To a Waterfowl
by William Cullen Bryant

*Despite many years of scientific study since Bryant’s time, we still do not understand fully how migrating birds find their way. Here, as in many of his poems, Bryant is interested in the connection between his own imagination and a mystery of nature.*

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

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

Seek’st thou the flashy brink
Of weedy lake, or marge* of river wide,
Or where the rocking billows rise and sink
On the chafed oceanside?

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

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

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

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

He who, from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,
In the long way that I must tread alone,
Will lead my steps aright.
"To a Waterfowl" by William Cullen Bryant

Questions:

1. In the first stanza, the observation of the waterfowl in flight is put not as a statement but as a question.
   a. What does this question about the bird's destination suggest to you about the poet's mood or state of mind?
   b. Migrating birds usually travel in flocks and follow a leader. What different effect is conveyed by the poem's focus upon a "solitary" bird?

2. In stanza 2, the poet imagines a hunter watching the waterfowl. How does the introduction of this second human observer help to establish the poet's sympathy with the bird?

3. In stanza 6, the poet imagines the future homecoming of the bird in images of rest, fellowship, and shelter. Why is it important that the poet should imagine this homecoming for the bird before it disappears? In answering, consider the image of the bird in stanza 5.

4. Stanza 7 is a turning point in the poem, moving from observation of the bird and meditation about its flight to a statement of the meaning of this experience. Stanza 8 draws a direct parallel between the bird's flight and the poet's earthbound journey through life. How do lines 25-26 anticipate this parallel?

5. The "lesson" of this experience touches the poet's heart.
   a. What inner assurance has the poet gained?
   b. What has provided this new assurance?
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**Theme:** Theme is the central insight into life, or main idea, that a work of literature expresses.

Understanding Theme: Identify thematic phrases as directed.

1. "There is a Power whose care
   Teaches thy way along that pathless coast --
   The desert and illimitable air --
   Lone wandering, but not lost."  (lines 13-16)
   a. Underline the phrase expressing the speaker’s belief in God.
   b. Circle the phrase that means that God, in the speaker’s view, guides the bird.
   c. Put a wavy line under the phrase that means that although the bird travels alone, it receives divine protection.

2. "And soon that toil shall end;
   Soon shalt thou find a summer home, and rest,
   And scream among thy fellows; reeds shall bend,
   Soon, o’er thy sheltered nest."  (lines 21-24)
   a. Underline the phrase that means that the bird’s work will soon over.
   b. Circle the phrase that says that the bird will find a relaxing reward.

3. "He who, from zone to zone,
   Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,
   In the long way that I must tread alone,
   Will lead my steps aright. "  (lines 29-32)
   a. Underline the phrase that each person’s path in life is a long one.
   b. Circle the phrase that means that each person must go through life on his or her own.
   c. Put a wavy line under the phrase that means God will guide the speaker’s way.
Applying Skills: Below are statements about themes. Based on themes in "To a Waterfowl," put an A beside the statements Bryant would agree with and a D beside those he would disagree with.

___ 1. A divine force protects birds and people in much the same way.
___ 2. Watching nature, we realize that we are in good hands as we travel through life.
___ 3. There is no mercy in this world
___ 4. We live our lives alone, yet we are protected in a way we don't completely understand.
___ 5. God is basically good.
___ 7. Nature is a fearsome thing.
___ 8. Birds are as intelligent as human beings.
___ 9. The lone-wandering bird is easy prey for humans.
___ 10. The wise person, like the waterfowl, trusts divine providence.

Reader's response: Below are three possible thematic statements about birds inspired by "To a Waterfowl." Circle the number of the statement you agree with most. Be ready to support.

___ 1. Birds live short, senseless lives and so do human beings.
___ 2. Birds are more beautiful than they themselves realize, and so are human beings.
___ 3. Though birds seem vulnerable, they are actually under divine protection.
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| **Title** |
| Make a prediction. What do you think the title means before reading the poem? |

| **Paraphrase** |
| Translate the poem in your own words. What is the poem about? |

| **Connotation** |
| Look beyond the literal meaning of key words and images to their associations. |

| **Attitude** |
| How does the author feel about the speaker, other characters, or the subject? |

| **Shifts** |
| Where do the shifts in tone, setting, voice, etc., occur? What is the purpose of each shift? How do they contribute to effect and meaning? |

| **Title** |
| Reexamine the title. What do you think it means now in the context of the poem? |

| **Theme** |
| Think of the literal and metaphorical layers of the poem. Write the theme in a complete sentence. |
1. List three verbs that show what the poem's narrator is doing in the first stanza.

2. The narrator of the poem is sad because his lost love is dead. What is her name and how does he try to escape his sorrow?

3. What fills the narrator's heart with terror in stanza 3?

4. What does the narrator see when he first opens the chamber door (stanza 4)?

5. In stanza 7, the raven flies into the narrator's chamber. Where does the raven perch?

6. What is the first question the narrator asks the raven (stanza 8)?

7. What is the raven's only answer to the narrator's questions?

8. In stanza 12, the narrator sits down in front of the raven. What is the narrator thinking as he looks at the bird?

9. As the poem progresses, the narrator becomes more and more furious with the raven. Why does he become so angry?

10. Where is the raven at the end of the poem (stanza 18)? What does the raven's presence tell the reader about the narrator's grief?

11. Edgar Allan Poe is famous for using symbolism in his stories and poetry. How could the raven be a symbol in this poem? What clues does Poe give you to imply that the raven is a symbol rather than a literal creature?

12. Poe is also famous for using allusions in his writing. Find two examples from "The Raven"; identify the type of allusion it is (literary, mythological, biblical, etc.).

13. How would you describe the atmosphere created by the setting? Which images in the beginning of the poem create this atmosphere?