The Eagle

POEM TEXT

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls:
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

SUMMARY

The eagle grasps the rocky cliff with his gnarled talons, standing on a remote mountaintop so high that it almost seems to touch the sun. He stands there at the center of the wide blue world.

Far below him, the waves of the ocean look like wrinkles in cloth. He observes the world from his fortress-like mountain—and then swoops down as fast as a bolt of lightning.

THEMES

THE AWESOME POWER OF NATURE

This short poem describes an eagle perched watchfully above a grand landscape, ready to hunt. When at last the bird spots its prey and attacks, it descends like a "thunderbolt," a figure of awe-inspiring power (and one with all sorts of mythological connotations, evoking the might of gods like Zeus and Thor). Through its depiction of this astonishing eagle, the poem illustrates the power, beauty, and ruthlessness of the natural world.

The poem's speaker presents the eagle as a masterful figure in a sweeping landscape. Perched haughtily above the wide "azure world," this eagle surveys his terrain like a god. Just to look at a majestic bird like this, the speaker's wonderstruck language suggests, is to come face to face with the power of nature itself: as the king of this mountainous landscape, the eagle seems to represent all the might of the natural world.

That might is majestic and compelling in part because it's dangerous. When the eagle plunges from its perch "like a thunderbolt"—a thunderbolt about to smite some unsuspecting rabbit or squirrel far below—the poem suggests that being amazed by nature also means approaching its power with respect and humility (and a little wholesome fear). This eagle, in short, sums up all of nature's power, glory, and danger in one feathery body. (Perhaps the poem also hints at the power, glory, and danger of some of the qualities eagles often symbolize, like freedom, insight, and intellect.)

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;

If readers skipped over the poem's title, the first line would seem deeply mysterious. The speaker launches straight into a description of a figure perched at the top of a mountain, clinging to the rock with his "crooked hands": a bit of imagery that is at once a vivid depiction of an eagle's knobbly talons and a peculiar moment of personification. Those "crooked hands" make this eagle seem like a strange old man sitting on a mountainside—or, for that matter, a god who "clasps" the whole mountainside *in* his hands.

Even in this first line, then, readers get the sense that this eagle has a little more power and personality than your everyday bird. The speaker seems to be looking up at this creature with real awe—and seeing, not just a marvel of nature, but a powerful consciousness. Perhaps the personification suggests the speaker is even imagining their way *into* that consciousness a little bit, feeling what it would be like to actually *be* the eagle.

The immediacy of this first line helps to evoke the speaker's wonder. The way the speaker launches right into this scene makes it feel as if the eagle has suddenly—and breathtakingly—caught their eye. Listen to the way the alliteration and consonance in this line help to set the scene:

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;

Those tough /c/ and /cr/ sounds are as rocky as the landscape they describe—and make the eagle's "crooked" talons feel like a natural part of the "crag." This bird is in its element.

LINES 2-3

Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.

The speaker now summons a whole sweeping landscape around the eagle in two short lines. Take a look at the way the speaker's imagery evokes dizzying heights, wide-open spaces, and pure majesty:

Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.

Standing "close to the sun," the eagle doesn't just seem to be at the top of a truly mighty mountain. He feels even more like a god than he did in the first line: he's almost able to touch the heavens themselves. Perhaps he's also "close" to the sun in the sense that he's *similar* to the sun, a figure of blazing power. And if he's "ringed with the azure world," he seems to be standing at the exact center of a vast landscape, as if the whole world revolved around him.

The "azure world" in particular bears a closer look: these two simple words pack a punch. The "azure" (or bright, rich, jewel-like blue) of this landscape evokes both the vast sky and the wide sea. But it also gives readers a powerful sense of *distance*. Readers who have had the chance to stand on top of a mountain and admire the view will know that the further you look into the distance, the bluer the landscape appears. (That's because of the same atmospheric effect that makes the sky itself look blue.) This eagle's "azure world" thus feels truly immense: stretching far out in every direction.

And the eagle is at the heart of it all. In only three lines, then, the speaker has conjured not just a vast setting, but also a creature who seems to be the solitary master of everything around him. Take a look at the way the poem's only caesura gives the eagle command of this landscape:

Ringed with the azure world, || he stands.

Set off by that comma, the words "he stands" literally stand alone in those "lonely lands"—the master of all he surveys.

As the stanza comes to its end, readers will notice that it is a rhyming tercet: each of its three lines features a perfect end rhyme ("hands," "lands," and "stands"). The meter thus far has been iambic tetrameter, or lines with four iambs (da-DUMs). These latter two lines mess with that meter, however, adding trochees in their first feet (DUM-da):

Close to | the sun | in lone- | ly lands,
Ringed with | the az- | ure world, | he stands.

These initial stressed beats add emphasis to these lines, and also create a swinging rhythm that might evoke the eagle surveying the landscape.

LINES 4-5

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls:
He watches from his mountain walls,

The first stanza has painted a picture of a majestic eagle, master of his "azure world." The second will watch in astonishment as that eagle exercises his power.

This new stanza opens with another evocation of just how vast the landscape is, and how high the eagle is above it. Take a look at the imagery here:

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls:

Again, just a few words do a whole lot of work here. That "wrinkled sea" suggests a dizzying height: the ocean is so far below the eagle that it looks like crumpled cloth. And if the ocean is "crawling," it's low down, certainly, but perhaps it's even subservient to the godlike eagle.

The eagle, meanwhile, isn't paying attention to the sweep of the world around him. He's "watch[ing]" intently, peering down from "mountain walls" that could almost be the walls of a castle or a fortress, not just cliffs.

Here, the reader might pick up on a subtle (and meaningful) metrical change. Again, this poem's basic meter is iambic tetrameter—that is, lines of four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. The last two lines, however, started with a trochee, a foot with a DUM-da rhythm, like this:

Ringed with | the az- | ure world, | he stands.

That strong first stress gives lines 2 and 3 a swinging motion, like an eagle turning his head to survey his domain.

But here, suddenly, the meter tightens up. Every line in the second stanza is in pure iambs, like this:

He watch- | es from | his moun- | tain walls,

The effect of this change is subtle, but noticeable: this sharper, tighter, more regular meter matches the eagle's newly focused attention. He's "watch[ing]"—and now, he seems to have spotted what he was looking for.

LINE 6

And like a thunderbolt he falls.

The last line releases all the poem's built-up tension in a single blow. And that's only fitting: in this line, the eagle dives, with all the swiftness, suddenness, and power of a "thunderbolt."

That simile doesn't just evoke the eagle's terrifying and beautiful animal strength. It also links him to *mythological* power, relating him to thunder-gods like Zeus or Thor. Once again, there's the sense that this poem's speaker doesn't just appreciate this eagle as an eagle, but as an expression of something godlike.

That's one reason that many critics have read this poem symbolically. Besides being an intense, awestruck depiction of a real live bird, this poem might also make readers think of all the things eagles have often been used to represent—from insight to freedom to God. Just for example: this poem about an eagle

could also be a poem about *inspiration*—about what it feels like to suddenly want to write a poem about an eagle! This eagle's power and lightning-swiftness might evoke how it feels to be so awestruck by something beautiful that you desperately need to put it into words.

The shape of this final line certainly suggests that there's some correspondence between the way an eagle works and the way a poem works. Take a look at the emphatic end-stop that closes this poem:

> And like a thunder-bolt he falls.

The steady rhymes and rhythm of the stanza help the poem pick up unstoppable speed—just like the diving eagle. All that speed whacks straight into the final word—"falls"—and comes to an abrupt and complete end—just like the end of the life of whatever unsuspecting little animal has just become this eagle's dinner.

By closely mimicking the eagle's motion, this poem embodies all its majesty and might: poet-power and eagle-power seem to go hand in hand here.

SYMBOLS

THE EAGLE

This poem's eagle could symbolize any number of things, from insight to inspiration to God. By vividly describing a highly symbolic bird, the poem opens up many avenues for such interpretations—without insisting that the reader choose any one in particular.

Eagles are traditional symbols of intellect, so there's the possibility that this poem describes what those qualities feel like: the eagle's power, his sharp eye, and his sudden dive might all evoke how it feels to think deeply and freely, and then hit on a new insight. For that matter, the eagle might symbolize the speaker's *poetic* inspiration—the feeling of being suddenly struck by the idea that leads one to write a poem like this!

And some readers have also seen the eagle as a symbol for God—an idea the speaker nods to through personification and "thunderbolt[s]." In this reading, the eagle's mastery of the world and sudden, lightning-quick descent might evoke the way that one version of God relates to creation: sitting watchfully above, then darting down to deal out ferocious judgment.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

By personifying the eagle, the speaker gives it a mysterious, godlike mind of its own.

If readers didn't know this poem was about an eagle, they might not guess for a minute! The poem's first image is of an unknown "he" who grasps a "crag" in his "crooked hands." There's something strange about that picture: the reader might imagine either a gnarled old man clinging to the side of a cliff or a god holding that entire cliff *in* his hands. And both of those impressions linger even as the reader begins to get the idea. There's something of both the wise old man and the almighty god in this eagle. The fact that the sea below the bird is also personified as "craw[ling]" adds to the image of the eagle as the master of his domain, perched high above the lowly, subservient sea.

Presenting the eagle in the form of a person—a "he"—the speaker also suggests that the eagle has a consciousness: an identity of his own, and intentions of his own. The eagle doesn't appear as an unthinking, instinctive force of nature, but as an awe-inspiring *character*.

And perhaps this personification is a way for the speaker to identify with the eagle, sharing in its experience, feeling how it might feel to fall from a cliffside "like a thunderbolt," but with full human consciousness. A real live eagle, after all, doesn't ever seem to say "Wheeeee!"—but a human can feel the exhilaration of an eagle's flight just by imagining it from the ground.

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Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6

PARALLELISM

The poem's parallelism gives it some of its ringing, dramatic tone, and creates tension and anticipation.

All the action of the poem is built around a parallel construction. The speaker follows the eagle's behavior with a repeated "he [verb]s": "he clasps," "he stands," "he watches," "he falls."

And take a look at where those repeated phrases fall. There are two of these parallel lines in each stanza: one of these statements always appears near the beginning, and one at the very end, like this:

> He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
> Close to the sun in lonely lands,
> Ringed with the azure world, he stands.

That movement gives the poem its subtle momentum. Like the speaker, the reader ends up watching to see what the eagle is going to do next. And the poem thus moves just like the eagle. Each stanza covers two stages of the eagle's transition from watcher to hunter, going from firmly-planted stillness ("clasps") to swift, silent, terrifying motion ("falls").

The poem's parallelism thus helps the reader to share in the speaker's experience, staring as if hypnotized to see what this amazing bird might be about to do next.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "He clasps"
- **Line 3:** "he stands"
- **Line 5:** "He watches"
- **Line 6:** "he falls"

SIMILE

The poem's single simile appears in its final line, when, "like a thunderbolt," the eagle "falls" on his unsuspecting prey. That simile evokes the eagle's astonishing (and dangerous) speed and strength: whatever that "thunderbolt" hits isn't going to be too happy about it.

Imagining the eagle as a "thunderbolt," the speaker doesn't just associate it with the awesome natural power of a storm—the crackling force with which a bolt of lightning shoots down from the sky. The speaker also subtly connects the eagle to mythical or legendary figures like Thor or Zeus, mighty gods of thunder. As a "thunderbolt," the eagle seems to be something between a weapon of the gods and a god himself.

Putting this powerful simile at the very end of the poem, the speaker also mimics exactly the action being described. This "thunderbolt" moves so fast that the speaker is left breathless and silent, just staring at the place the eagle was only a second ago. The poem ends as abruptly as the eagle shoots out of view—and as abruptly as some unfortunate little furry creature on the ground has to cancel all its plans for the day.

Both the nature of this simile and the way the speaker deploys it, then, help to evoke the eagle's tremendous power.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "like a thunderbolt he falls."

END-STOPPED LINE

Nearly every line in this poem is emphatically end-stopped. Those frequent pauses give this poem a steady, dignified, and majestic pace, evoking the speaker's awe—and throwing the eagle's lightning-quick dive into relief.

Take a look at the way that works in the second stanza:

> The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls:
> He watches from his mountain walls,
> And like a thunderbolt he falls.

In the first line of this stanza, the speaker sets the scene, suggesting just how dizzyingly high above the ground the eagle is with an image of the sea—so far away that it looks like wrinkled cloth. That line comes to an end with a colon, which works like a drumroll: that strong pause suggests that something dramatic is about to happen.

Then, the speaker refocuses on what the eagle himself is doing up there on his mountain walls: watching. And while this line also concludes with an end-stop, it's a speedier one, just a comma. Now, it feels as if the poem is gaining some momentum.

And finally, as the eagle "falls" from its perch toward its unsuspecting prey, a solid period evokes just how suddenly it drops. The eagle zooms out of sight as quickly as the poem ends!

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "hands;"
- **Line 3:** "stands."
- **Line 4:** "crawls:"
- **Line 5:** "walls,"
- **Line 6:** "falls."

IMAGERY

The speaker's imagery gives this very, very short poem its outsized vividness.

Perhaps the most sweeping image here is the "azure world" that surrounds the eagle on his mountaintop. The color "azure"—a vibrant, jewel-like blue—suggests not just the ocean far beneath the eagle and the sky above him, but the sheer vastness of the landscape. Readers who have had the chance to admire the view from a mountaintop will know that the world indeed seems to get bluer and bluer the further one looks into the distance (there's even a scientific explanation for this effect). The eagle's "azure world" is thus one made not just of sea and sky, but of endless expanses of pure space.

The poem's image of the "wrinkled sea" that "crawls" far beneath the eagle also gives the reader a dizzying sense of scale—and further evokes the eagle's power. On the one hand, this image is just accurate: the ocean, seen from far above, does look "wrinkled" like fabric. But if the ocean itself is "crawl[ing]," it also seems almost subservient to the eagle—as if the eagle were a nature god, and the ocean itself were under its power.

One last bit of imagery paints a picture of the eagle himself—and a rather strange one. Giving the eagle "crooked hands" instead of talons, the speaker seems to personify him as a gnarled old man. The eagle's eventual display of power thus feels all the more striking. Those "crooked hands," it seems, are

also perfect killing machines.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "He clasps the crag with crooked hands;"
- **Line 3:** "Ringed with the azure world,"
- **Line 4:** "The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls:"

ALLITERATION

Strong alliteration helps to make this poem feel bold, powerful, and emphatic. For instance, take a look at the dense alliterative sounds in lines 1-2:

> He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
> Close to the sun in lonely lands,

All those /c/ and /r/ sounds evoke the tough, "crag[gy]" rocks and wide, clear air of the landscape the speaker is describing here. And the long, liquid /l/ sounds of "lonely lands" suggest the way those lands stretch far, far out into the distance.

Besides these more specific effects, all these alliterative words in a row are just plain attention-grabbing. Alliteration doesn't turn up all that much in everyday speech, so it lands with an extra punch when a poem uses a lot of it. Here, that effect helps to support the general tone of this poem: this grand landscape, ruled over by a mighty bird, gets presented in forceful, unignorable sounds.

Alliteration can also simply give a poem a touch of music:

> He watches from his mountain walls,

Here, that repeated /w/ sound just plain sounds nice!

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "clasps," "crag," "crooked"
- **Line 2:** "Close," "lonely," "lands"
- **Line 5:** "watches," "walls"

ASSONANCE

Assonance helps to give this poem a touch of hypnotic, spellbound music, evoking the speaker's fascination with the eagle.

Listen to the vowel sounds in the first two lines, for instance:

> He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
> Close to the sun in lonely lands,

The repeated /ah/ and /oh/ sounds here give each of these lines a chant-like quality, subtly threading all these words together. In combination with the strong alliteration and consonance in these lines, that effect helps to immerse readers in this poem's world. Strong sonic effects right up front allow this very short poem to make an impact right away.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "clasps," "crag," "hands"
- **Line 2:** "Close," "lonely"
- **Line 4:** "sea," "beneath"

VOCABULARY

Clasps (Line 1) - Grasps, holds tightly.

Crag (Line 1) - A rocky outcrop, a cliff.

Crooked hands (Line 1) - That is, gnarled talons.

Azure (Line 3) - A bright, rich blue.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Eagle" is broken into two tercets (three-line stanzas). In six sparing lines, it evokes a whole wide and dramatic landscape, full of craggy rocks and echoing seas, and a powerful, godlike central figure: an eagle as mighty as a "thunderbolt."

This poem was first published under the title "The Eagle: A Fragment." A fragment is a segment of a never-completed (or sometimes purely imaginary!) longer work, published as a stand-alone poem. Fragment poems often feel rather mysterious, hinting that there's a bigger story here just beyond a veil. (Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" is another good example.) The sense that a longer poem is only starting here makes this poem's brevity feel powerful, suggesting there's a whole unspoken world of meaning behind this one image.

METER

"The Eagle" uses iambic tetrameter: lines of four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's what that sounds like in line 1:

> He clasps | the crag | with crook- | ed hands;

This steady, pounding rhythm evokes the poem's world of soaring cliffs and endless waves: this is a powerful meter to suit some powerful images.

The speaker also plays with this rhythm to evoke the eagle's behavior. Take a look at the way the meter works in lines 2 and 3:

> Close to | the sun | in lone- | ly lands,
> Ringed with | the az- | ure world, | he stands.

Both of these lines start with a trochee—the opposite of an iamb, with a DUM-da rhythm. Those strong initial stresses give the first words of these lines a little extra oomph and create a swinging, sweeping, back-and-forth rhythm that mirrors the way the eagle scans the landscape for its prey.

When the speaker returns to straightforward iambic tetrameter in the second stanza, the change in meter matches the change in mood: as the eagle prepares to dive, the meter gets more focused and consistent, as if the bird's eye is now fixed firmly on the unsuspecting little furry creature below.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Eagle" uses a striking, insistent rhyme scheme. Each of its tercets (or three-line stanzas) uses three rhymes in a row, like this:

AAA BBB

This is a pretty dramatic and unusual choice! And it only feels more noticeable because every one of these rhyme words is a strong monosyllable, falling like the blow of an axe: "hands," "stands," "lands," boom boom boom.

That forceful feeling makes perfect sense: this is a poem about a mighty eagle striking "like a thunderbolt," and these rhymes feel as powerful and swift as the eagle's fall.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is just an anonymous, awestruck voice—with no clear personality or identity beyond that awe. The speaker's whole role here is just to stare at this bird in wonder.

For that very reason, there's some sense that the speaker might be *imagining* the eagle, or even imagining what it might be like to *be* the eagle. The poem seems able to observe the eagle from right up close, in spite of the fact that the eagle is standing on a remote crag that seems almost to touch the sun, well out of human reach. And when the bird at last falls "like a thunderbolt" on the world below, there's a sense that the speaker feels swept up in its exhilarating power.

SETTING

"The Eagle" is set in grand, sweeping, wild, and mountainous terrain. Everything here is soaringly vast: the mountaintops seem to touch the sky, and the huge ocean is so far below that it looks like "wrinkled" fabric.

The eagle seems to be the absolute master of this domain: these are "his mountain walls," and these "lonely lands" don't seem to be inhabited by humankind. The setting thus makes the eagle himself seem even more awe-inspiring and powerful. He's the godlike ruler of an epic landscape, standing at the very center of his own "azure world."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was one of the most famous, influential, and beloved poets of the Victorian era. In fact, he was so emphatically the face of mid-19th-century English poetry that he became Poet Laureate to Queen Victoria herself.

In some ways, Tennyson's poetry is transitional, marking the end of the earlier Romantic era as much as it establishes a new Victorian voice. The intensity and brevity of "The Eagle" (published in 1851) might, for instance, remind readers of Shelley's "Ozymandias"—and the mighty, awe-inspiring eagle itself feels like a cousin to Blake's "Tyger." Tennyson was well aware of his debt to the Romantics: he was a huge fan of Lord Byron as a young man and was deeply shocked by Byron's tragic death. He also directly inherited the title of Poet Laureate from arch-Romantic William Wordsworth.

But like his friends Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Tennyson was also an innovator and a master in his own right. The concise power of "The Eagle," for instance, demonstrates his knack for choosing just the right word.

While Tennyson fell out of popularity among the early-20th-century Modernists (who dismissed his work as too quaint, too pretty, and too conservative), recent scholars have given him more credit, praising his deep sense of mystery and wonder. There's no question that he's an important and influential writer: to this day, poems like "The Lady of Shalott," are among the best-known and best-loved in the world.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Tennyson wasn't just a popular poet during his time: he was a major public figure. As Poet Laureate to Queen Victoria, Tennyson was one face of the British Empire at its peak. Under Victoria, Britain's power expanded worldwide. Proverbially, the "sun never set on the British Empire": Britain had colonial holdings across the world, and very much saw itself as the rightful, "civilized" ruler of all the lands it had conquered.

Some of Tennyson's own work reflects the intense British patriotism of the time. His "The Charge of the Light Brigade," for instance, is a bombastic celebration of military self-sacrifice. But it's also a tragedy, and reflects another major Victorian preoccupation: grief.

Queen Victoria's beloved husband Prince Albert died when Tennyson was about a decade into his tenure as Poet Laureate. Victoria went into deep mourning for the rest of her life—and sparked a craze for flamboyant public grief. Victorian mourners would wear black for years, make elaborate wreaths and jewelry out of the hair of the dead, and pose corpses for post-

mortem portraits. Tennyson himself might have helped to fan the flames of this obsession with his great poem "In Memoriam," a long commemoration of a beloved friend, dead too young.

Perhaps the Victorian obsession with death and mourning also speaks to the changing 19th-century world. As Europe's rural past began to fade, and the Industrial Revolution ushered in an era of rapid, dirty, and dangerous change, Britain embraced its new economic might—but also mourned a disappearing way of life.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Poems in Two Volumes — Learn more about Tennyson's Poems, the important collection in which this poem first appeared—and see images of a lavishly illustrated Victorian edition. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-moxon-illustrated-edition-of-tennysons-poems)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the poem read aloud. (https://youtu.be/dG0ZsJSNOi8)
- A Short Biography — Learn more about Tennyson's life and work at the British Library's website. (https://www.bl.uk/people/alfred-lord-tennyson)
- Tennyson's Obituary — Read a contemporary account of Tennyson's death—and learn about how influential and important a poet he was in his own time. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/oct/07/death-of-lord-tennyson)
- Tennyson Today — Read an article about Tennyson's continuing influence. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/aug/13/tennyson-essential-reading)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ALFRED LORD TENNYSON POEMS

- Break, Break, Break
- Crossing the Bar
- Tears, Idle Tears
- The Brook
- The Charge of the Light Brigade
- The Kraken
- The Lady of Shalott
- Ulysses

HOW TO CITE

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