The Waking

SUMMARY

The speaker says they wake up in order to sleep again later, and therefore take their time waking up. They can sense what will happen to them and aren't afraid of it (or can sense it *because* they aren't afraid of it). They learn by doing and by following their gut.

The speaker says that people make decisions intuitively. What can be rationally understood? The speaker feels as happy as if their spirit were dancing and smiling wide. They repeat that they wake up in order to sleep later, so they don't rush to wake up.

The speaker addresses an unknown other, asking them who they are. The speaker praises the earth they walk on, saying that they will move gently across it and figure things out by following their gut.

Sunlight illuminates a tree, the speaker says, but no one can tell human beings how to (metaphorically) illuminate or be illuminated. The humble worm ascends a curving staircase (i.e., progress is an uphill climb). The speaker repeats that they wake up only to go back to sleep, so they don't rush to wake up.

The speaker says that nature, in all its vastness, has its own plans for us. So go take a deep breath, and in this beautiful way, figure out what you're doing by doing it.

The speaker says that their agitation keeps them stable—they ought to know (since they're the one feeling it). They add that what disappears is gone forever—*and* is close at hand. The speaker wakes up only to go back to sleep, so they don't rush to wake up. They figure things out by following their gut.

THEMES

THE UNKNOWABILITY OF THE FUTURE

In "The Waking," the speaker muses on the paradoxical nature of life and death and embraces the fact that the future is ultimately mysterious. People find out where they're "going" in life only by taking chances and discovering along the way whatever they need to "learn." In this way, the poem suggests, life is a perpetual process of "waking" up to everything around and inside us. There's no road map for the future; the only thing one can really do is "slow" down and appreciate the mystery of it all.

The poem repeats two central paradoxes that highlight the mysterious nature of what lies ahead. First, the speaker says that they "wake to sleep," suggesting that, like everyone, they live knowing that they must eventually die. Yet rather than causing "fear," the knowledge of death's inevitability—their "fate"—makes the speaker "take [their] waking slow." In other words, since life is short, one should slow down and savor things. "I wake to sleep" might even imply that the speaker is like a waking sleepwalker, happily and fearlessly letting fate carry them along their path.

The speaker also says that they "learn by going where [they] have to go." This suggests that there are no real missteps in life, because everything is ultimately a lesson. If a person doesn't know their purpose, they're more likely to figure it out by forging ahead and following their instincts than by holding back and making decisions based on logic. At the same time, even if they think they know where they want to go, they might discover, by trying and making mistakes, that they're actually better off somewhere else. As such, one should just go where one feels compelled to go; since the future is unknowable, it's best to stay focused on the present.

The speaker rejoices in the knowledge that there are no real answers about how one should live. "We think by feeling," the speaker says, suggesting that it's better to follow one's gut than to try to make some rational plan about how to live. They add: "What is there to know?" This question suggests either that there's nothing one can know for certain or that there are endless things to learn and discover. Either way, it suggests that life is about taking chances and having experiences, not trying to figure everything out ahead of time.

The speaker also points out a "Tree" that has been "take[n]" by "Light," suggesting that the tree is somehow enlightened, that it knows some deep truth about existence. Yet the speaker wonders "who can tell us how" to be like the tree. This question might suggest that no one can—that there's no authority on how best to live one's life. But the speaker also points out a "lowly worm" that "climbs up a winding stair." The humble worm's slow ascent echoes the speaker's proclamation that they "take [their] waking slow." It also reflects the speaker's worshipful attitude toward the ground itself ("God bless the Ground!"). Taken together, these statements perhaps suggest that the only way to reach enlightenment is to remain firmly attuned to one's present reality. Only by staying grounded can one attain the tree's lofty height.

All in all, the poem suggests that the future isn't something one needs to have figured out ahead of time. Rather, there's joy in slowly feeling one's way through life and being surprised as one goes.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3

- Lines 6-12
- Lines 18-19

FEELING VS. RATIONAL THOUGHT

The speaker of "The Waking" argues that thought is really just emotion and sensation: "We think by feeling." In other words, humans are not detached, logical creatures at heart; they're impulse-driven and immersed in a world of physical sensation. The speaker, therefore, speaks with great feeling, celebrating the passionate "dance" of their own "being" and urging "you" toward an equally passionate experience of the world.

The speaker argues that feeling *is* thought, or at least the only kind of thought that really matters. For instance, the speaker says, "I feel my fate," suggesting that intuition and impulse, not rational decisions, lead them where they're meant to go. Indeed, when the speaker says "We think by feeling," they're arguing that people in general don't really operate from a place of cold, systematic rationality but from desire, fear, and other emotions that can't be fully understood. In fact, the speaker says, "This shaking keeps [them] steady." This paradoxical statement implies that letting themselves be overwhelmed by feeling, rather than repressing or hiding from it, keeps the speaker sane and grounded. Allowing oneself to be passionate, the poem suggests, is healthier than trying to control or repress oneself.

Ultimately, the speaker hopes to communicate their own passionate exuberance to the reader. The speaker describes "hear[ing]" their "being dance from ear to ear." In other words, they're in the grip of joy ("from ear to ear" is a phrase usually used to describe a smile), and they feel their spirit to be fully alive and present, as though it were dancing. That "Great Nature has another thing to do / To you and me" further suggests that people aren't on this earth to act coldly and rationally. They're here to be *moved*, to deeply feel whatever comes their way.

Thus, the speaker says, one should "take the lively air, / And, lovely, learn by going where to go." In other words: breathe deep and enjoy the ride! The speaker also says that "What falls away is always. And is near." This suggests, perhaps, that death is always lurking in the background, and that when it comes, all the beauty of life and feeling will disappear ("fall[] away"). So it's important not to take life too seriously, or to treat it methodically, like a game that can be won. Everyone's "fate" is to die, so why not seek to live fully and feel everything while we still can?

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-5
- Lines 13-17

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

I wake to ... my waking slow.

The poem begins with a cryptic, paradoxical statement: "I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow."

The speaker might literally be saying that they wake with no other thought than to go back to sleep and therefore take their time waking up. More likely, however, they're using "waking" and "sleep[ing]" as a metaphor for living and dying. That is, the speaker lives knowing they will eventually die, and as such, they're in no hurry to wake fully. There's no point in rushing to the finish line when the finish line is death!

The /sl/ alliteration ("**sl**eep"/ "**sl**ow") in this line reinforces the connection between the eventuality of "sleep" (or death) and the speaker's relaxed pace. There's also internal rhyming in the words "**wake**," "**take**," and "**wak**ing," resulting in an emphatic first line. The poet really wants the reader to pay close attention to this puzzling expression!

"The Waking" is a villanelle, meaning that it's made up of five tercets (three-line stanzas) followed by a final quatrain (four-line stanza). The first and third lines of the first stanza act as refrains, reappearing in alternation as the last line of each subsequent tercet. These two lines also repeat as the concluding lines of the poem. The villanelle is a highly rigid and predictable form, yet the poem itself feels celebratory and surprising (in part because it occasionally varies its rhythm and refrain lines). This combination reflects the speaker's feelings about life: our lives move in only one direction and always end in death, yet we have the capacity to live spontaneously and feel deeply.

Each tercet of the villanelle has an ABA rhyme scheme, while the final quatrain has an ABAA rhyme scheme. This scheme makes the form highly musical and further emphasizes the repeating lines. And while villanelles don't have to follow a specific meter, "The Waking," like most English-language villanelles, uses iambic pentameter. This means that its lines generally contain five iambs, or metrical feet that follow an unstressed-**stressed** rhythm (da-**DUM**). Here's how this pattern sounds in line 1:

I **wake** | to **sleep**, | and **take** | my **wak**- | ing **slow**.

This familiar, propulsive rhythm underscores the speaker's confidence and joy throughout the poem.

LINES 2-3

I feel my ...
... have to go.

Line 2 declares: "I feel my fate in what I cannot fear." The lofty word "fate" affirms that the speaker is discussing a metaphorical waking and sleeping—that is, life and death. They may not consciously know what their life holds for them, but they intuitively "feel" it, and they aren't scared of it. Alternatively, they might be saying that they are drawn towards something they should fear, but don't, *because* it's their fate. Note how /f/ alliteration ("feel," "fate," "fear") adds intensity to this line. The fricative /f/ sounds imbue the speaker's statement with confidence; they seem certain they are on the right track even if they can't quite say what that track is.

The speaker then adds, "I learn by going where I have to go." This line echoes the first statement in its paradoxical wisdom. The speaker is suggesting that they learn through experience—by "go[ing]" forth into the world rather than sitting back and studying. Or perhaps they mean that life will teach them something no matter what, so they might as well follow their gut (go where they "have to," or feel compelled to, "go").

Notice the use of anaphora and parallelism in these opening lines:

> I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
> I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
> I learn by going where I have to go.

The poem begins with three strong "I" statements. The speaker is speaking from personal experience, expressing their core beliefs about the world. In fact, these three sentences seem to encapsulate a whole philosophy of how to live. The procession of grammatically parallel statements ("I wake," "I feel," "I learn") lends immediate rhythm and momentum to the poem.

LINES 4-6

We think by ...
... my waking slow.

The speaker extrapolates from their own experience to say, more broadly, that "We" (human beings) "think by feeling." This is another seeming paradox; aren't thinking and feeling two separate, opposite processes? The poem insists they aren't—that people act from instinct, intuition, and emotion rather than logic. The caesura in line 4 stresses the word "feeling," which to the speaker is the most important thing:

> We think by feeling. What is there to know?

The speaker follows their broad statement with an ambiguous question: "What is there to know?" This rhetorical question implies that nothing can be known for certain; even the most rational decisions are fallible, because they're made by creatures who are more mysterious than they'd like to believe.

The speaker adds, "I hear my being dance from ear to ear." Since "ear to ear" usually describes a wide smile, this metaphor, or repurposed idiom, evokes the speaker's joyous state. They aren't just happy; they're witnessing their own happiness as it moves through them like an exuberant dancer. The internal rhyme between "hear" and "ear" subtly underscores the value of listening and paying attention.

So when the speaker repeats that they "wake to sleep, and take [their] waking slow," they're describing a way of being in the world. They choose to move slowly, pay attention, and savor their emotions, which tell them everything they need to "know."

LINES 7-9

Of those so ...
... have to go.

In the third tercet, the speaker addresses someone (another person or the reader) directly:

> Of those so close beside me, which are you?

This rhetorical question pulls the reader into the poem, suggesting that speaker and reader aren't so far apart after all. Its meaning is a bit mysterious, but it may be asking readers to decide where they stand in relation to the speaker—to consider how they feel about everything he's saying.

Then the speaker cries exuberantly, "God bless the Ground!" Notice the /g/ alliteration as well as the capitalization of "Ground," both of which add emphasis to this exclamation. The exclamation point after "Ground" also creates a dramatic caesura—a pause in which the speaker's ecstatic devotion reverberates.

To the speaker, the very ground they walk on is worthy of praise; there's something holy about it. As such, they say they will "walk softly there," so as not to disturb the sacred dirt and grasses, and so that they can pay close attention as they pass. In the process, they will "learn by going where [they] have to go." The refrain takes on new meaning as the speaker re-contextualizes it. It suggests that life is more about the journey we take, and the attention we pay to the miracle of life, than it is about any achievement or destination. The speaker is OK with taking their time—maybe even getting a little lost—because life is all about experiencing and feeling things deeply.

Notice, too, the /oh/ assonance in "those" and "close" and the /ah/ assonance in "walk softly." These repeated vowels intensify the music of the language, emphasizing the speaker's reverence for the earth.

LINES 10-12

Light takes the ...

... my waking slow.

The speaker throws out another challenging rhetorical question: "Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?" Notice how they assign "The Tree" a capital letter, conveying their reverence for nature and also, perhaps, framing the tree as a symbol or archetype. The "Light" is implied to be metaphorical; the speaker is looking for someone who can "tell" them how to live in a more enlightened, meaningful way. They want to be illuminated by wisdom in the way trees are gradually illuminated by sunlight.

But it isn't God or even a person who instructs the speaker how to live; it's "The lowly worm" who "climbs up a winding stair." This humble worm is a symbol for the kind of instinctual living the speaker advocates. Worms don't look ahead to the future; they can't even really see, but instead sense darkness and light. They move slowly through the earth, and the image of one ascending "a winding stair" suggests that they can get anywhere—even reach the heights—just by feeling their way along. The speaker sees value in staying close to the earth and taking things slow. Indeed, the refrain about "waking slow" immediately follows and reinforces the "worm" line.

/T/, /w/, and /h/ alliteration—along with /l/ and /m/ consonance—makes this stanza pop:

> Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?
> The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;

These crisp sounds bolster the hopeful images of the tree and worm.

LINES 13-15

Great Nature has ...
... where to go.

The speaker now shifts focus from the small, slow, specific worm to "Nature" in general:

> Great Nature has another thing to do
> To you and me; so take the lively air,
> And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This personification of nature emphasizes that people are at the mercy of forces outside their control. No matter what plans we might make, nature is like a "Great" god that can "do" to us whatever it pleases. For example, love is something nature brings to most of us at some point, and death is the thing it will "do" to all of us eventually. (In fact, "another thing to do / To you and me" could be read as a kind of innuendo about sex and/or death.) Because we don't control our lives, the speaker suggests, there's no point in being too rigid about our plans. Better to take a deep breath—"take the lively air"—and enjoy the journey life takes us on. "Lovely" here could be a term of endearment for "you," or an adjective describing how we should (aspire to) go about our journeys.

Combined /ate/ assonance and consonance places extra stress on "Great Nature," emphasizing its power over peoples' lives. This phrase is also part of a spondee, a double-stressed foot that further highlights nature's importance:

> Great Nat- | ure has | anoth- | er thing | to do

The fluid /l/ consonance in lines 14-15 ("lively," "lovely," "learn") underscores the beauty of accepting life as it is, and making the most of wherever one finds oneself.

LINES 16-19

This shaking keeps ...
... have to go.

The final stanza begins with another paradox: "This shaking keeps me steady. I should know." Normally, "shaking" is the *opposite* of being "steady." Yet this statement implies that intense feeling is what makes the speaker feel anchored. They "know" they're living their life right if they're experiencing strong emotion—for them, that's the whole point of being alive! ("I should know" also stresses that this is a personal testimony: the speaker isn't just philosophizing, they're speaking from experience.) Feeling isn't just how people think; it's how they orient themselves in the world.

They follow this paradox with another cryptic statement:

> What falls away is always. And is near.

How can "What falls away" be "always" or "near"? If something disappears, isn't it gone forever? The speaker doesn't think so. They seem to feel that life is constant and ever-present, the source of all that intensity that keeps them "shaking." To feel deep emotion, they suggest, is to be in touch with the spiritual, including those who have lived before. We can lose people and things forever, yet still feel the closeness of their presence.

Repeated /al/ and /way/ sounds ("falls away is always") make this important line especially musical and emphatic. Note, too, how caesuras slow the language down and break the speaker's thoughts into smaller parts:

> This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
> What falls away is always. And is near.

The caesuras draw attention to "steady" and "always," respectively. These related words emphasize what's constant in a tumultuous world.

In keeping with the villanelle form, the poem ends by repeating its two refrain lines:

> I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

I learn by going where I have to go.

By the time the end arrives, these lines have gained a great deal of meaning. While they may have seemed confusing to begin with, they now clearly correspond to the speaker's philosophy of life. The speaker lives knowing their life can only end in death, and this gives them a kind of freedom: to move slowly and appreciate everything they experience on this beautiful planet. Wherever they're compelled to go, they know life will hand them valuable lessons along the way, and so their time can never really be wasted.

SYMBOLS

THE LOWLY WORM

"The lowly worm" in line 11 symbolizes the value of humility, living in the present, and not anticipating what the future will bring. The worm "climbs up a winding stair" not by meticulously planning its course, but simply by feeling its way along. This image suggests that people, too, can embrace their lack of understanding in the face of life's mysteries. They can humbly put one foot in front of the other, thereby "learn[ing] by going where [they] have to go."

More broadly, the worm symbolizes a natural way of living, one informed by instinct rather than knowledge. Throughout his career, Roethke frequently wrote about humble, earth-bound creatures such as worms, slugs, and snails. His father was a gardener, so he grew up inside greenhouses, tending plants and developing his own deep connection to the earth. As such, he saw great value in getting one's hands dirty and heeding the lessons offered by "Great Nature."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration adds musicality and intensity to the poem, heightening its already strong rhythm. In some cases, alliteration also highlights the connections between related words. Look at the /sl/ sounds in the first line, for example:

I wake to **sl**eep, and take my waking **sl**ow.

Here, alliteration emphasizes the connection between the metaphorical "sleep" the speaker "wake[s]" for (i.e., the death that will inevitably conclude their life) and the "slow" pace at which they live. In other words, they see no need to hurry, since it's clear where they're going in the end.

Then comes a flurry of /f/ and /wh/ alliteration in lines 2-3:

I **f**eel my **f**ate in **wh**at I cannot **f**ear.
I learn by going **wh**ere I have to go.

The insistent /f/ alliteration highlights "**f**eel," "**f**ate," and "**f**ear," announcing the importance of these concepts. The musicality of the line makes the idea of "feel[ing]" one's way through life, "fear[lessly]," sound beautiful and joyful. The /wh/ alliteration emphasizes "**wh**at" and "**wh**ere," words that embody the open, questioning nature of the poem. The speaker isn't pretending to have everything figured out; they're comfortable not knowing it all, and they spin a kind of philosophy from that stance.

Guttural /g/ alliteration in line 8 ("**G**od bless the **G**round") emphasizes the majesty of the earth itself, and the importance of staying *grounded* or rooted in the moment. Lines 10-11 bring an abundance of /t/, / h/, /k/, and /w/ alliteration:

Light **t**akes the **T**ree; but **wh**o **c**an **t**ell us **h**ow?
The **l**owly **w**orm **c**limbs up a **w**inding stair;

This strong alliteration highlights the importance of *both* the grand "Tree" and the humble "worm" (who seems to know the secret of "how" to live). The repeated sounds also slow the language down, as if to mirror the tree's slow illumination and the worm's gradual climb.

In lines 14-15, fluid /l/ alliteration ("**l**ively," "**l**ovely," "**l**earn") evokes the beauty of taking deep breaths and enjoying life's journey. In line 16, /sh/ alliteration ("**sh**aking," "**sh**ould") creates a hushed tone, as the speaker quietly conveys intense emotion.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sleep," "slow"
- **Line 2:** "feel," "fate," "what," "fear"
- **Line 3:** "where"
- **Line 4:** "We," "What"
- **Line 6:** "sleep," "slow"
- **Line 7:** "which"
- **Line 8:** "God," "Ground," "walk"
- **Line 10:** "Light," "takes," "Tree," "who," "tell," "how"
- **Line 11:** "lowly," "worm," "winding"
- **Line 12:** "sleep," "slow"
- **Line 14:** "lively"
- **Line 15:** "lovely," "learn"
- **Line 16:** "shaking," "should"
- **Line 18:** "sleep," "slow"

REPETITION

Because "The Waking" is a villanelle, it inevitably contains a lot

of repetition. As dictated by the form, lines 1 and 3 of the first stanza act as refrains that repeat at the ends of subsequent stanzas. So line 1 ("I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow") repeats in lines 6, 12, and 18, while line 3 ("I learn by going where I have to go") repeats with minor variations in lines 9, 15, and 19. The repetition makes these phrases, which sum up the poem's themes, impossible to ignore.

The poem contains other kinds of repetition as well. For instance, in the first line (and consequently in lines 6, 12, and 18), the speaker says, "I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow." Polyptoton (the repetition of "wake"/"waking," which share the same root) emphasizes the importance of this word. It also draws the action out, stressing that "waking" is a gradual process. There's more polyptoton in line 3 (and thus lines 9, 15, and 19) as well: "I learn by going where I have to go." The repetition of "going"/"go" once again highlights an important word, as the poem deals with progress along life's journey.

Lines 1-3 contain anaphora as well as parallelism:

> I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
> I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
> I learn by going where I have to go.

The repetition of "I" centers the poem in the speaker's experience, while the grammatically parallel statements ("I wake," "I feel," "I learn") build rhythm and momentum. And in a way, these six words could be a thesis for the poem. The speaker is basically saying that their approach to life is to wake each day, let their feelings guide them, and learn something in the process.

There is also diacope in line 5:

> I hear my being dance from ear to ear.

The phrase "ear to ear" usually describes a smile; here, it describes a whole ecstatic mood. It also reinforces the idea of "hear[ing]" and therefore listening. Thus, it seems to suggest that the speaker's wild joy stems from how closely they pay attention to their surroundings.

There is more diacope, as well as parallelism, in line 17:

> What falls away is always. And is near.

Here, the repetition highlights the paradoxical nature of the statement. The speaker asserts that "What falls away" is *both* "always" and "near"—suggesting that, while things can become forever imperceptible to us, nothing ever fully disappears. Repetition makes the speaker's statements sound convincing even when they're cryptic, perhaps suggesting that there's more to truth than straightforward logic.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I ," "wake," "waking"
- **Line 2:** "I"
- **Line 3:** "I," "going," "go"
- **Line 5:** "ear," "ear"
- **Lines 6-6:** "I / to sleep, and take my / slow."
- **Line 6:** "wake," "waking"
- **Lines 9-9:** "And learn by / where I have to / ."
- **Line 9:** "going," "go"
- **Line 12:** "I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow."
- **Line 15:** "learn by going where to go."
- **Line 17:** "is," "is"
- **Lines 18-19:** "I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow. / I learn by going where I have to go."

PARADOX

The poem leans heavily on paradox, encouraging the reader to slow down and contemplate its insights.

Both of the lines that repeat throughout the poem include paradoxes: "I wake to sleep [...]" and "I learn by going where I have to go." Let's break these down a bit:

- "I wake to sleep" seems self-contradictory at first. Why would someone wake *to* sleep: that is, why wake up solely in order to fall asleep again? Yet if waking is a metaphor for living, and sleep a metaphor for death, this statement makes sense: people live knowing that they have to die.
- "I learn by going where I have to go" also seems self-contradictory. If we don't know where we're going, how can just setting off with no sense of direction help us? Yet this paradox implies that there's much to be gained from wandering without a clear plan. In fact, such wandering offers a kind of insight into oneself that a planned, programmatic journey couldn't provide.

These aren't the only paradoxical statements in the poem. In line 4, the speaker says "We think by feeling." This seems self-contradictory because people tend to distinguish between thought and feeling, attributing one to the mind/brain and the other to the heart/body. But this paradox suggests that such distinctions are false; people's decisions are much more based in emotion and instinct than they'd like to admit. People may tell themselves that they're acting rationally, but in the speaker's view, they act and *then* come up with ways to make sense of their actions. Thus, there's not much point to trying to plan our lives out in some meticulous, calculated way; better just to live and make sense of it as we go.

In line 16, the speaker says that "This shaking keeps me steady." This statement plainly contradicts itself, seeing as "shaking" is the opposite of "stead[iness]." Yet what the speaker really

means is that their ability to be moved—their capacity for deep, strong emotion—is what keeps them going. If they weren't able to feel in this way, life would cease to have meaning for them, and it wouldn't really matter where they went or what they did.

And in line 17, the speaker says that "What falls away is always. And is near." This statement doesn't make sense at first: if something "falls away" (disappears), how can it be "always" and "near"? Yet on closer inspection, this paradox seems to suggest that life and death are intricately intertwined. "What falls away," in the end, is life—but just because someone dies doesn't mean life itself, or the legacy of their particular life, ceases to exist. There's a balance between life and death that's similar to the balance created by these paradoxes.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I wake to sleep"
- **Line 3:** "I learn by going where I have to go."
- **Line 4:** "We think by feeling"
- **Line 6:** "I wake to sleep"
- **Line 9:** "And learn by going where I have to go."
- **Line 12:** "I wake to sleep"
- **Line 15:** "learn by going where to go."
- **Line 16:** "This shaking keeps me steady."
- **Line 17:** "What falls away is always.," " And is near."
- **Line 18:** "I wake to sleep"
- **Line 19:** "I learn by going where I have to go."

CAESURA

Caesura helps to control the pace of the poem, slowing it down and alerting the reader to pay attention. Caesura can also draw attention to important words within a line, just as an end stop emphasizes words at the end of a line. Look at line 1, for example:

> I wake to **sleep, and** take my waking slow.

Here, caesura encourages the reader to pause over the key word "sleep" and contemplate the paradox of "wak[ing] to sleep." It also slows down the line, evoking the "slow[ness]" with which the speaker awakes.

In line 4, the speaker says that human beings "think by **feeling. What** is there to know?" A period makes a harder stop than a comma, so the caesura between "feeling" and "What" is fairly dramatic. It accentuates the word "feeling"—which is thematically central to the poem—as well as the larger paradox of "think[ing] by feeling."

Lines 7 and 8 both contain caesuras, which affect the rhythm of their lines in different ways:

> Of those so close beside **me, which** are you?
> God bless the **Ground! I** shall walk softly there,

The comma in line 7 creates a much softer pause than the exclamation point in line 8, which is maximally dramatic. Combined with the capitalization of "Ground" and the /g/ alliteration in "God"/"Ground," caesura helps stress the speaker's reverence for the humble earth.

Later, line 15 contains two caesuras:

> **And, lovely, learn** by going where to go.

The double pause creates a slow, halting rhythm, evoking the deep breaths of "air" the previous line has encouraged people to "take."

In lines 16-17, there are two more pronounced caesuras:

> This shaking keeps me **steady. I** should know.
> What falls away is **always. And** is near.

The poem's rhythm becomes even more halting here, the sentences more fragmented. In this context, caesura helps evoke the fragility of life, how quickly it can "fall[] away." It also lends the speaker's tone a certain crispness, as if he's delivering hard truths about life and death.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sleep, and"
- **Line 4:** "feeling. What"
- **Line 6:** "sleep, and"
- **Line 7:** "me, which"
- **Line 8:** "Ground! I"
- **Line 10:** "Tree; but"
- **Line 12:** "sleep, and"
- **Line 14:** "me; so"
- **Line 15:** "And, lovely, learn"
- **Line 16:** "steady. I"
- **Line 17:** "always. And"
- **Line 18:** "sleep, and"

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker personifies nature in the fifth stanza:

> Great Nature has another thing to do
> to you and me; so take the lively air,
> And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

In other words, it doesn't matter how rationally people plan out their lives, because everyone's plans are subject to "Great Nature." Ultimately, we have little control over what happens to us; we could get sick and die tomorrow, and then what would all our careful planning amount to? "Nature," then, becomes an embodiment of the larger forces that shape our lives, and that should encourage us (in the speaker's view) to live humbly,

intuitively, and joyfully.

This personification of nature echoes the fourth stanza, in which the speaker points to "Light"—natural sunlight—illuminating "the Tree." The capitalization of "Ground" in line 8 also suggests a personification of the earth, or nature. All of these lines link nature with a power and "Great[ness]" that surpasses rational, human thought. That nature "has another thing to do" to both speaker and reader suggests that we're fragile, mortal, and subject to forces beyond our control; the best we can do is feel our way through life the way a "worm" might (line 11).

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "Great Nature has another thing to do / To you and me"

VOCABULARY

Lowly (Line 11) - Humble; unimportant.

Winding stair (Line 11) - A spiraling staircase (here possibly a metaphor, suggesting the kind of twisting stem or vine a worm might climb).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Waking" is written in the form of a villanelle. This means that it contains 19 lines, broken into five tercets (three-line stanzas) and a final quatrain (four-line stanza), with the first and third line of the first tercet acting as refrains. These lines repeat in alternation at the end of each following tercet, and both lines appear at the end of the closing quatrain. The poem's rhyme scheme (ABA ABA ABA ABA ABA ABAA) and meter (see Meter section) are built into its form as well.

The repetitions of the villanelle emphasize the ideas in the refrain lines. In this case, "I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow" and "I learn by going where I have to go" are centrally important to the poem. As these lines repeat in different contexts, with occasional variations, they take on more and more meaning. Though they're somewhat enigmatic and paradoxical statements, they signal that the contrast between "waking" and "sleep[ing]," and between knowledge and feeling, are key to any reading of the poem.

The strict villanelle form also reinforces the inescapable "fate" of the speaker: that is, there's no way to live without dying. Even before death, we go where we "have to go"—and so does the poem's form. Yet the poem feels dynamic and surprising, in part due to variations in its meter and the wording of its refrain lines. This dynamism reflects the speaker's argument that there's a freedom in knowing one will die—since one can't escape one's fate, one should live fearlessly and with relish.

METER

"The Waking" is written in iambic pentameter, meaning its lines are generally made up of five iambs (feet that follow an unstressed-stressed pattern: da-DUM). Here are the first three lines scanned:

I wake | to sleep, | and take | my wak- | ing slow.
I feel | my fate | in what | I can- | not fear.
I learn | by go- | ing where | I have | to go.

Iambic pentameter is the most common meter in the English language, as well as the typical meter of villanelles in English. Its familiar rhythm makes the poem easy to read as well as sprightly and musical. And while Roethke keeps the meter quite regular overall, he occasionally varies it to mix things up and/or create emphasis. For instance, there's a spondee rather than an iamb at the start of line 8:

God bless | the Ground! | I shall | walk soft- | ly there,

This strong foot emphasizes the speaker's reverence for the earth. Notice the spondee in line 13 as well:

Great Nat- | ure has | anoth- | er thing | to do

This emphatic foot once again highlights an important idea: that "Great Nature" is more powerful than, and has a plan for, human beings.

RHYME SCHEME

Villanelles follow a set rhyme scheme: ABA for each of the tercets, and ABAA for the final quatrain. It's an extremely closed scheme, relying on just two kinds of rhymes: the predominant A rhymes ("slow," "go," "know," etc.) and the less pronounced B rhymes ("fear," "ear," etc.).

To make things less rigid, Roethke sprinkles some slant rhymes throughout this villanelle. For instance, "ear" and "there" share /r/ consonance but have slightly different vowels, and "you," "go," and "how" hardly rhyme at all—they just end with a /w/ sound. These slant rhymes add some spontaneity to the pattern, mirroring the poem's theme of "learn[ing]" as you "go."

Still, the rhyme scheme is prominent enough to make the poem highly musical and memorable. The rhymes and repetitions underline the speaker's enigmatic statements, causing them to echo in the reader's mind.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Waking" could be anyone; they don't

specify their age, race, gender, etc. And because the poem deals with broad philosophical themes, such as the unknowability of the future and the value of feeling over logic, it isn't necessary to interpret the speaker as a specific person. After all, when they say "We think by feeling," they're describing human beings in general, not just themselves.

That said, one could easily read Roethke himself into some of the speaker's statements. For example, the speaker's reverence for "Great Nature" manifests itself in other Roethke poems as well; he's famous for his richly evocative writing about plants and animals. And the speaker's "shaking" might indirectly refer to Roethke's struggles with mental illness (he suffered from manic depression, also known as bipolar disorder). For Roethke, mental illness was a source of deep pain, but it was also an important part of how he experienced the world.

SETTING

The poem doesn't have a clearly defined setting. For the most part, it deals with philosophical concepts—things that take place primarily in the mind.

Even the speaker's mention of "the Ground" and "Light tak[ing] a Tree" are more metaphorical than literal. When the speaker says that they will "walk softly" on the earth, they are referring to a way of living their life. They choose to remain in awe of the world and its mysteries rather than trying to bend the future to their will. They don't take themselves too seriously.

Similarly, the speaker describes a "lowly worm climb[ing] up a winding stair." This is more a symbolic worm than a real one: the worm is representative of how even the slowest, least important creatures can rise above their stations simply by following their instincts.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Theodore Roethke (1908-1963) is widely considered a major 20th-century American poet. Roethke was familiar with the radical innovations introduced by modernist poets like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, but his poems just as often get their energy from traditional forms. Alongside contemporaries like John Berryman, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath, Roethke helped pioneer the style that came to be called "confessional" poetry. This poetry was "confessional" because it included autobiographical details from the poets' own lives, as if they were baring their souls in public.

However, "The Waking" deals with more universal, philosophical themes and contains no explicit references to Roethke's life. It was published in Roethke's 1953 collection of the same name, which won the Pulitzer Prize the following year. Frequently anthologized in the years since, it remains one of Roethke's most beloved poems.

Roethke was hugely influential as a teacher; many of his students, including James Wright, Tess Gallagher, Richard Hugo, Jack Gilbert, David Wagoner, and Carolyn Kizer, went on to become famous poets in their own right. Though not his student, Plath was also profoundly inspired by him, so much so that *Poetry* magazine once rejected her "Poem for a Birthday" because it too closely resembled his work.

Roethke himself learned how to write poetry by emulating contemporaries such as W.H. Auden, Louise Bogan, and William Carlos Williams. He believed that modern poets couldn't just rely on deep outpourings of personal expression; instead, they should begin by purposely imitating other poets, in order to internalize the overarching trajectory of poetry. In this way, they could then consciously build on the poetic tradition.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Roethke was born in Saginaw, Michigan in 1908, the son of a German immigrant father and American-born mother. He spent much of his childhood inside the 25-acre greenhouse his father owned and managed, and thus formed an intense bond with plants and gardening. In its praise for "the Ground," "the lowly worm," and "Great Nature" itself, "The Waking" reflects his humble, earthy beginnings.

When he was 14, Roethke lost his father to cancer and his uncle to suicide. These early losses shook him, and as he grew older he began to struggle with bipolar disorder, a mental illness marked by extreme shifts in energy and mood. When the poet/speaker of "The Waking" says that "This shaking keeps me steady," he might be referring to the instability he experienced in the throes of grief and/or mental illness.

"The Waking" was published in the America of the 1950s, an era marked by broad social conformity after the shock and disruption of World War II. This poem urges a more nonconformist and liberated approach to life; since everyone ultimately dies, the speaker suggests, there's no right or wrong way to live, so we should follow our intuitions and savor whatever comes our way.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- All Things Considered: Roethke's Humble Beginnings — An NPR feature about the house the poet grew up in and how his humble beginnings influenced his work. (https://www.npr.org/transcripts/90817463)
- Remarkable People: A Short Film About Roethke — Watch a short documentary about the poet by filmmaker Jean Walkinshaw. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Edfly5jPb80)

- Roethke's Relationship to Mystery and Darkness — A Seattle Times article discussing one of the Pacific Northwest's greatest poets, his upbringing and influences, and his lasting legacy. (https://www.seattletimes.com/pacific-nw-magazine/poet-and-uw-professor-theodore-roethke-moved-among-mysteries-and-literary-legacy/)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of "The Waking." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yuuwzrAmpjg)
- More About Roethke's Life — A brief biography of the poet at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/theodore-roethke)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER THEODORE ROETHKE POEMS

- My Papa's Waltz

HOW TO CITE

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