evocative imagery in the opening lines also immediately suggests that nature is worth paying attention to. Indeed, the speaker ultimately learns a lesson from nature, and the striking imagery of the poem suggests that looking closely at the visual beauty of nature can lead to useful insights.

Yet, at the same time, the natural world seems foreboding and unknowable, even dangerous, in the poem. The speaker frequently describes nature as large, overwhelming, and inscrutable—calling it “illimitable” (without limit) or an “abyss.” Nature in the poem often seems too vast for people to fully grasp or understand (much like God, maybe!)

Nature also comes across as rugged through the imagery of the “plashy brink / of weedy lake” and “rocking billows” of the “chaféd ocean side.” In lines 15 and 16, the speaker describes the air as “desert and illimitable” and “cold [and] thin,” imagery that conjures a harsh, unwelcoming picture of the natural world. Such imagery evokes the speaker’s awe and wonder in the face of God’s creation.

#### Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** “'midst falling dew, / While glow the heavens with the last steps of day, / Far, through their rosy depths”
- **Lines 7-8:** “darkly seen against the crimson sky, / Thy figure floats along.”
- **Lines 9-12:** “Seek’st thou the plashy brink / Of weedy lake, or marge of river wide, / Or where the rocking billows rise and sink / On the chaféd ocean side?”
- **Lines 17-18:** “All day thy wings have fanned, / At that far height, the cold thin atmosphere;”

#### CAESURA

"To a Waterfowl" uses [caesura](#) to interrupt or alter the pace and flow of the poem. The speaker seems calm and contemplative, not barreling through thoughts or lines. The pauses created by the many caesurae add to this feeling

throughout the poem.

In the first line, for example, a comma appears after the word "Whither," creating an immediate breath or hesitation in the line:

Whither, // 'midst falling dew

Note how that pause also precedes a flip in the poem's meter here. The first word is a [trochee](#) (a foot that goes stressed-unstressed, DUM-a), but after the caesura, the line changes to [iamb](#)s (the opposite of trochees: iambs go da-DUM).

The entire poem seems to be a struggle toward achieving regular meter, in fact, with caesura often interrupting the poem's rhythm. In both lines 3 and 7, for instance, a caesura after the first syllable ("Far" and "As") interrupts the flow of the preceding line.

On the one hand, this might be evidence of the speaker's attentive, patient thought process. At the same time, it can seem as if the speaker is trying to regain their breath, struggling through the verse much like the waterfowl of the poem struggles to reach its destination.

These caesurae, therefore, help to evoke the waterfowl's difficult journey. They suggest the patience required to overcome such a halting journey, as well as the moments of continual recovery (i.e., those pauses) required to fly through the harsh elements.

In other instances, caesurae also put emphasis on particular words or ideas. In line 13, for instance, a comma appears after "Power," almost dividing the line in half. By creating a hesitation after "Power," the speaker gives the word particular weight. The caesura both places the focus of the line on God and suggests that God is so powerful that mention of him requires a moment of pause or religious deference.

Another notable instance occurs in line 22, when a caesura occurs between the words "home, and rest." The pause creates a moment of rest within the line, as if the speaker, envisioning the peaceful nest the waterfowl will eventually reach, also experiences a moment of calm.

#### Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “Whither, 'midst”
- **Line 3:** “Far, through,” “depths, dost”
- **Line 7:** “As, darkly”
- **Line 10:** “weedy lake, or marge”
- **Line 13:** “a Power, whose care”
- **Line 18:** “far height, the cold”
- **Line 19:** “not, weary, to”
- **Line 22:** “home, and rest,”
- **Line 23:** “thy fellows; reeds”
- **Line 24:** “Soon, o'er”



- **Line 25:** "Thou'rt gone, the abyss"
- **Line 26:** "thy form, yet, on my heart"
- **Line 29:** "He, who, from"

## ENJAMBMENT

"To a Waterfowl" uses [enjambment](#) to make its language and [imagery](#) more striking. For example, enjambment occurs between lines 3 and 4: "dost thou pursue / Thy solitary way?" In this case, the enjambment separates the phrase "Thy solitary way?" from the rest of the sentence, making the phrase literally stand on its own—solitarily, you might say—in the shortened fourth line. Thus, the solitude of the waterfowl is emphasized through the "solitude" of the enjambed line.

In line 9, the enjambment after "plashy brink" serves a similar function. "Brink," in this case, refers to the edge or border of a "weedy lake." As such, by enjambling the line after the word "brink," the poem creates a literal brink or division within the stanza. The speaker thus uses the structure of the poem itself (the split between lines 9 and 10) in order to visually evoke this edge or the border.

Another notable instance of enjambment occurs in line 13: "There is a Power, whose care / Teaches thy way." Breaking the line after "whose care" stresses God's benevolence, emphasizing the great power and affection or tenderness the speaker sees in God. As such, the use of enjambment continues to underscore the content of the poem through the poem's form and structure.

### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "pursue / Thy"
- **Lines 5-6:** "eye / Might"
- **Lines 9-10:** "brink / Of"
- **Lines 11-12:** "sink / On"
- **Lines 13-14:** "care / Teaches"
- **Lines 25-26:** "heaven / Hath"

## CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) works just like [alliteration](#) in the poem, adding emphasis to certain moments and making the speaker's language generally more poetic and memorable.

In the second stanza, for example, sharp /k/ sounds mix with /s/ sounds, adding a crispness and eerie hiss to the speaker's description of the bird flying through the evening air:

As, darkly seen against the crimson sky,

Later, a flurry of consonance brings the speaker's natural [imagery](#) to life. Gruff /r/ sounds, sharp /k/ sounds, whooshing /w/ sound, buzzing /z/ sounds, and hissing /s/ sounds evoke the ruggedness of the landscapes being described—with their

crashing waves, weed-filled water, and vast depths:

Seek'st thou the plashy brink  
Of weedy lake, or marge of river wide,  
Or where the rocking billows rise and sink  
On the chaféd ocean side?

The poem frequently turns to [sibilance](#) in particular, which is present in both examples above, to create a whispery, awe-filled tone. Take the lines where the waterfowl makes it home:

Soon shalt thou find a summer home, and rest,  
And scream among thy fellows; reeds shall bend,  
Soon, o'er thy sheltered nest.

The /s/, /sh/, and /m/ sounds here make the language sound cohesive and soothing, reflecting the fact that the waterfowl has finally reached a place of rest.

### Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "depths, dost," "pursue"
- **Line 4:** "solitary"
- **Line 5:** "fowler's"
- **Line 6:** "Might mark," "flight"
- **Line 7:** "darkly seen against," "crimson sky"
- **Line 8:** "figure floats"
- **Line 9:** "Seek'st," "plashy," "brink"
- **Line 10:** "weedy," "lake," "or marge," "river," "wide"
- **Line 11:** "where," "rocking billows rise," "sink"
- **Line 12:** "ocean," "side"
- **Line 14:** "pathless coast"
- **Line 15:** "illimitable"
- **Line 16:** "Lone," "lost"
- **Line 17:** "fanned"
- **Line 18:** "far," "atmosphere"
- **Line 19:** "weary," "welcome land"
- **Line 20:** "night," "near"
- **Line 21:** "soon," "shall"
- **Line 22:** "Soon," "shalt," "summer home," "rest"
- **Line 23:** "scream among," "shall"
- **Line 24:** "Soon," "sheltered nest"
- **Line 25:** "abyss," "heaven"
- **Line 26:** "Hath," "swallowed," "heart"
- **Line 27:** "hath," "sunk," "lesson," "hast"
- **Line 30:** "boundless sky," "certain"
- **Line 31:** "long," "must trace," "alone"
- **Line 32:** "Will lead"



## VOCABULARY

**Whither** (Line 1) - Archaic form of "where."

**Midst** (Line 1) - Shortened form of "amidst" or "amid."

**Dost** (Line 3) - Archaic form of "do," as in "do you."

**Thou** (Line 3, Line 9, Line 22, Line 27) - Archaic form of "you."

**Thy** (Line 4, Line 6, Line 8, Line 14, Line 17, Line 23, Line 24, Line 26, Line 30) - Archaic form of "your."

**Vainly** (Line 5) - In vain; in a way that produces no result or is unsuccessful.

**Fowler** (Line 5) - One who hunts birds.

**Mark** (Line 6) - To note the position of. In this case, the fowler would "mark" the bird's position in the sky with the intent of shooting it down.

**Thee** (Line 6) - Archaic form of "you."

**Seek'st** (Line 9) - Archaic form of "Do you seek."

**Plashy** (Line 9) - Marshy, wet, or marked by splashing; full of puddles.

**Brink** (Line 9) - An edge or bank, especially of a river or lake.

**Marge** (Line 10) - An archaic form of "margin," or edge. In this case, a riverbank.

**Billows** (Line 11) - A wave, especially a great wave or surge of water.

**Chaféd** (Line 12) - Worn away or eroded. Bryant places an accent on the second syllable to adhere to the poem's [meter](#).

**Desert** (Line 15) - Deserted, empty.

**Illimitable** (Line 15) - Limitless or measureless; incapable of being bounded.

**Thou'rt** (Line 25) - Archaic conjunction of "you are."

**Abyss** (Line 25) - An immeasurably deep gulf or great space.

**Hath** (Line 26, Line 27) - Archaic form of "has."

**Hast** (Line 27) - Archaic form of "have."

**Aright** (Line 32) - Right, or correctly. In this case, God will lead the speaker's steps down the right path.

guide, but what's important to note here is that this form creates a repetitive rise and fall in each stanza—from a short trimeter line, to two longer pentameter lines, and then back to a trimeter line. This gives the poem a rhythmic, up-down sensation both sonically and visually that mirrors the flapping of a birds' wings, reflecting the waterfowl's arduous, long journey.

Also note how this steady, controlled form reflects the control that the speaker believes God has over life. The fact that the stanzas duplicate themselves, over and over again, contributes to the sense that there is a higher "Power" driving both the poem and the waterfowl.

## METER

Each [stanza](#) of "To a Waterfowl" sandwiches two lines of [iambic pentameter](#) between lines of iambic trimeter. An iamb is a poetic foot with an **unstressed-stressed** syllable pattern; pentameter means there are five iambs (for a total of ten syllables) per line, while trimeter means there are three iambs (for a total of six syllables) per line.

The use of iambs evokes a bird in flight, as the repetition of **unstressed-stressed** syllables mirrors the rise and fall of wings.

However, the poem often fails to meet the rigors of its own meter, making alterations or variations that give it a fluid, imperfect feel. Take lines 5-6:

Vainly the fowler's eye  
Might mark thy distant flight, to do thee wrong,

"Vainly" is actually a [trochee](#), which is the opposite of an iamb: a **stressed** beat followed by an **unstressed** beat. This adds emphasis to just how futile—how in vain—the fowler's attempt to shoot down the bird is.

The first three lines of the fifth stanza again feature some interesting variations on the poem's meter:

All day thy wings have fanned  
At that far height, the cold thin atmosphere;  
Yet stoop not, weary, to the welcome land,

The first line uses perfect iambic trimeter, featuring three feet of **unstressed-stressed** syllables. Like the content of the line, the meter reflects the way the bird has flown all day, without stopping.

However, in the second line, things begin to change. While it *might* be read as regular iambic pentameter, some readers might also hear extra **stressed** beats on "far" and "cold." Such stresses would evoke the intense effort required of the bird's journey. There's also a comma after the second foot ("far height,"), which causes a clear interruption in the meter. This



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"To a Waterfowl" is made up of eight four-line [stanzas](#), or [quatrains](#).

The stanzas also use an alternating (ABAB) [rhyme scheme](#) and [iambic pentameter](#). Typically, this kind of stanza is referred to as a heroic or elegiac quatrain. However, the poem deviates in one key way: rather than using iambic pentameter in *every* line, as is standard for a heroic quatrain, the first and fourth line of each stanza use iambic *trimeter* (which basically means these lines are much shorter).

We'll talk about that in more detail in the Meter section of this

pause seems to suggest a hesitation in the bird's flight, a moment of doubt or difficulty in which the endless rhythm of its wings is momentarily interrupted.

Such a feeling is only heightened in the third line, as two commas are inserted, one in the middle of the line's second foot ("not, wea-") and another after "weary." It is as if the waterfowl's flight has faltered again: after a long day of toil, its wings have missed a beat, and it has to struggle to regain its composure.

Such variations in meter regularly occur throughout the poem, capturing the struggle of the waterfowl, and of the speaker, to stay on the right path.

## RHYME SCHEME

"To a Waterfowl" follows a perfect ABAB [rhyme scheme](#), with each stanza using its own set of rhyme sounds. For example, the first three stanzas' rhyme scheme is:

ABAB CDCD EFEF

...And so on.

This steady rhyme scheme stands in notable contrast to the imperfect, variable [meter](#) within the poem. If the poem's imperfect meter represents the struggles of the speaker and the waterfowl to reach their destinations, then the perfect rhymes reveal that there is still a system pervading the poem.

That is, even though lines 1 and 2 differ in length, for instance, and even though each stanza has clear imperfections in meter—two signs that seem to indicate chaos or randomness—the poem still follows an overarching structure or pattern. This resembles the lesson the speaker heeds from the poem: that, even in the midst of one's struggles, there may be a larger power guiding them.



## SPEAKER

The speaker of "To a Waterfowl" is anonymous and genderless. While an argument can be made that it is William Cullen Bryant himself, who claimed to have thought of the poem after seeing a duck in flight while he was on a walk, there isn't anything in the poem itself that would assign the speaker a specific identity.

What is clear is that the speaker is someone who has a keen eye and deep appreciation for nature, and is also very religious. The speaker's vivid descriptions of the natural world are attuned to the smallest of details, from falling dew to the reeds of a nest. Likewise, the speaker addresses the poem directly to the waterfowl of the title, regarding it with an apparent reverence.

However, the speaker's appreciation of the waterfowl is not merely rooted in a love of nature: in fact, the speaker seems to commiserate with the bird because the speaker also faces a long, difficult journey. The speaker's true attachment to the waterfowl, therefore, stems from the speaker's faith: as shown

in lines 29-32, the speaker sees the bird's journey as proof of God's guidance and ability to lead the speaker through their own individual journey.

By keeping the speaker anonymous, the poem's message about faith in God also feels universal: the speaker is talking to, and about, everyone.



## SETTING

"To a Waterfowl" is set somewhere in the outdoors, as the speaker apparently watches a bird flying across the sky. The speaker notes that a hunter may be nearby, indicating that the setting is also likely outside of a city or urban area. Specifically, the poem takes place over a period of time, from twilight to nightfall, as the waterfowl first flies against the backdrop of a sunset and ultimately vanishes into the darkness of night.

Although the exact location of the speaker is never revealed, one could also argue that a portion of the poem takes place in the speaker's mind, as several stanzas are devoted to imagining the waterfowl's possible destinations.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

William Cullen Bryant was one of the Fireside Poets, a group of American poets in the 19th century largely based in the Northeast United States. The group is generally considered to include Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and James Russell Lowell. The Fireside Poets were immensely popular—the "fireside" moniker arose from the frequency at which people read their books around the fire at home—and they were the first group of American poets to rival the British in international fame.

The Fireside Poets were generally stuck to traditional [rhyme schemes](#) and [meters](#). The group emerged at the height of Romanticism, when British poets like John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and William Wordsworth were writing poetry that focused on individual emotional experiences and the wonder and power of the natural world.

In the United States, writers and thinkers were exploring similar notions. Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, for example, saw society as corrupting individuals and found value in returning to nature. "To a Waterfowl" embodies many of these themes through its focus on landscapes and wildlife and God's presence in nature.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Bryant wrote "To a Waterfowl" in 1815, less than 40 years after the United States declared independence from Great Britain. Bryant himself was born only five years after the U.S.

ratified the Constitution. In many ways, the U.S. was still forging its culture, trying to form an identity that was distinct from British influence, and Bryant was one of the first poets to be revered as an "American" poet.

Similarly, the United States had just emerged from the War of 1812, where they fought the British. While "To a Waterfowl" isn't an overtly nationalist or political poem, it embodies many ideas that were popular in the American conscience at the time, such as individuality and an ability to blaze a trail alone as well as faith in God and the notion that America and its citizens were guided by divine providence.

- [Why Animals Don't Get Lost](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/04/05/why-animals-dont-get-lost) — A New Yorker article on contemporary research into the ways birds and other animals navigate. (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/04/05/why-animals-dont-get-lost>)
- [The Waterfowl](https://www.paws.org/resources/waterfowl/) — Learn more about the species of bird that the speaker addresses throughout the poem. (<https://www.paws.org/resources/waterfowl/>)

#### LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT POEMS

- [Thanatopsis](#)



### MORE RESOURCES

#### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Biography of William Cullen Bryant](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-cullen-bryant) — A detailed account of Bryant's life and work, via the Poetry Foundation (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-cullen-bryant>)
- [A Brief Guide to the Fireside Poets](https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-fireside-poets) — An overview of the Fireside Poets from the Academy of American Poets. (<https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-fireside-poets>)



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