

Cetacean



SUMMARY

The speaker describes leaving Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, California, early on a Sunday morning, in a boat that was sixty-three feet long. The group was hoping to see some blue whales—which they did, the speaker says, near the Farallones Islands.

The speaker goes on to describe the whales, often using mathematical terms to do so. The speaker says that the whales swam slowly, their bodies creating only a slight angle against the water's surface as they rose above it. In an aside, the speaker also compares the whales' splotchy, gray bodies to slate, a kind of rock, adding that their dorsal fins were small and short, while their wide, flat heads made up one fourth of their overall lengths.

The whales blew air out of their blowholes right at the moment that their heads rose above the water, creating straight, narrow jets of condensation that looked like columns on a building, rising thirty feet into the air.

Soon enough, the whales ducked their heads back under the water's surface, causing their vast, long backs to come into view. They were roughly twenty feet longer than the speaker's boat.

The group caught a quick glimpse of the whales' small dorsal fins after the animals had finished breathing and dipped their heads under the water again.

At this point, the whales bent their backs and tails in preparation for diving deeper into the ocean.

The group could glimpse only the top part of the whales' tails before the animals disappeared, diving into the mysterious depths of the ocean at a slight angle.

for knowledge—the desire to *know* nature, to categorize and explain it. This tendency is reflected by the poem's title itself—a Latin word that refers to an animal within the order *Cetacea*, a taxonomic rank.

The speaker goes on to make a series of journalistic points about the appearance and behavior of the whales, trying to capture the experience of spotting them faithfully. Note how the speaker uses approximate measurements like “twenty feet” instead of just saying that “the whales have long backs,” for example, and in doing so reveals a desire for *precise* knowledge, a need to pin down the experience as accurately as possible.

But though the speaker might be able to capture *something* of this experience through language and observation, the encounter with the whales is nevertheless fleeting and mysterious. There's no real sense, in truth, that the human observers on the boat have learned anything profound about these majestic creatures. The poem is thus sympathetic towards the human desire for knowledge while also suggesting that these observations only serve to reinforce the natural world's deep sense of awe and mystery.

What's more, the whales' presence undermines humanity's sense of being special and unique among the creatures of the earth. To that end, the poem makes clear the whales' behavior is not *for* the humans watching at all; the whales aren't there to entertain people or facilitate their quest for knowledge. The whales blow incredible column-like jets of water, but they're not doing this to impress the people watching. It's the *humans* who go to the *whales*, not the other way around.

The whales are some of the largest creatures on earth, and yet they remain utterly elusive. They display both intelligence and sociability, living together as a kind of community totally independent of humanity. And, ultimately, the whales disappear almost as quickly as they show up, “vanish[ing]” back into the ocean's depths—a place where the human onlookers can't follow. The speaker doesn't necessarily lament their disappearance, but this person's attempt to record every moment of the encounter only serves to underline that there is something that *can't* be fully captured or understood by humanity.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-19



THEMES



THE MYSTERY AND WONDER OF NATURE

“Cetacean” explores the relationship between humanity and nature. No matter how detailed humanity's observations might get, the poem implies that the natural world will always have a kind of beauty that eludes people's grasp. It further suggests that human beings aren't the only intelligent creatures on earth, and as such that nature is filled with a sense of mystery and wonder that onlookers can appreciate and be inspired by, yet which they may never fully understand.

The speaker, on one level at least, represents humanity's thirst



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

...
... off the Farallones.

Before looking at the first stanza of the poem, it's worth considering the specific word choice for the title. The poem is about a specific animal commonly known as the blue whale, but the title uses the very scientific-sounding "Cetacean." This word refers to the biological order *Cetacea*, a large group of aquatic mammals (totaling 89 species of whales, dolphins, and porpoises), and signals one of its main themes: the quest for knowledge and understanding. The scientific title speaks to the practices of observation, assessment, and classification—more broadly, to humanity's insistence on categorizing the natural world.

The poem then starts by describing the speaker's boat trip to "observe Blue Whales." The speaker and others have woken up early on a Sunday morning and sailed off the San Francisco coast in a boat "sixty-three" feet in length. The precise measurement here reflects the speaker attempts to chronicle the experience of seeing the whales in precise language.

Also note how the poem starts with a bunch of short phrases lacking any conjunctions. This [asyndeton](#) creates a choppy, detached tone. The poem thus seems remarkably spare and unsentimental so far—almost like a scientist's brief field notes.

But, already, there's more going on here than meets the eye. First, note that it's a Sunday—which in Christian tradition is the day of rest. Perhaps, then, it's not too much of a stretch to think of the poem's set-up as a subtle nod to a kind of human restlessness when it comes to making sense of the world.

It's also worth noting how the poem makes no effort to build a will-they-or-won't-they-see-the-whales kind of suspense. After the caesura in line 3 (that dash after "Whales"), the speaker makes clear that the group did in fact spot some of the creatures "off the Farallones" (a group of islands in the Pacific Ocean). The poem thus immediately becomes about the encounter *itself*, and not *whether* that encounter is going to happen.

LINES 4-6

...
... their overall body-lengths).

The second stanza marks the arrival of the blue whales in the poem. The stanza consists of a series of observations that aim to paint an accurate, faithful picture of the experience.

Interestingly, though, there is a subtle tonal shift between this stanza and the first. The previous stanza was choppy and abrupt, stitched together out of short clauses. This stanza has a more stately, even elegant feel, as though the poem has

absorbed some of the whales' slowness.

The sounds of these lines further evoke the watery atmosphere. In line 4, for example, note the slippery [sibilance](#) and consonance of the /l/ sound, as well as the [assonance](#) of the round, open /oh/:

They were swimming slowly, and rose at a shallow angle

The whales are such an epic, magnificent sight that they make time itself seem to slow down (even if the actual sight of the whales is brief).

The speaker is saying that the whales' bodies only rise out of the water slightly, creating a "shallow angle" between themselves and the water. The use of the mathematical term "angle" here again speaks to the speaker's thirst for precise knowledge and understanding; the speaker is trying to apply measurements to a fairly immeasurable moment.

Lines 5 and 6 then appear within parentheses, seeming like an aside that the speaker is making. It's hard to say why the speaker does this, exactly, but one possible reason relates to the poem being a broader meditation on the nature of creativity. The speaker moves from simply describing the whales' movement to describing their actual bodies, and in doing so begins to rely on some more explicitly poetic language—perhaps because the whales have granted the speaker some spark of inspiration.

Specifically, the speaker uses a [simile](#), calling the whales are "grey as slate with white mottling." Slate is a type of rock—one that has been used throughout the centuries as a writing tool (giving rise to the [idiom](#) "a clean slate"). Gently, then, the poem hints that it might, in part, be about the act of writing/the creative process, in addition to being about the majesty and mystery of the whales themselves.

These lines are also filled with interesting sound patterns. There's that clear long /ay/ assonance of "grey as slate," for instance, as well as the [consonance](#) of /t/ and /d/ sounds found in words including "slate," "white mottling," "dorsals," "tiny," and "stubby."

There is a kind of tension here between the speaker's poetic language and more science-based, factual vocabulary. Perhaps the speaker wants to find words that do justice to the sight of the whales, and is caught between wanting to record the event and wanting to celebrate it.

LINES 7-9

They blew as ...
... in vertical sprays.

As the whales' heads rise above the water's surface, they blow jets of what looks like water up into the air (this is actually just condensation formed as the whales exhale through their

blowholes).

The start of line 7—"They blew" subtly recalls line 4 through the [anaphora](#) of "They." This makes the poem feel sequential and chronological, with the speaker recording the encounter in a way that strives to be truthful and authentic. Again, the speaker discusses the whales by focusing on their body parts, rather than in taking them in all at once—hinting that the experience is difficult to entirely comprehend, let alone render accurately in words.

The whales are just breathing; they're not putting on a performance, but just carrying on with their regular old whale existence. Still, the speaker seems somewhat awed by the sight—even if the language of the poem remains relatively straightforward. Notice, for example, how [alliteration](#) supports the [imagery](#) in line 7:

They blew as soon as their heads began to break the surface.

These booming /b/ sounds make the reader expel air. In a way, this evokes the whales' breathing and the impressive force as the jets of condensation escape their blowholes.

In lines 8 and 9, the speaker uses another [simile](#) to describe these "straight and slim" sprays rising "thirty feet" (another attempt to quantify the experience) above the whales. These jets are compared to "upright columns," borrowing an image from architecture. The simile, while visually powerful, thus once again speaks to human patterns of construction and containment. Columns help support a building, which, in essence, is a human-imposed limitation of space. Perhaps this reflects the way that the speaker tries to contain—and reconstruct—the encounter with the whales through this poem.

As in the previous stanza, [sibilance](#) plays up the watery environment, now evoking the "sprays" of the whales through words like "soon," "surface," "straight," "slim," and "sprays" itself. The [enjambment](#) between 8 and 9 is worth noting too, the uninterrupted sentence evoking the uninterrupted "column" rising into the air in one straight line.

LINES 10-12

*Then their heads ...
... the vessel herself.*

The whales start disappearing from view—and as they do, the stanzas get shorter and shorter. Here, the speaker describes how the whales' heads disappear before the "lengthy, rolling / expanse of their backs hove into our view." In other words, the whales dip their heads back under the water, and as they do so their backs briefly rise above the surface (think of the arc that diving dolphins make with their bodies to visualize this).

"Hove" is a nautical word derived from "heave"—as in "heave-

ho," a phrase associated with lifting something heavy (particularly in relation to boats). It's not quite a [metaphor](#), but the word does suggest how the speaker perceives the sheer weight and size of the whales. "Expanse" is not quite a metaphor either, but is a word often associated with a landscape. The speaker thus captures how the whales' backs seem so big it's almost as if they could be home to "rolling" hills.

The speaker then compares the whales' backs to the length of the boat itself, estimating that the former is "about twenty feet longer" than the latter. Again, then, the speaker embodies the human desire to observe and measure the world in order to acquire knowledge and understanding.

At the same time, the poem becomes distinctly *poetic* here once again, borrowing a technique from the world of concrete poetry to create a visual representation on the page of what's being described. While lines 10 and 11 focus on the whales, the much shorter line 12 belongs to "the vessel herself" (the speaker's boat). The poem thus visually reflects how much longer the whales are than the boat.

LINES 13-17

...
... *for diving.*

The fifth and sixth stanzas continue to get shorter as the whales prepare to dive into the ocean's depths. The whales have finished breathing and dipped their heads back into the water; as they do so, their backs and dorsal fins (i.e., the little fins on their backs) briefly break the water's surface. Finally, as they arch their bodies downward, preparing to dive, the tip of their tails appear.

These two stanzas, as well as the previous one, start with the word "then," creating [anaphora](#). This, in turn, reinforces the sense that the speaker is making a methodical, step-by-step recollection. As with the references to measurements throughout the poem, the sequential, logical order of events hints at the speaker's desire to understand and capture the experience accurately.

At the same time, the poem's form itself is distinctly poetic. Line 13 is half-empty, for example, as was line 12. Dividing up the stages of the whales' diving like this slows the poem down, making the sight of the whales last longer—suggesting this is an image the speaker wants to hold onto.

The empty space also suggests the imminent *disappearance* of the whales back into the mysterious depths of the ocean. The amount of white space surrounding this section of the poem in general evokes the almost incomprehensible size of said ocean—and how little humankind really knows about the world contained within.

As with earlier in the poem, this section thus has a tension between two motivations: the attempt to scientifically record what is happening, and the effort to render the *feeling* of that

experience through poetic language. Again, while the speaker is methodical in describing the whales' motions, carefully moving from one observation to the next, the speaker also makes choices that are expressly *literary* (ones you wouldn't often find in a science journal!).

The [alliteration](#) of "diminutive dorsals," for instance, is rather cutesy, making the small fins seem even smaller. That they "show[] briefly" speaks to the fleeting nature of the experience, and how little of whales' existence the speaker actually observes. This encounter is a mere glimpse, over almost as soon as it has started.

Alliteration between "briefly" and "blows" recalls the plosive /b/ sound in the third stanza ("They blew as soon [...]"), which evoked the power of the whales' expulsion of air upon surfacing. Slippery [sibilance](#) in words like "dorsals," "disperse," "backs," and "stocks" continues to evoke the watery setting.

LINES 18-19

*Then the flukes ...
... a shallow angle.*

The stanza begins with [anaphora](#) again: "Then." This continues the steady, chronological structure of the poem, in which the speaker methodically recalls a series of events. The speaker sees the flick of the whales' "flukes" (their tails), which signal that the whales are diving deep into the ocean. The whales disappear into the "deep again," where onlookers can't follow—thus bringing this short-lived encounter to an end.

Though the poem has been very restrained overall, refusing to reach for overly lofty language or intense emotion, the ending leaves the impression that something significant has happened here. Yet for all the speaker's meticulous recording of the whales' actions, it's hard to *explain* that significance. Perhaps the speaker doesn't *know* exactly what to make of this experience, in turn making the whales a kind of symbol for the limits of human knowledge.

The whales are undoubtedly mysterious, living their lives without any real care for the human world. They are intelligent, socially organized animals, and their existence subtly undermines any sense that human beings are unique and superior among nature's creatures.

To that end, the whales don't really "vanish[]" at all—they just move out of sight and go on living their whale lives. This vanishing, then, is only in the eye of the beholder—in this case, human beings. This, in turn, reinforces the sense that much of the natural world exists beyond human comprehension. All people like the speaker can do is observe the surface of things. Also note the [alliteration](#) between "visible" and "vanished" here, which draws out this contrast between knowing and not-knowing.

The poem ends on a phrase it already used: "shallow angle." As with the first time the speaker used these words—to describe

the way the whales' bodies barely broke the water's surface—the measurement is imprecise; the speaker is, understandably, unable to grant this "angle" an exact number of degrees. Again, this reflects the human inability to fully capture the grandeur of the natural world. That the angle is "shallow" further suggests that the speaker's understanding of nature itself is "shallow."

Finally, it's tempting to read this all as again being related to creative inspiration—which, for all its power, is often fleeting and mysterious. The human mind is often conceived of in spatial terms, with inspiration surging up from and then diving back into the deep recesses of an artist's brain.



SYMBOLS



THE WHALES

Whales in the poem may [symbolize](#) a few things. Most obviously, they represent the mysteriousness and wonder of the natural world—something the poem suggests exceeds human understanding.

Whales are enormous, intelligent creatures that exist entirely independent of human beings—who don't actually know all that much about them. The speaker's attempt to capture the whales' movements in precise, scientific language reflects the human desire to understand the natural world—something that the poem implies isn't always possible. The speaker sees only the surface of things—quite literally—and is unable to follow the creatures into the ocean's depths. Through the whales, then, the poem suggests the limits of human knowledge and understanding.

It's also important to note that whales have been fascinating people and showing up in art for a long time. For example, think of the biblical story of Jonah, who, in some translations, is famously being swallowed whole by a whale after disobeying God. And, of course, there's the idea of a "white whale" being something obsessively, yet fruitlessly, pursued (the [metaphor](#) is of course taken from the most famous whale tale of all: [Moby-Dick](#)).

In a more metaphorical reading of the poem, whales might also represent artistic inspiration or creativity. They rise from mysterious depths without any human input, briefly awe onlookers, and then vanish. Such is the nature of inspiration, the poem may be implying—something that human beings can't quite understand or control. The powerful blasts of condensed air that blow "as straight and slim as upright columns" evoke the sudden jolt of inspiration as well, the sensation akin to a lightbulb going off.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-19



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) appears throughout "Cetacean," adding moments of lyricism to what is an otherwise straightforward, methodical description of the whales. Take lines 7 to 8, for example, with their bold /b/ and slippery /s/ sounds:

They blew as soon as their heads began to break the surface.

The blows were as straight and slim [...]

The speaker is describing the marvelous sight of the whales breathing. As they expel air from their blowholes, it condenses and looks like powerful jets of water. The firm /b/ sound here requires the reader to similarly spurt out air, and it evokes the force with which these "blows" erupt. The alliteration in line 14's "briefly" and "blows" does the same thing.

The speaker again turns to alliteration in line 13 with the phrase "diminutive dorsals." The two /d/ sounds here are cutesy and perhaps even a bit cartoonish, evoking the speaker's impression of how the small dorsal fin looks on the huge "expanse" of the whales' backs.

Finally, line 18 uses alliteration for contrast:

Then the flukes were visible just before the creatures vanished,

The alliteration here draws attention to the whales' quick disappearance beneath the water; they are visible only for a moment before they vanish, or disappear, from the speaker's view.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Fisherman's," "San," "Francisco," "Sunday"
- **Line 2:** "stern, some sixty"
- **Line 4:** "swimming slowly"
- **Line 5:** "with white"
- **Line 7:** "blew," "soon," "began," "break," "surface"
- **Line 8:** "blows," "straight," "slim"
- **Line 9:** "sprays"
- **Line 13:** "diminutive dorsals"
- **Line 14:** "briefly," "blows"
- **Line 18:** "visible," "vanished"

ANAPHORA

The poem uses [anaphora](#) in every stanza apart from the first,

and this reflects the speaker's steady, methodical, and at times scientific attempt to record this experience with the whales.

Anaphora creates the sense that the scene is unfolding bit-by-bit, and that the speaker is taking care to record things every step of the way. The speaker says, "They" (the whales) "were swimming," "they were grey," "They blew," "Then their heads disappeared," "and then the diminutive dorsals / showed," "Then they arched their backs," and so forth. Readers get the idea that the speaker is trying to record the experience truthfully and authentically.

At the same time, there's also something ritualistic about all this anaphora. It's a bit hypnotizing, almost as though the speaker is in some sort of trance while watching these majestic creatures go about their whale business. This, in turn, means that the anaphora reflects two seemingly contradictory things at once: the speaker's attempts to understand nature, and the natural world's sense of mystery and wonder.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "They"
- **Line 5:** "they"
- **Line 7:** "They"
- **Line 10:** "Then"
- **Line 13:** "then"
- **Line 16:** "Then"
- **Line 18:** "Then"

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) appears here and there in "Cetacean," which makes sense. This is not an overly poetic poem, and too much of any one sonic device might feel rather artificial. Assonance pops up in brief moments, adding touches of musicality and drawing readers' attention to certain words and images without overwhelming the poem.

One interesting moment comes in the second stanza. Note the rounded long /oh/ sounds and short /ah/ sounds here:

They were swimming slowly, and rose at a shallow angle

These open /oh/ sounds evoke that "slow" swimming, while the shortness of those /ah/ sounds suggest the "shallow[ness]" of the "angle" the speaker mentions.

The next line features assonance as well, with "they were grey as slate." This assonance notably appears within the poem's first moment of figurative language (specifically a [simile](#)), and thus draws attention to the fact that the poem has suddenly become more self-consciously *poetic*. Having spotted the whales, it's as though the speaker wants to try to render the experience in language that goes beyond the somewhat prosaic tone of the opening lines.

Another subtle moment of assonance worth noting comes in the poem's final line, with the quick, clipped /ih/ sounds of "slipping into." The shortness of this sound evokes the suddenness of the whales' disappearance under the water.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "San Francisco"
- **Lines 2-2:** "s /ixty-three feet"
- **Line 3:** "to," "Blue"
- **Line 4:** "slowly," "rose," "at," "shallow"
- **Line 5:** "they," "grey," "slate," "tiny," "stubby"
- **Line 7:** "blew," "soon"
- **Line 8:** "upright columns"
- **Line 9:** "thirty," "vertical"
- **Line 12:** "vessel herself"
- **Line 19:** "slipping into," "at," "shallow"

ASYNDETON

The [asyndeton](#) in "Cetacean" is important to the poem's tone. Note in the first stanza, for example, how the spare, fragmented language suggests someone jotting down notes in a journal or logbook. The lack of conjunctions keeps the language swift, as though the speaker wants to give the reader a very quick understanding of the poem's setting—thereby allowing the main event, the whales' arrival, to come sooner.

There's also something scientific about the asyndeton in this opening stanza, as though the speaker initially opts for language that is distinctly *unpoetic* in order to create a more accurate record of the experience. The speaker seems to want to use as few words as possible to get the point across.

This approach, of course, changes drastically once the whales arrive. The poem becomes more stately, slow, and elegant in tone—as if in tribute to the whales themselves (though the speaker still makes some rather science-y observations). Gone is the intense asyndeton, for the most part, as the speaker allows for more descriptive language.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Wharf, San Francisco, Sunday, early, / our vessel, bow to stern, some sixty-three feet"
- **Line 5:** "mottling, dorsals"

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) occurs throughout "Cetacean," helping to bring the encounter with the whales to life for the reader. Much of this is more specifically [sibilance](#), which we discuss separately in this guide.

One striking example of consonance comes in line 4, where, in addition to that sibilance, the gentle /l/ and /w/ sounds combine with round /oh/ [assonance](#) to evoke the whales' slow, steady

movements through the water:

They were swimming slowly, and rose at a shallow angle

Later, in lines 7-9, strong /b/ and /k/ sounds in words like "blew," "break," "columns," and "vertical" evoke the forceful eruption of air as the whales breathe. Combined with the stanza's many /s/ sounds, and readers can almost feel those "sprays" coming off the page.

Heavy /d/ sounds throughout the poem reflect the whales' size and majesty, often imbuing the lines themselves with a sense of weight. Take the phrase "their heads disappeared underwater" in line 10, for example.

Overall, the frequent use of consonance in the poem suggests that the speaker has crafted all these descriptions of the whales with intense care. The speaker is clearly awed by these animals, and this awe is reflected in the carefully-chosen sounds of the poem.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Fisherman's Wharf, San Francisco, Sunday"
- **Line 2:** "vessel," "to stern, some sixty," "feet"
- **Line 3:** "Blue Whales," "off," "Farallones"
- **Line 4:** "were swimming slowly," "shallow angle"
- **Line 5:** "slate," "with white mottling, dorsals tiny," "stubby"
- **Line 7:** "blew," "soon," "began," "break," "surface"
- **Line 8:** "blows," "straight," "slim," "columns"
- **Line 9:** "to thirty feet," "vertical sprays"
- **Line 10:** "heads disappeared underwater," "lengthy, rolling"
- **Line 11:** "expanse," "backs," "hove," "view"
- **Line 12:** "vessel herself"
- **Line 13:** "diminutive dorsals"
- **Line 14:** "briefly," "blows," "dispersed," "heads had"
- **Line 15:** "under"
- **Line 16:** "backs," "tail stocks ready"
- **Line 17:** "diving"
- **Line 18:** "flukes," "visible," "vanished"
- **Line 19:** "slipping," "deep," "again," "shallow angle"

ENJAMBMENT

[Enjambment](#) is used frequently throughout the middle chunk of "Cetacean." The poem at times reads more like a scientist's field notes or prose than actual poetry, and enjambment reflects that; the speaker's sentences aren't bound by line breaks, but rather flow more naturally and conversationally down the page.

Notably, the poem starts off with [end-stopped](#) lines, for the most part; while the speaker's thoughts do indeed sprawl down the page, there's a clear *pause* indicated at the end of every line

from lines 1 through 7. This creates a steady, methodical pace. As soon as the whales break the surface of the water, however, enjambment steps in—ramping up the poem's pace and excitement. Take lines 8 and 9, for example:

The blows were as straight and slim as upright
columns
rising to thirty feet in vertical sprays.

Here, the speaker describes the way that the whales forcefully expel air from their blowholes. Condensation makes that air look like there's a column of "spray" rising above the animals, and the enjambment here reflects the impressive sight: the columns themselves are apparently too immense to be contained by a single line.

The next three stanzas are then all enjambed. Again, this speeds up the poem and in doing so reflects the speaker's awe and excitement. Enjambment also evokes the whales' immense size, as one long sentence stretches across multiple lines in each stanza. In the fourth stanza in particular, the speaker plays with enjambment to visually represent the size of the whales in comparison to the boat: lines 10 and 11 are much longer than line 12, in which "the vessel herself" appears.

Enjambment then continues through the next two stanzas, pulling the reader down the page in a way that suggests the whales preparing to dive deeper into the ocean. Yet once the whales disappear, the enjambment stops; without their awe-inspiring majesty, the speaker returns to the more plodding end-stops with which the poem began.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "columns / rising"
- **Lines 10-11:** "rolling / expanse"
- **Lines 11-12:** "longer / than"
- **Lines 13-14:** "dorsals / showed"
- **Lines 14-15:** "had / gone"
- **Lines 16-17:** "ready / for"

SIBILANCE

"Cetacean" is packed with [sibilance](#), the swishing, slippery sounds of which evoke the poem's ocean setting. Think about the sounds of the sea—the way waves splash and send sprays of salt water into the air (and note how "splash" and "sprays" are sibilant words themselves!).

The poem uses sibilance right from the start, with:

[...] Fisherman's Wharf, San Francisco, Sunday, early,
our vessel, bow to stern, some sixty-three feet,

Already, then, the poem turns to sound to evoke its setting for the reader. Sibilance then continues throughout the entire

poem, never letting readers forget that this is all taking place at sea—essentially a foreign realm, given that human beings live on land. Part of the poem's point is that the natural world is mysterious and somewhat foreign to human beings, so it makes sense that the speaker takes care to make the entire poem evoke a world with which people are not all that familiar (at least, not in the sense that whales are).

Sibilant sounds are also, by their very nature, hushed and quiet. This further reflects the sense of awe and wonder that fills the poem.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Fisherman's," "San Francisco, Sunday"
- **Line 2:** "vessel," "stern, some sixty-three"
- **Line 4:** "swimming slowly," "shallow"
- **Line 5:** "slate," "dorsals," "stubby"
- **Line 7:** "soon," "surface"
- **Line 8:** "straight," "slim"
- **Line 9:** "sprays"
- **Line 10:** "disappeared"
- **Line 11:** "expanse," "backs"
- **Line 12:** "vessel herself"
- **Line 13:** "dorsals"
- **Line 14:** "showed," "dispersed"
- **Line 16:** "backs," "stocks"
- **Line 18:** "flukes," "just," "vanished"
- **Line 19:** "slipping," "shallow"

SIMILE

There are two [similes](#) in "Cetacean." The first coincides with the arrival of the whales in the poem. In line 5, the speaker describes the whales' coloring:

(they were grey as slate with white mottling, dorsals
tiny and stubby,

Slate is a kind of rock, historically used to create writing tablets similar to blackboards. The poem can be interpreted as a kind of [extended metaphor](#) for the process of writing and creative inspiration, and it might not be a coincidence that the speaker becomes more poetic (in the sense of using [figurative language](#)) when the whales actually show up.

In the next stanza, the speaker concentrates on the jets of water that whales form above their blowholes:

The blows were as straight and slim as upright
columns
rising to thirty feet in vertical sprays.

This simile relates to architecture, likening the jets of spray (made up of condensation as whales breathe) to "upright columns." Columns are supporting structures for buildings, and,

in a way, these jets do support the whales to dive back down into the deep. The mention of columns also suggests the straightness of these jets, while also speaking to the human behavior of design, construction, and containment. A building is a kind of limitation imposed on space, which is not all that far removed from the speaker's attempt to capture the encounter with the whales in another kind of container—the poem itself.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "they were grey as slate"
- **Lines 8-9:** "The blows were as straight and slim as upright columns / rising to thirty feet in vertical sprays."

EXTENDED METAPHOR

Though the poem never mentions it specifically, it's possible (though by no means necessary!) to interpret "Cetacean" as a kind of [extended metaphor](#) for the poetic—or, more generally, artistic—process itself. Read this way, the poem describes this process as mysterious and powerful, but all too fleeting. In this reading, the whales' appearance represents the sudden surge of creative inspiration—something that the speaker feels deeply yet can't totally capture or control.

People often speak of "depth" when talking about the mind, suggesting that poems (or other creations) get retrieved from a near-bottomless pool of possibilities. In this way, the ocean could represent ideas that are as yet uncreated—unfathomed, perhaps—and the whales could be read as the moment of inspiration rising unbidden to the surface.

It's also worth noting how the poem changes tone once the whales actually arrive. The first stanza is rather sketch-like, and doesn't really read like a typical poem. Instead, these opening lines read like a set of field notes. But once the whales appear, the poem becomes much more conventionally *poetic*.

Suddenly, the speaker uses lots of devices that make the lines feel elevated and literary—tools like [alliteration](#), as though the speaker feels inspired by the whales. The speaker even slips into using a [simile](#) to compare the whales' color to "slate" (a type of rock linked to writing) and the sprays from their blowholes to "upright columns" (suggesting intentional construction—as in a building or, perhaps, a poem).

With the above in mind, the speaker could be talking about poems (as well as whales) in the last stanza. The way the whales "vanish[]" seems characteristic of how creative inspiration can come and suddenly go—similarly disappearing back into the mysteries of "the deep."

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-19



VOCABULARY

Fisherman's Wharf (Line 1) - A famous waterfront in San Francisco, California. It's touristy, hence its status as a point of departure for boat tours (e.g., to see whales, or, quite differently, Alcatraz).

Bow to stern (Line 2) - From the front of the ship to the back of the ship.

Farallones (Line 3) - A group of islands off the coast of San Francisco, California.

Slate (Line 5) - A type of rock.

Mottling (Line 5) - Splotchy coloration.

Dorsals (Line 5, Line 13) - The small fin on a whale's back.

Stubby (Line 5) - Short and thick.

Expanse (Line 11) - Wide, open space.

Hove (Line 11) - Lifted.

Diminutive (Line 13) - Small.

Dispersed (Line 14) - Spread out and disappeared.

Tail Stocks (Line 16) - The part of a whale's tail just below the fins.

Flukes (Line 18) - The fan-shaped parts of the tail.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Cetacean" consists of 19 lines broken up into five tercets (three-line stanzas) and two [couplets](#). The stanzas thus get shorter as the poem goes along.

The first three stanzas are the longest, as the speaker introduces the trip and begins to describe the whales. As soon as the whales begin to dive back into the water, however, the stanzas become less and less dense.

For example, stanza 4 ("Then their heads [...] the vessel herself") has less text than does stanza 3. Stanza 4 is also a subtle example of concrete poetry; note how lines 10 and 11 stretch out to represent the length of whales' bodies, which then immediately contrasts with the shortness line 12 that belongs to "the vessel [the boat] herself":

Then their heads disappeared underwater, and the
lengthy, rolling
expanse of their backs hove into our view — about
twenty feet longer
than the vessel herself.

The following two stanzas then get shorter and shorter still, the sudden increase of white space evoking the whales'

disappearance into the water; it's as though the speaker's observations themselves are being swallowed by the ocean.

METER

"Cetacean" is written in [free verse](#), meaning it doesn't use a regular [meter](#). This keeps the poem feeling prose-like and natural, like these are simply the speaker's immediate observations and reflections upon seeing the whales. This also shifts the focus away from the poem's *rhythms* to its word choices, and makes poetic elements like [alliteration](#) and [simile](#) stand out more prominently.

Most of the poem's lines are quite long as well, which makes its three very short ones all the more striking. Line 12—"than the vessel herself"—visually represents the way that the boat is dwarfed by the long length of the blue whales (described in the preceding two lines), while lines 15 ("gone under") and 17 ("for diving") both relate to the whales' "vanish[ing]" beneath the water's surface. This emphasizes the whales' mysterious, majestic presence, accenting their absence by creating lines surrounded by space.

RHYME SCHEME

As a [free verse](#) poem, "Cetacean" has no [rhyme scheme](#). In fact, there aren't any true rhymes in the poem at all. [Consonance](#) and [assonance](#) lend the poem music and may make readers *think* of rhyme on occasion (in moments like "blew as soon," or "expanse of their backs"), but again there's no overarching pattern of rhyme here. Using rhyme would perhaps feel too self-consciously *poetic* and false a poem about the mysteries of nature.



SPEAKER

The poem gives very little away about its speaker, shifting the reader's focus almost entirely onto the whales themselves. As with any poem, though, there *is* a speaker, and in this case it's an individual who is part of a boat trip to see blue whales. Like the other people on the boat, the speaker wants to "observe" the whales, a word that carries with it connotations of ceremony and ritual (think of how people may "observe" a minute's silence).

The speaker seems to be pulled in two directions at once. On the one hand, the speaker wants to quantify everything—the length of the boat, the size of the whales' heads in relation to their bodies, the height of the spray that erupts as they breathe. This tendency also comes out in the methodical, chronological way in which the poem takes the reader through the encounter, the speaker carefully breaking down each movement the whales makes. The speaker, then, has a desire to *know* and *understand*.

But the speaker *also* wants to capture the more emotional,

moving part of this experience—things that defy such precise recording. Once the whales actually arrive, the speaker casts off the detached, choppy lines of the first stanza and opts for more carefully constructed language, using techniques like [alliteration](#) ("swimming slowly") and [simile](#) ("grey as slate"). The speaker seems at once like an unsentimental poet and a poetic amateur scientist.



SETTING

The poem takes place during a boat trip off the coast of San Francisco, California. The boat takes off from a real place called Fisherman's Wharf, a popular tourist area offering boat trips to see sights including blue whales and even the infamous Alcatraz Island.

The speaker takes care to describe the setting as accurately as possible for the reader—pointing out that it's early on a Sunday morning, that the boat is "some sixty-three feet" long, and that the whales are spotted "off the Farallones," a group of islands off the California coast.

But also note how the poem plays with time in the opening stanza compared to the rest of the poem. The first stanza compresses a fair length of time into a small space—referencing the boat leaving the harbor and finding the whales in short, sketchy phrases. This signals that the human side of the poem—what happened on the shore, who is on the boat, etc.—is far less important than the whales themselves.

Once the whales do appear, the poem takes everything very slowly—even though the actual sight of the whales doesn't last long. The speaker describes the whales' actions bit-by-bit, step-by-step, trying to faithfully capture the experience—and then to reconstruct that experience through poetic language.

Also note how the setting emphasizes the distance between the whales and the observers. The onlookers on the boat can only see the parts of the whales as they breach the surface of the water; they never actually see the whales' entire bodies all at once. This reflects the way that human beings may never be able to fully grasp or understand the mysteries of the natural world, which extends well beyond the human realm. The speaker's understanding of the whales remains shallow, surface-level. The whales may briefly come into view, but then they dive below the water where human beings can't follow.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Peter Reading published "Cetacean" in his 2002 collection *Faunal*. The word "Cetacean" comes from the Latin *Cetacea*, the name for a taxonomic order of marine mammals. Many of the poems in this collection feature Latin names as well, and

revolve around similar themes related to the wonder of the natural world and its many mysterious creatures—as well as humanity's attempts to understand, and often dominate, those creatures.

Whales have long occupied a prominent place in the human imagination. They may even appear in the Bible (though the Hebrew phrase, "dag gadol," translates more literally as "big fish"). Earth's largest creatures appear in the book of Jonah (of getting-swallowed-by-a-whale fame) and Job, for example.

The ocean has always been a place of great mystery, and the fact that it can hold such immensely large animals—living their whale lives far away from humankind—has always been of interest in literature. Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is perhaps the most obvious example, while D.H. Lawrence's "[Whales Weep Not!](#)" is a much more flamboyant poetic take on the same creature.

There are countless poems about the animal kingdom, and plenty that also see the animal kingdom and/or the ocean as a potential source of—and [metaphor](#) for—creative inspiration. The whales provide the speaker with a moment of contemplation in an otherwise hectic world (indeed, the boat launched from one of the most tourist-packed places in the U.S.!). With this in mind, one interesting poet for comparison is Elizabeth Bishop; check out "[The Fish](#)" and "[The Moose](#)" for starters. "[The Thought-Fox](#)" by Ted Hughes is also relevant here, as a poem that more explicitly links animals and creativity.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Cetacean" is a contemporary poem. The speaker, possibly a tourist, takes a boat trip from Fisherman's Wharf—a touristy waterside area in San Francisco (from which trips to Alcatraz Island are another popular attraction).

Blue whales have long fascinated humankind, though the nature of this interest has changed over time. The blue whale is famously the largest creature on earth, sometimes growing to up to 100 feet in length and 200 tons in weight. Its heart alone can weigh as much as a car!

The speaker carefully describes the different parts of these animals, beginning the poem with a word straight from the lexicon of scientific classification. Dolphins and porpoises are also types of cetacean.

Though the blue whale has always been a kind of ambassador

for the weird and wonderful things living under the ocean's surface, it was hunted voraciously by humankind throughout the early-to-mid 20th century. Around 360,000 were slaughtered before the 1966 International Whaling Commission outlawed the practice. The pursuit of whales, primarily for their oil, features prominently in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poet's Voice](#) — Peter Reading reads a selection of his poems. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcioTpfIBfk>)
- [Reading's Obituary](#) — An overview of Reading's life from The Guardian. (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/dec/02/peter-reading>)
- [The Blue Whale](#) — Pictures and facts about the earth's largest creature. (<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/b/blue-whale/>)
- [Reading's Collected Poems](#) — A review of Reading's third volume of collected poetry. (<https://www.popmatters.com/collected-poems-3-1997-2003-2496246219.html>)
- [Whales on Film](#) — Check out some incredible footage from the BBC. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvtMTV9mMSc>)



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