

Theodore Roethke's "The Waking" is a villanelle that reads as a meditation on mortality and the meaning of life in the face of death. The poem begins with the line, "I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow," wherein the narrator is ostensibly speaking of becoming aware of or accustomed to ("waking" to) the idea of death ("sleep,") but he's not in a particular hurry to reach his destination. He speaks of his "fate" in the next line, insisting that he "cannot fear" it. The central theme of the poem is stated at the end of the first stanza and subsequently repeated twice in the poem, in the statement, "I learn by going where I have to go." This suggests that the speaker is determined to let life—and, yes, death—unfold for him as he encounters it. One gets the sense that the speaker is trying to calm himself of fears or anxieties about the future, about death, about the meaning of life—or perhaps trying to speak to the fears and anxieties of others.

The poem goes on to talk about how humans intuitively understand their world—"we think by feeling"—then turns its attention to the people who join him on his journey ("those so close beside me") and invites the reader into the poem by asking which of his companions "you" are. This suggests that the journey the speaker is embarking on is not a solitary one—or at least not a unique one—but rather one shared by all.

Nature imagery takes over in the fourth and fifth stanzas; the speaker pauses to contemplate with wonder light on a tree, a worm making its journey "up a winding stair," and then turns our attention once more back to mortality. In the lines, "Great Nature has another thing to do/To you and me, so take the lively air," he implies that life is short, and our natural end approaches, so we must live while we can, "And, lovely, learn by going where to go." Here, the speaker is implying that life is too precious and death too near to whittle it away in plans and worries.

Those fears the speaker is trying so hard to wave away in the earlier stanzas appear to return in the final one, however, when the speaker admits, "This shaking keeps me steady. I should know./ What falls away is always. And is near." Here, the speaker is betraying the impetus behind his revelation: death is coming, and he fears it. But from this fear, paradoxically, emerges a sort of necessary calm—the "shaking" that "keeps [him] steady." The briefness of life betrays the importance of being present in each moment, for, if with death, "what falls away is always," then we must embrace every bit of "always" while we're still around to experience it. Finally, at the end of the poem, the sense of calm acceptance returns, and we are left where we began: learning by going where we have to go.

The repeating form of the villanelle help accentuate the sense of death and life as being inextricably intertwined; by repeating and recontextualizing the lines "I learn by going where I have to go" and "I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow," Roethke emphasizes the need to understand the beauty of life as a function of the nearness of mortality, and perhaps vice versa. Combined with the rhythmic steadiness of the poem, the repetition of lines and the consistent rhyme scheme make the structure of the poem a sort of mirror of the death/life process that the speaker contemplates. The effect is further enhanced by the bookending that the villanelle creates: the speaker ends up where he began, at life, at death. Insert cheesy "Circle of Life" reference here.

All elements of Roethke's masterfully crafted poem conspire to deliver the message that life is short, and precious, and mysterious, and that death, while to be feared, is perhaps the only thing that makes us really understand the value of life. Thus, we should not live in fear or mete out our time in planning and preventing, but should simply live life from day to day. (The poem is so much better than this explication at communicating the full import and nuance of Roethke's idea, though.)

NOTE! I italicized all the academic hedge words I used—those are words like "perhaps," "seem," and "may" that keep you from sounding overconfident or tyrannical in your views. TMMWLYGATCW/O at work!

Comment [j1]: Any explication worth its salt will include the author and title of the poem in the first line. Notice that poem titles go in quotation marks, not in italics or underlined. Stating the subject of the poem in the first line is also a good idea, but not a must, I suppose.

Comment [j2]: The bulk of the explication is a more or less line-by-line paraphrase. While I was able to throw this together in about 15 minutes, I've read the poem about a hundred times, thought about it a lot, and have a keyboard to exploit. You may find that 30 minutes isn't enough to do such an in-depth look at connotation/denotation while still covering all your bases re: theme, tone, speaker, and imagery, metaphor, or other aspects of form]. My advice? Practice. If you think you'd have time to go through the poem as I've done, your explication of the poem will be more convincing.

Comment [j3]: Theme!

Comment [j4]: Analyzing speaker here. By the way, I think it's fine, when in doubt, to refer to the speaker as sharing the same gender as the poet.

Comment [j5]: Notice how much I quote the poem. Actually referring to the actual words in the poem makes your interpretation more sound!

Comment [j6]: Imagery! Note that I don't just mention that it's there, but actual talk about WHAT it's doing there.

Comment [j7]: Reiterating and providing more support for my statement of the poem's theme.

Comment [j8]: I don't say the word "tone" here, but that's exactly what I'm talking about: the speaker's attitude toward their subject.

Comment [j9]: Here's my paragraph about form! (You don't need to know what a villanelle is, but I do, so heck yes I'm going to use that knowledge in my explication!)

Comment [j10]: Note that I'm reinforcing my interpretation of the poem's theme! You can never do this too much, apparently.

Comment [j11]: Talking about effect rather than intent emphasizes that this is MY INTERPRETATION of the poem, not Roethke's Master Plan when he was writing it. It leaves me some wiggle room to imply that my interpretation, while sound, isn't the only one possible. This keeps me from sounding like a pompous fart. (Arguably.)

Comment [j12]: Appropriate humor is generally a nice touch, if somewhat risky, as we can never really be sure that other people find us as funny as we do.

Comment [j13]: When in doubt, kiss the poet's butt. (Not really. I just stink at transitions—particularly in conclusion paragraphs.)

Comment [j14]: I don't really need commas between these. I just added them because they make you stop and read each word a little more slowly. Creative use of punctuation!

Comment [j15]: "Mete out" is one of my favorite phrases.

Comment [j16]: Expressing embarrassment at trying to say what the poet says better than the poet says it either proves you're humble or makes you look like a suck-up. YOU DECIDE.