Try analyzing the following poem by Sir Alfred Lord Tennyson, paying particular attention to sound devices:

**The Eagle**

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.

**Glossary**

1 crookèd: in the first printing of this poem, between 1851 and 1863, Tennyson originally wrote "hookèd".

3 azure: blue - the blue of the sea and the sky. (The eagle is surrounded by the horizon on all sides, but not by any towns or cities.)

4 wrinkled: i.e. from on high, the waves on the sea look tiny, like wrinkles.

**Commentary**

In these brief lines, which Tennyson himself subtitled "Fragment", we have a vivid heroic image of an eagle, first high on some crag in the mountains, then swooping on his prey.

Walt Whitman, the American poet - the writer of "Patrolling Barnegat" - spoke of Tennyson's "finest verbalism". What he meant was Tennyson's exquisite sense of the sound of words, and particularly his control of assonance and consonance. The sound in this poem is an important part of its effect. We can notice the strong alliteration on "e" in the first two lines. There is also strong use of consonance (the repetition of a sequence of two or more consonants with a change in the intervening vowel): "close … lands " (2), "wrinkled … crawls" (4), "watches … walls " (5). There are the echoing ending d-sounds in "Ring'd … world … stands" (3).

Here, also, the rhythm is finely judged. It is mainly iambic tetrameter (i.e. an eight-syllable line, with iambic rhythm). However, lines 2 and 3 begin with trochees, i.e. a strong beat and then a weak beat. This inverts the rhythm momentarily and so slows the poem's movement. This is one of the reasons that the image of the bird seems so majestic.
The two stanzas form triplets, i.e. there is one rhyme sound in each stanza. This was a form that Tennyson enjoyed early in his career, so that, though this poem was indeed published in 1851, it may have been written much earlier, perhaps in 1833. This would make sense in other ways. Loneliness and isolation is an important theme in Tennyson's early poetry. Sometimes he felt very ambivalently about loneliness (as in "The Lady of Shalott" for example) but here the eagle, all on its own, high above all living things, seems to present a glorious image. Perhaps in that sense this is a young person's poem, all about the heroic individual, not the individual who sees the importance of society and connectedness. It is a heroic image of a creature on its own, far above the world.

When he wrote the poem, Tennyson may have been remembering a line in Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (1671). Samson, the great strong man of ancient Israel, pushed the pillars of a temple apart, and so brought down the whole structure on the heads of his enemies. Milton, in telling his story compares him to an eagle: "but as an eagle / His cloudless thunder bolted on their heads" (ll. 1695-96). The last lines of "The Eagle" perhaps echo this, as the eagle's swoop downwards is compared to a "thunderbolt" (6).