Stormcock in Elder

SUMMARY

In my dark and isolated dwelling, distant from the world and all its sights and sounds, next to the small door where the dwelling's old roof is just five feet off the ground, I searched on the shelf for bread, but found spiritual sustenance instead:

For all of a sudden, near my ear, loudly and wildly, with winter's happiness, that dependable choirboy, the mistle thrush, burst out into proud song; and through the broken roof, I spotted him, distinguished by his singing.

Barely an arm's-length away from my eye, I saw him, even though I was hidden from his view. I saw his vibrating throat that produced his song, his bird's breast damp with dew from the misty air, his shiny beak that opened wide and showed his pointed tongue inside.

I saw his large eye, surrounded by a sunburst of dainty feathers, delicately arranged. I saw his feet holding on firmly to the small branch of the elder tree. I saw how strong and deftly crafted were his feet's scales and tendons and claws. Clearly through the broken roof I saw him.

I saw the flight-feathers on his tail and wings and the shorter feathers covering those, and the way the white feathers blended into the reddish-brown feathers, connecting his brightly-colored breast with the brightly-colored outer sections of his wings. Dots of gold, spots of chestnut brown, sprinkled with silver, like a multicolored flower.

Luck's little warrior, like Jack Frost himself, boasting of your survival skills, there you sing—but tell me, stormcock, before your windpipe breaks, how do you manage such resilience and optimism? Just look at you: fully-fed even in the harsh month of February, thriving and healthy like a rich merchant at a feast.

It's said that half the world is ignorant of the other half's enlightenment; so please sing your song, and go on your way! And keep on keeping on, even in February, like the angel Gabriel, delivering your hopeful message by perching on elder tree branches near the broken roofs of other souls.

THEMES

THE SPLENDOR OF NATURE

"Stormcock in Elder" revolves around the detailed description of a stormcock—a type of bird common in much of Europe. ("Stormcock" is actually a nickname; it is technically called the "mistle thrush.") The poem's vivid imagery praises the stormcock's singing, its well-formed body, and its strength in the face of bad weather. Throughout the poem, the speaker's tone is one of deep admiration and appreciation. "Stormcock in Elder" thus pays tribute to the splendor of nature, as seen via the magnificence of one ordinary bird.

From the start, the stormcock is described by the speaker in glowing terms: he is "glee[ful]," "burst[ing] out in pride of poetry," and "by his singing glorified." This contrasts sharply with the descriptions of the "dark hermitage" where the speaker has been living alone until the stormcock appears, and suggests from the get-go that the poem is dedicated to celebrating the natural world as well as the joy and wonder that nature can bring to human beings.

Indeed, the bulk of the poem is spent describing the stormcock in great and rapturous detail. The speaker gazes on each part of the bird's body with admiration, delighting not just in his beauty—"like a brindled flower"—but also his form. From his "polished bill" and "pointed tongue" to his feet, which the speaker describes as "strongly used" and "subtly made," the bird is portrayed as a majestic, perfectly-constructed creature, suggesting that nature itself is also glorious and without flaw.

The speaker also lavishes praise upon the stormcock for his strength and resilience. The speaker calls him "old hard times' braggart" and describes him as "full-fed in February." Clearly, the stormcock is a worthy bird not merely for his beauty and form, but also his aptitude for survival in even the worst times of year. (In fact, that's where the "stormcock" nickname comes from—the mistle thrush is known for singing even during bad weather.) The poem, therefore, affirms the stormcock as a worthy symbol for the vitality of nature itself.

All together, the clear joy and admiration that the speaker feels while watching the stormcock lays the foundation for the poem's depiction of the natural world as a source of splendor and strength, worthy of celebration.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-36

RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

"Stormcock in Elder" should be read not merely as a celebration of nature, but also as an ode to spiritual belief. It portrays the speaker's encounter with the stormcock as a transformative religious moment. In the stormcock's perfection, which the speaker praises at length, the speaker sees evidence of God's handiwork, which fills the speaker with joy. The speaker even explicitly compares the stormcock to the angel Gabriel, which suggests that the bird, like the angel, serves as a spiritual messenger. In sum, the poem can be read as an extended metaphor for religious awakening.

The introduction of the stormcock lays the foundation for this extended metaphor. Readers first meet the speaker alone and "aloof." The speaker's home, despite being a "hermitage" (where a hermit or religious figure lives), is portrayed as spiritually empty. The speaker describes it as "dark" and impoverished. The speaker must "grope" for bread on an empty shelf.

Rather than bread, however, what the speaker finds is the stormcock, singing on the roof. Importantly, the speaker first refers to the bird metaphorically as "celestial food," immediately linking the stormcock to spiritual nourishment. This suggests that the speaker's poverty and hunger should also be read metaphorically, as signs of spiritual as well as literal impoverishment.

From this moment on, the speaker undergoes a religious awakening. The speaker gazes ecstatically upon the stormcock, and describes him using words or phrases with spiritual implications. The bird is compared to an "old unfailing chorister," or member of a choir; his singing is "glorified"; he "cries" like a passionate spiritual leader; he is even referred to once as "Him," with a capital H, in the same way that God's pronouns are capitalized in Christian writing. The stormcock is also consistently personified, elevated to greater significance by the speaker's use of human pronouns, rather than calling the bird "it."

Most explicitly, in the poem's final lines, the speaker describes the stormcock "as bright as Gabriel." The archangel Gabriel is a famous messenger in the Christian faith, best-known for delivering the news to the Virgin Mary that she is pregnant with Jesus, the son of God, who will grow up to bring new faith to millions. In making this comparison, the speaker suggests that the stormcock is also a spiritual messenger, shining "bright" new light on the speaker's circumstances, and heralding the arrival of faith and new hope.

Finally, in light of the implicit and explicit spirituality present in the poem, the speaker's attention to the stormcock's beauty, form, and strength must be read as more than an appreciation of the natural world. The way the speaker marvels over the bird's construction and fortitude suggest that the speaker views the beauty of the natural world as proof of divine design, and appreciates the stormcock in no small part because the speaker appreciates God as the bird's creator.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12
- Lines 15-23
- Lines 25-32
- Lines 37-42

RESILIENCE AND OPTIMISM

"Stormcock in Elder" closes on a hopeful note, drawing lessons of resilience and optimism from its celebration of the stormcock. Throughout the poem, the stormcock is portrayed as uncommonly strong and upbeat, withstanding even the worst winter weather, and singing happily despite hardship. In a sense, the stormcock can be read as a role model for the speaker. The speaker clearly derives great pleasure from watching the bird, but also learns some things from him too. His spirited way of living inspires the speaker to embrace an optimistic outlook as well.

Though the speaker is a human being and the stormcock only a bird, their relationship throughout the poem positions the stormcock as the leader or instructor. Early in the poem, the speaker is "unseen" by the stormcock—thus their relationship is entirely based on the speaker's view of him, and the insights the speaker gleans by watching him. In short, the bird leads by example alone.

And the example the stormcock sets is a worthy one! His toughness is mentioned again and again, beginning with the poem's title, which uses the bird's tenacious nickname rather than its proper name. In addition, much of the speaker's characterization of the stormcock emphasizes his high spirits in addition to his strength. He is "loud ... with wintry glee," has a "throbbing" throat, "bright breast," and many other qualities, like "flight-feathers" that allow him to fly freely through the sky, that the speaker admires in great detail.

Thus, by the time the speaker is done admiring the stormcock, it is clear the speaker's outlook on life has changed. Instead of dwelling on loneliness or the impoverished place in which the speaker lives, the speaker begins to address the bird directly in a playful manner, comparing him to a "soldier" and "northwest Jack" (a folk figure who thrives in the winter) and his birdsong to the cheerful sound of "bagpipes." The speaker even calls the bird an "old hard times' braggart," suggesting that he's a bit of a show-off—but also that the speaker has been a willing audience for his show of strength.

What's more, the speaker even explicitly asks the bird for guidance on how to "make so brave a show" in the face of adversity. Because the speaker is unseen by the stormcock—and does not really expect a reply from a bird—this line can be interpreted as the speaker processing the lessons learned from this unexpected encounter with the stormcock.

The poem's conclusion emphasizes this reading, since the speaker not only bids the stormcock farewell, but also encourages him to go forth into the world and do for others what he has done for the speaker. After musing that half of the world remains ignorant to how the other half lives—in other words, that half of the world is still waiting to be enlightened—the speaker urges the bird to "sing your song and go your way." Witnessing his resilience and exuberance has encouraged the speaker to embrace the stormcock's optimistic approach to life, and now the speaker hopes he will go on to share his wisdom with others.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-6
- Lines 8-12
- Lines 14-15
- Line 17
- Lines 19-22
- Lines 25-28
- Lines 31-42

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

In my dark ...
... celestial food instead:

The opening lines establish the poem's setting and the speaker's circumstances, which are closely linked. The setting is revealed as a "hermitage," a remote dwelling usually belonging to a hermit or religious figure. The speaker describes the hermitage as "dark" and "aloof," or distant, from the world's sights and sounds, conveying a strong sense of isolation. The fact that the speaker identifies themselves with this place—note that it is "my" hermitage—suggests that the speaker, too, is lonely and isolated.

The hardship of life at the hermitage is further emphasized by lines 4 through 6 ("Hangs but five feet ... celestial food instead"), which continue to describe it as a small, worn-out place. The "old roof" hangs so low to the ground it is barely as tall as a person. When the speaker goes to "grope," or search, on the shelf for bread, there's none there. Not only is the hermitage cut off from the outside world, it is also in disrepair and without food, indicating that the speaker may be impoverished as well as isolated.

Given the religious implications of the word "hermitage," much of its description can also be read metaphorically. In other words, the isolation and impoverishment of the hermitage likely represents the speaker's spiritual or religious state as well.

- This is made clear in the stanza's final line, where the speaker finds "celestial food instead" of bread. *Celestial* means "heavenly," so the implication here is that the speaker has not found actual food, like bread, but rather spiritual sustenance.
- What's more, the rest of the poem indicates that the phrase "celestial food" is itself a metaphor for the stormcock, the central figure of the poem, whom the speaker has just spotted.
- Thus this line suggests that the speaker has been suffering from *spiritual* hunger at the hermitage—and that the sighting of the stormcock fills that hunger by providing spiritual nourishment.

This stanza also establishes the poem's structure, meter, and rhyme scheme. The is a sestet, or six-line stanza, just like the rest of the poem's stanzas. Each line contains eight syllables, and they are written in loose iambic tetrameter, the meter that dominates the poem. This means that there are four iambs—poetic units with a da-DUM, or unstressed-stressed syllable pattern—per line. Lines 5 and 6 illustrate this meter clearly (note that "celestial" should be read as having two syllables rather than three):

I groped along the shelf for bread
But found celestial food instead:

There are many variations to this meter, however. Note the spondees (stressed-stressed) of "world's sight," "world's sound," "small door," and "old roof," for instance. The extra stresses here add emphasis to these descriptive phrases.

Lastly, the rhyme scheme follows an ABABCC pattern, in which the first and third, second and fourth, and fifth and sixth lines each rhyme with each other in pairs, again establishing a pattern that will be used throughout the rest of the poem.

LINES 7-12

For suddenly close ...
... his singing glorified.

The second stanza of "Stormcock in Elder" introduces readers to the central figure of the poem: the stormcock. He is noticed first for his singing, which the speaker hears "close at my ear" and describes as "loud, loud and wild, with wintry glee."

The use of epizeixius, in which the word "loud" is repeated twice in immediate succession, emphasizes the powerful way in which the stormcock bursts onto the scene and takes hold as the poem's focus. The poem also breaks once again from its usual iambic tetrameter here: "loud, loud" is another spondee, or metrical foot with two stressed syllables, which achieves a similar attention-grabbing effect on a metrical level.

The rest of the stanza is dedicated to the speaker's description of the stormcock's singing, and relies on religious metaphors:

- First the stormcock is compared to a "chorister," or choirboy.
- His song is then described as "poetry," which does not necessarily imply spirituality, but certainly elevates simple birdsong to a higher level.
- Finally, lines 11 and 12 ("And through ... glorified") state that the speaker "spied," or noticed, "Him by his singing glorified," which has strong religious undertones. The use of the word "glorify" echoes the idea of God's glory and magnificence, and the capitalization of "Him" is suggestive of the Christian tradition of capitalizing pronouns that refer to God.

This stanza also introduces another major theme of the poem: the stormcock's resilience. The fact that his glee is described as "wintry" emphasizes the bird's optimism in the face of harsh weather. Likewise, the adjective "unfailing" implies that the stormcock keeps at his song regardless of any obstacles. These descriptions also mark the beginning of the poem's personification of the stormcock, who is consistently referred to using human pronouns, rather than being called "it."

Lastly, line 11 ("And through ... I spied") once again reminds readers that the speaker has encountered the stormcock via the "broken roof" of the hermitage. This line not only reminds readers of the speaker's impoverishment, both literal and spiritual, but also begins to shed light on the speaker's relationship with the stormcock. The speaker is a passive witness, "spying" on the bird through a hole in their roof, whereas the stormcock is the primary actor of the stanza—and the poem.

LINES 13-18

Scarcely an arm's-length ...
... pointed tongue inside;

The third stanza of "Stormcock in Elder" begins to examine the stormcock's physical form. Using vivid imagery, the speaker describes various parts of the bird's body: its throat, its breast, its bill, and its tongue.

In particular, the speaker highlights those aspects that exhibit vitality. For example, the bird's throat is described as "throbbing" and making a "cry," which emphasizes the stormcock's strength and resilience. The use of alliteration, assonance, and consonance in these lines—specifically, the repetition of /th/, /t/, /p/, /i/ and /y/ sounds—also convey the bird's beauty through the musicality of the language. The many sibilant /s/ sounds add gentleness to the line as well, as if the speaker is speaking softly to avoid disturbing the bird. All the attention dedicated to the stormcock in these lines seems to suggest that the bird is somehow special:

> Scarcely an arm's-length from the eye,
> Myself unseen, I saw him there;
> The throbbing throat that made the cry,
> The breast dewed from the misty air,
> The polished bill that opened wide
> And showed the pointed tongue inside;

Since the bird possesses fairly ordinary body parts, no different from any other stormcock's, it can be deduced that the stormcock is special more so because of what he *represents* than what he actually is. His "throbbing throat," "breast dewed [in mist]," "polished bill," and "pointed tongue" are significant because they mark his physical perfection. This perfection, in turn, can be attributed to the natural world to which the stormcock belongs, and also to God, as the creator of that natural world. This stanza thus introduces a major extended metaphor of the poem: the stormcock represents not just himself, but also the splendor of the natural world, and the presence and power of God.

In addition, the speaker reminds readers in line 14 ("Myself ... there") that though they are "scarcely an arm's-length" away from the stormcock's eye, they are nevertheless "unseen" by the bird. This reinforces that the speaker and stormcock's relationship is entirely based on the speaker's view of him, and is a reminder of their respective roles in the poem.

The stormcock acts independently of the speaker, whereas the speaker devotes the same attention to the bird that a pupil might pay to a teacher, or a religious disciple to a learned elder. In other words, the stormcock leads the speaker by example—by simply being itself, as created by nature and God, and the speaker watches and learns.

LINES 19-24

The large eye, ...
... roof I saw;

In the fourth stanza of the poem, the speaker continues to lavish praise upon the stormcock. The imagery grows ever more vivid, highlighting every detail of the bird, from his "large eye" and the "minion feathers" that surround it to the scales, sinews, and claws of the bird's feet. The speaker's tone is likewise increasingly rapturous, as seen in the use of asyndeton to create a breathless effect as the speaker moves from one body part to the next.

Likewise, this stanza opens by breaking from the iambic tetrameter that has characterized much of the poem. This metrical deviation emphasizes that the stormcock is having a profound effect on the speaker, though the second half of the stanza does return to the poem's regular rhythm:

> The large eye, ringed with many a ray
> Of minion feathers, finely laid,
> The feet that grasped the elder-spray;
> How strongly used, how subtly made
> The scale, the sinew, and the claw,
> Plain through the broken roof I saw;

Once again, the poem also draws connections between the stormcock's physical form and his strength and resilience. In particular, his feet are described as "strongly used" and "subtly made," a line that subtly implies the existence of a maker—in other words, God. This line is also an example of antithesis that juxtaposes the strength of the bird's feet with their expert, delicate construction by God. The anaphora of "how"; the parallel grammatical construction on either side of the caesura (how + adverb + past tense verb); and the alliteration, consonance, and assonance between "strongly" and "subtly" all draw attention to the relationship between the incredible

might of the bird and the incredible skill of God in creating that might:

> How strongly used, how subtly made

The bird's feet are also described as "grasp[ing] the elder-spray." Literally, this refers to the bird's feet holding on to the small branch of an elder tree upon which he is perched. However, the word "elder" can also be interpreted as a bit of wordplay. The elder-spray likely symbolizes the speaker, who may be elderly or an elder (a leader) in the church. Therefore, this line is key to the relationship between the speaker and the stormcock. If the "elder" held by the bird is, metaphorically-speaking, the speaker, this line implicitly confirms the stormcock's power over the speaker.

The question is, what effect does the stormcock's power have? The final line of the stanza provides a hint. It reminds readers of the speaker's situation, watching the stormcock "through the broken roof" of the hermitage. As the earlier stanzas established, this broken roof is a metaphor for the speaker's spiritual impoverishment.

This line therefore suggests that the speaker's lonely and isolated state is why the stormcock is able to have such a profound effect. The strength, resilience, and optimism of the stormcock (as well as the splendor of nature and glory of God that he represents) have all served to uplift the speaker in a time and place of need. The stormcock's power thus can be understood as similar to that of a teacher or religious leader, who "grasps" the speaker in order to reveal the light in the darkness.

LINES 25-30

> *The flight-feathers in ...*
> *... a brindled flower.*

Like the prior two stanzas, this sestet is devoted to description of the stormcock. In this case, the speaker focuses primarily on the bird's beauty, especially the way his feathers fit perfectly together and the colors of his wings. Once again, this stanza relies on vivid imagery and a rhapsodic tone that convey the speaker's deep admiration for the bird and all that he represents.

These lines also allude to the poem "Pied Beauty" by Gerard Manley Hopkins, which likewise uses the word "brinded" (a variation on the word "brindled" seen here) and celebrates the beauty of the natural world.

This allusion suggests that "Stormcock in Elder" shares "Pied Beauty's" religious focus. The first line of "Pied Beauty" is "Glory be to god for dappled things," and it is hard not to read this stanza of "Stormcock in Elder" as a similarly praiseworthy hymn to God. The ecstatic descriptions of the stormcock's coloring, comparing his feathers to sequins, silver, and a multicolored flower, all suggest that the speaker continues to be ever more deeply moved by the bird on a spiritual level. Indeed, the speaker's admiration for the bird's "flight-feathers," "coverts" and "pinions," suggests an expert admiration of God's handiwork, which the speaker views as flawless all the way down to the level of a bird's wings.

Importantly, this stanza is the first to omit any reference to the speaker's hermitage, or the spiritual impoverishment from which the speaker suffered at the start of the poem. It suggests that by this point in the speaker's encounter with the stormcock, things have improved. As the ecstatic language implies, the speaker has progressed from spiritual hunger to spiritual fulfillment, and feels deeply moved and inspired by their experience with the bird.

No surprise then that this stanza is also one of the most metrically-varied in the poem, breaking frequently from iambic tetrameter. It contains several spondees (two stressed syllables), trochees (stressed-unstressed), and feminine endings (an extra unstressed syllable at the close of a line), all of which work together to deviate dramatically from the poem's regular rhythm:

> The flight-feathers in tail and wing,
> The shorter coverts, and the white
> Merged into russet, marrying
> The bright breast to the pinions bright,
> Gold sequins, spots of chestnut, shower
> Of silver, like a brindled flower.

This metrical deviation indicates that this moment marks the height of the speaker's spiritual encounter with the stormcock. The alliteration in these lines reflects the speaker's excitement as well, drawing readers' attention to phrases and further imbuing the lines with a sense of musicality and lyricism:

> The flight-feathers in tail and wing,
> The shorter coverts, and the white
> Merged into russet, marrying
> The bright breast to the pinions bright,
> Gold sequins, spots of chestnut, shower
> Of silver, like a brindled flower.

These lines are also filled with consonance (particularly of the gentle /l/, /s/, and /w/ sounds), which similarly adds to the beauty of the bird's description.

LINES 31-36

> *Soldier of fortune, ...*
> *... at a feast.*

The sixth and penultimate stanza of "Stormcock in Elder" introduces an element of apostrophe, as the speaker begins to directly address the stormcock. The speaker fondly nicknames the bird "soldier of fortune" and "northwest Jack," another

name for the folk figure Jack Frost, again as a way of expressing admiration for the bird's hardiness and survival skills even in wintertime.

In the next line, the speaker even seems to tease the stormcock a bit, by calling it a "hard-times' braggart," or a show-off. In doing so, however, it should be noted that the speaker is a willing audience for the bird's boastful song—and also that the speaker has repeatedly mentioned that the stormcock is not aware of having an audience, so is not really bragging so much as simply being himself!

Then the speaker asks the stormcock a question: "Tell me ... how you can make so brave a show?" In other words, the speaker asks the stormcock to give advice and guidance on how to live like the bird does, "full-fed in February" and full of bravery and good cheer. The metaphorical compliment with which the speaker concludes the stanza, comparing the stormcock's appearance to being "dressed like a rich merchant at a feast," also alludes to the bird's health, vitality, and prosperity despite it being winter.

It is important to note that these lines follow the prior stanzas in which the speaker studied the bird in great and rapturous depth. Since the speaker cannot really expect a reply from a bird, the speaker's question should be interpreted as more of a moment of self-interrogation. It is evidence of the speaker processing out loud the lessons learned from the stormcock. Before the stormcock's "bagpipes crack," or his song comes to an end, the speaker wants to make sure they have fully digested the spiritual insight and nourishment that the stormcock has provided.

LINES 37-42

One-half the world, ...
... by broken tile.

The final stanza of "Stormcock in Elder" delivers its most explicit religious metaphor yet, and ends on an optimistic and hopeful note. In the first two lines, the speaker suggests that while one half of the world's population has been spiritually enlightened, the other half has not.

Presumably, the speaker is among this enlightened half, having just undergone a religious awakening (or renewal) thanks to the stormcock's visit. No surprise, then, that in the next line ("So sing ... your way") the speaker turns back to addressing the stormcock and explicitly sends him on his way. In short, the speaker is no longer in need of the stormcock's enlightening presence or song, but knows there may be others out there who are.

In that vein, in the final lines of the poem, the speaker urges the bird to visit other "elder-spray[s] by broken [roof] tile[s]." This is where the major religious metaphor comes in, for in lines 40-41 ("And still ... to smile") the speaker explicitly compares the stormcock to the archangel Gabriel, a famous messenger of faith in the Christian tradition. This allusion implies that the stormcock is also a spiritual messenger, capable of bringing "bright" new light to those he encounters. Thus the poem's conclusion implies that the speaker hopes the stormcock will deliver his message of resilience, optimism, and hope to others lonely souls, as the speaker was at the poem's opening.

Indeed, these final lines beautifully wrap up the poem's progression. Having begun in the isolation of the hermitage, with a speaker suffering from spiritual hunger, the poem closes with the speaker looking outward, beyond the hermitage or even this encounter with the stormcock, to the rest of the world. It is clear the stormcock has had a profound impact on the speaker, and now the speaker hopes he will have the same effect on others.

SYMBOLS

THE HERMITAGE

"Stormcock in Elder" opens by establishing the poem's lonely and isolated setting, a "dark hermitage" where the speaker lives "aloof / from the world's sight and the world's sound." The speaker describes it as a "dark" and impoverished place, with an "old" and "broken" roof, a "small" door and low ceiling, and an empty shelf without any "bread" or nourishment.

Apart from these descriptions of the speaker's residence, the poem reveals very little about the speaker. As a result, the hermitage takes on symbolic importance, particularly because the word *hermitage* is usually used to refer to the distant dwelling places of hermits or religious figures.

By calling the speaker's home a hermitage, the poem makes clear that religion is key to the speaker's identity and experience. In addition, by describing the hermitage as a lonely and impoverished place, the poem suggests that the speaker, too, feels alone and impoverished—particularly in matters of spirituality and religion. The dark, lonely and impoverished hermitage thus reflects not just the setting in which the speaker encounters the stormcock, but also the state of the speaker's soul.

Importantly, however, it is the hermitage's isolation and state of disrepair that allows the speaker to encounter the stormcock in the first place. This up-close and personal encounter with the stormcock is transformative, and leaves the speaker feeling spiritually renewed. The hermitage's role in facilitating this encounter thus further emphasizes its symbolic link to the speaker's religious state.

Tellingly, throughout the course of the poem, the hermitage fades from symbolic prominence, and disappears from stanzas 4 and 5 altogether, as the speaker outgrows its confines and embraces the stormcock's more optimistic outlook.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-6:** "In my dark hermitage, aloof / From the world's sight and the world's sound, / By the small door where the old roof / Hangs but five feet above the ground, / I groped along the shelf for bread / But found celestial food instead:"
- **Lines 11-12:** "through the broken roof I spied / Him by his singing glorified."

THE STORMCOCK

The stormcock is the main symbol in "Stormcock in Elder." It is the central figure of the poem, and speaks to all three of the poem's major themes: the splendor of nature, faith and spirituality, and resilience and optimism.

The vast majority of the poem is dedicated to describing the stormcock's beauty, its well-formed body, and its strength and cheerfulness in the face of difficulty. The stormcock's many positive attributes make him a straightforward symbol for the human qualities that align with his traits: hope and optimism, and resilience in the face of adversity.

These same qualities can also be read as evidence of nature's glory, and are why the stormcock also symbolizes the splendor of nature itself. He literally embodies the natural world's precision and perfection, with every inch of his body constructed in order to meet his needs. On top of that, he is described as beautiful, his magnificence inspiring the speaker to study him in great detail. Last but not least, his song is compared to poetry. All together, it's clear that the stormcock represents the best of what nature has to offer.

At the same time, a deeper reading of the poem reveals many religious undertones, including the speaker's direct comparison of the stormcock to the angel Gabriel. In this light, the stormcock should also be read as symbolic of the glory of God, since each of its positive qualities, including its ability to weather winter, can also be interpreted as evidence of the role God has played in the creation of nature. No wonder, then, that the stormcock leaves such a profound impact on the speaker, since the bird's individual resilience and optimism take on larger religious significance.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-12
- Lines 14-23
- Lines 25-36
- Lines 39-42

THE ELDER-SPRAY

The elder tree, or elder-spray (a small branch or twig of an elder tree), is mentioned three times in "Stormcock in Elder," including the title. Elder trees, which are common in England, have strong symbolic resonance in that country, and elsewhere. They are often considered sacred trees, and commonly associated with life and death, in particular the circle of life that leads to regeneration and transformation. In the Christian faith, they became associated with the cross on which Jesus was crucified, and they are often planted in or near graveyards and cemeteries as a symbolic way of warding off evil. The fact that the stormcock chooses an elder tree to sit upon is thus symbolically significant to the speaker's religious transformation, as well as the poem's adherence to the Christian tradition.

At the same time, the use of "elder" in the poem can also be read as a play on the word for an old or elderly person. In that sense, the stormcock "grasp[ing]" the elder-spray might also be read as the stormcock's symbolic shepherding of an elderly, isolated, and lonely person, who has lost hope until the stormcock brings its message of faith and optimism. Similarly, the word "elder" is sometimes used to refer to leaders in a church or faith tradition, who are valued for their wisdom and responsible for teaching others to follow the faith. This reading also resonates with the stormcock's choice of an elder tree as its perch, emphasizing the bird's role as a religious mentor or role model.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 21:** "elder-spray"
- **Line 42:** " elder-spray"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is a key poetic device throughout "Stormcock in Elder." Though the poem is already highly regular, with a consistent form and structure and a rarely-broken rhyme scheme, the alliteration also adds another layer of cohesion through sound. This is the case both within individual stanzas, where alliteration links the poem's imagery together, as well as across stanzas, with some alliterative sounds repeating from one stanza to the next.

For example, the first stanza relies on /w/, /s/, and /gr/ alliteration, which creates a harmonious effect in that stanza alone by linking both "world's," "sight" and "sound," and "ground" and "groped." However, it also introduces some sounds that resurfaces as alliteration later in the poem. The /br/ sound in "bread," for instance, is echoed in the use of "broken" in the second, fourth, and seventh stanzas, as well as in words like "braggart," "brindled," "bright" and "breast."

A similar effect occurs with the /th/ sound, both in its voiced and unvoiced varieties. The poem frequently uses "the," "there,"

"that," and "through," which creates unity, but the repetition really pays off when, in line 15, the poem refers to "The throbbing throat that made the cry." The line feels propulsive in its distinct diction, but truly harmonious (even euphonious) as a result of the groundwork laid by all the other /th/ sounds.

Ultimately, the impact of all this alliteration is a strong sense of cohesion and beautiful unity—fitting for a poem about a bird in which every part has its place.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "world's," "sight," "world's," "sound"
- **Line 3:** "small"
- **Line 4:** "five feet," "ground"
- **Line 5:** "groped," "for," "bread"
- **Line 6:** "But," "found," "food"
- **Line 7:** "close"
- **Line 8:** "Loud, loud," "wild," "wintry"
- **Line 9:** "chorister"
- **Line 10:** "Burst," "pride," "poetry"
- **Line 11:** "broken," "spied"
- **Line 12:** "singing"
- **Line 14:** "there"
- **Line 15:** "The throbbing throat that," "the"
- **Line 17:** "polished"
- **Line 18:** "pointed"
- **Line 19:** "ringed," "ray"
- **Line 20:** "feathers, finely"
- **Line 21:** "feet," "spray"
- **Line 22:** "strongly," "subtly"
- **Line 23:** "scale," "sinew"
- **Line 24:** "saw"
- **Line 25:** "flight-feathers," "wing"
- **Line 26:** "white"
- **Line 27:** "Merged," "marrying"
- **Line 28:** "bright breast," "pinions," "bright"
- **Line 29:** "sequins," "spots"
- **Line 30:** "silver," "brindled"
- **Line 32:** "braggart," "blow"
- **Line 33:** "But," "bagpipes"
- **Line 34:** "brave"
- **Line 35:** "Full-fed," "February"
- **Line 36:** "feast"
- **Line 37:** "so," "say"
- **Line 38:** "how half"
- **Line 39:** "So," "sing," "song"
- **Line 40:** "still"
- **Line 41:** "bright," "smile"
- **Line 42:** "spray," "broken"

ALLUSION

There are three instances of allusion in "Stormcock in Elder."

The first is very subtle. In line 30, at the conclusion of the speaker's ecstatic study of the stormcock, the speaker compares the bird's coloring to "a brindled flower." The word "brindled" means multicolored, but it is not usually used to refer to flowers, but rather to the mixed markings on an animal's coat. That's the case in the poem "Pied Beauty," by Gerard Manley Hopkins, where a shortened form of the word, "brinded," describes a cow.

This unusual use of "brindled" indicates that Pitter was likely purposefully alluding to Hopkins' poem. It is a fitting allusion, since "Pied Beauty" has been interpreted as a hymn of praise to God that marvels at the varied world that God has created—not unlike "Stormcock in Elder," which sees the stormcock's perfection and beauty as evidence of God's handiwork.

The second allusion is a minor one, in which the speaker nicknames the stormcock "northwest Jack." This is another name and variation on the folk figures Jack Frost or Old Man Winter, all of whom are known for thriving in the wintertime, as the stormcock does.

The third allusion, on the other hand, is very explicit. At the very end of the poem, having implied in a number of more subtle ways that the stormcock serves as a messenger for faith and spirituality, the speaker compares the bird to the archangel Gabriel. More specifically, the speaker says, the stormcock should "go your way / And still in February contrive / As bright as Gabriel to smile" on other souls in need of spiritual renewal.

For starters, the speaker name-drops Gabriel, who delivered the news of her pregnancy to the Virgin Mary, and implies that the stormcock's message is as "bright," or hopeful, as the archanagel's.

Secondly, the speaker does this in a line that also deliberately depicts the stormcock as a messenger in his own, not just metaphorically, by instructing the stormcock to go forth and visit others in need of his message. Altogether, this allusion is a powerful one, especially since it explicitly confirms the many religious hints and undertones included more implicitly throughout the rest of the poem.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 30:** "like a brindled flower"
- **Line 31:** "northwest Jack"
- **Line 41:** "bright as Gabriel"

ASSONANCE

There is a lot of assonance in "Stormcock in Elder." The easiest examples to pick up on are the end rhymes in every stanza, where the vowel sounds of the final words in each line match with another's; this is discussed in the rhyme scheme section of this guide.

However, there is also assonance tucked into other portions of

the poem as well. Often, the end rhyme sounds surface elsewhere in the poem as well, such as in the second stanza when the long /i/ sound of "spied" at the end of line 11 is picked up by "I," "by," and "glorified." In fact, every word in the final line of this stanza features either a short or long /i/ vowel sound:

> ... I spied
> Him by his singing glorified.

This is the line introducing the stormcock's song, so it makes perfect sense that the poem itself is intensely musical here. Similarly, in the fourth stanza the long /ay/ sound in "scale" echoes the end rhymes that have already appeared throughout the stanza ("ray," "laid," "made,"), while and /oo/ sound rings out in lines 23-34:

> The scale, the sinew, and the claw,
> Plain through the broken roof I saw;

As a result of assonance like this, the poem feels deeply cohesive, each word carefully chosen to create a unified aural effect. The poem's sound is surefooted and strong, just like that of the bird the poem is praising.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "but," "above"
- **Line 5:** "shelf," "bread"
- **Line 6:** "celestial," "instead"
- **Line 8:** "with wintry glee"
- **Line 11:** "through," "roof," "I spied"
- **Line 12:** "Him by his singing glorified"
- **Line 13:** "Scarcely an," "eye"
- **Line 14:** "Myself," "I"
- **Line 17:** "polished bill," "opened"
- **Line 18:** "showed"
- **Line 19:** "ray"
- **Line 20:** "laid"
- **Line 21:** "spray"
- **Line 22:** "made"
- **Line 23:** "scale," "sinew"
- **Line 24:** "through," "roof"
- **Line 26:** "shorter coverts"
- **Line 28:** "pinions"
- **Line 29:** "sequins"
- **Line 30:** "silver," "brindled"
- **Line 31:** "fortune," "northwest"
- **Line 35:** "fed," "February," "dressed"
- **Line 37:** "so," "say"
- **Line 38:** "Knows," "may"
- **Line 39:** "So," "go," "way"
- **Line 40:** "still in," "contrive"
- **Line 41:** "bright," "Gabriel," "smile"
- **Line 42:** "spray," "tile"

APOSTROPHE

Apostrophe surfaces late in "Stormcock in Elder." After the speaker has dedicated the majority of the poem to describing and admiring the stormcock, in the sixth stanza the speaker begins to address the bird directly. Because the bird, of course, cannot reply (and in fact, has no idea the speaker is watching him), this is an excellent example of apostrophe, a figure of speech in which a speaker directly addresses someone (or something) that cannot respond.

The impact of this poetic device is to remind readers that the speaker is having a profound experience with the stormcock, and learning a lesson from their close examination of the bird. The question that the speaker directs at the stormcock—"How [can you] make so brave a show?"—actually speaks directly to the *speaker's* own circumstances and conundrum. It serves as a form of self-interrogation as the speaker processes how, indeed, the stormcock manages to remain resilient and optimistic even in the face of adversity, and takes those lessons to heart.

In the following stanza, the speaker once again addresses the bird, but this time to bid it farewell, instructing it to "sing your song and go your way," and bring its hopeful message to others. This use of apostrophe truly confirms that the speaker has learned from the stormcock, and is ready to say goodbye so that it can provide that same lesson for others.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 31-36:** "Soldier of fortune, northwest Jack, / Old hard-times' braggart, there you blow / But tell me ere your bagpipes crack / How you can make so brave a show, / Full-fed in February, and dressed / Like a rich merchant at a feast."
- **Line 39:** "So sing your song and go your way,"
- **Lines 40-42:** "And still in February contrive / As bright as Gabriel to smile / On elder-spray by broken tile."

CAESURA

There are several instances of caesura in "Stormcock in Elder," and most are fairly unremarkable. Throughout the poem, commas appear in the middle of a number of lines, most often to indicate a pause in the speaker's description of the bird at moments when the speaker goes into greater detail or moves on to describing another body part.

However, line 14—"Myself unseen, I saw him there"—contains a more dramatic example of caesura. Here, the pause serves to emphasize the relationship and power dynamic between the speaker of the poem and the stormcock. It reminds readers that the stormcock has no idea he is being watched by the

speaker, which emphasizes the bird's purity and perfection, since he models so many good qualities completely unconsciously and without awareness of his audience. It also emphasizes the speaker's evolving role as not just witness but pupil and disciple, as the speaker begins to realize how much they can learn from this up-close and personal encounter with the bird right "there," "scarcely an arm's-length from the eye."

A similar moment occurs when the speaker mulls over the spiritual status of the world's population, and deliberately undercuts the statement that "one-half the world" is ignorant of the other half's enlightenment. In line 37, a comma creates a deliberate break in the speaker's thought, as the speaker amends this statement with the phrase, "or so they say." The caesura here acknowledges, perhaps, that having only just joined the enlightened half of the world, the speaker may not be the most qualified person to make this pronouncement of the world at large.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "hermitage, aloof"
- **Line 8:** "wild, with"
- **Line 14:** "unseen, I"
- **Line 19:** "eye, ringed"
- **Line 20:** "feathers, finely"
- **Line 22:** "used, how"
- **Line 26:** "coverts, and"
- **Line 27:** "russet, marrying"
- **Line 30:** "silver, like"
- **Line 31:** "fortune, northwest"
- **Line 32:** "braggart, there"
- **Line 35:** "February, and"
- **Line 37:** "world, or"

CONSONANCE

Like alliteration and assonance, consonance is evident throughout "Stormcock in Elder" and plays a role in creating a sense of aural cohesion and harmony. That is, consonance makes the poem feel rich with sound and connects its many descriptive words, reflecting the beauty and perfection of the stormcock that the speaker so admires.

Interestingly, however, consonance often appears to be at its strongest in the poem when assonance has waned a bit. For instance, the fifth stanza relies largely on the sharp /t/ sound in words like "flight," "shorter," "coverts," "bright," "spots," as well as many /s/, /r/, and /b/ sounds (plus alliterative /f/ and /m/ sounds):

> The flight-feathers in tail and wing,
> The shorter coverts, and the white
> Merged into russet, marrying
> The bright breast to the pinions bright,
> Gold sequins, spots of chestnut, shower
> Of silver, like a brindled flower.

The intense consonance here builds yet more richness into the speaker's description of the bird, the beauty and intensity of all these sounds woven together evoking the varied yet harmonious patterns of the bird's feathers.

Indeed, the poem relies heavily on consonance to create a musical and harmonious effect overall. All three poetic devices (alliteration, assonance, and consonance) might be said to be working together create an effect of euphony, or pleasant and easy-to-pronounce sounds, which bolsters the poem's rhapsodic treatment of the stormcock.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dark"
- **Line 2:** "world's," "sight," "world's," "sound"
- **Line 3:** "small," "door," "old," "roof"
- **Line 4:** "five feet," "ground"
- **Line 5:** "groped," "bread"
- **Line 6:** "But," "found," "celestial," "food," "instead"
- **Line 7:** "suddenly," "close"
- **Line 8:** "Loud, loud," "wild," "with wintry glee"
- **Line 9:** "old," "unfailing," "chorister"
- **Line 10:** "Burst," "out," "pride," "poetry"
- **Line 11:** "broken roof," "spied"
- **Line 12:** "singing," "glorified"
- **Line 13:** "Scarcely"
- **Line 14:** "Myself," "unseen," "saw"
- **Line 15:** "The throbbing throat that," "made," "the"
- **Line 16:** "breast," "from," "misty"
- **Line 17:** "polished," "opened," "wide"
- **Line 18:** "showed," "pointed," "tongue," "inside"
- **Line 19:** "ringed," "many," "ray"
- **Line 20:** "minion," "feathers," "finely," "laid"
- **Line 21:** "The feet that," "grasped," "elder," "spray"
- **Line 22:** "strongly," "subtly," "made"
- **Line 23:** "scale," "sinew," "claw"
- **Line 24:** "Plain," "broken," "saw"
- **Line 25:** "flight," "feathers," "tail," "wing"
- **Line 26:** "shorter," "coverts," "white"
- **Line 27:** "Merged," "russet," "marrying"
- **Line 28:** "bright breast," "pinions," "bright"
- **Line 29:** "Gold," "sequins," "spots," "chestnut," "shower"
- **Line 30:** "silver," "like," "brindled," "flower"
- **Line 31:** "Soldier," "Jack"
- **Line 32:** "Old," "hard," "times," "braggart," "blow"
- **Line 33:** "But," "bagpipes," "crack"
- **Line 34:** "can," "make," "brave"
- **Line 35:** "Full," "fed," "February," "dressed"
- **Line 36:** "rich," "merchant," "feast"
- **Line 37:** "so," "say"
- **Line 38:** "Knows not how half"

- **Line 39:** “So sing,” “song ”
- **Line 40:** “still,” “February”
- **Line 41:** “bright,” “Gabriel ,” “smile”
- **Line 42:** “elder,” “spray,” “by broken tile”

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is crucial to "Stormcock in Elder," and present from the very first line. In addition, each stanza within the poem is made up of one sentence or complete thought, which runs from one line to the next. Though those lines that end in punctuation marks, such as commas, are not technically enjambed because there is an indication for a pause, they do achieve some of the same effects.

The first effect of this device is to close the distance between the speaker and readers. By pushing readers to read on in order to complete the speaker's thoughts, readers are drawn into by speaker's voice and begin to identify with the speaker's point-of-view.

The second is to convey the breathlessness and ardor with which the speaker studies the stormcock. The enjambment becomes particularly powerful in the fourth and fifth stanzas, as descriptive clauses pile up and complete thoughts are broken across multiple lines, making it difficult to tell where one sentence begins and ends. This is fitting, considering these stanzas capture the emotional and spiritual height of the speaker's transformative experience with the stormcock.

The fifth stanza focuses on a vivid description of the bird's appearance, with thick consonance and alliteration evoking the rich coloring and patterning of the stormcock's feathers. The enjambment of this stanza adds to the effect, as lines flow into one another without pause, just as the birds various colors and features all merge together into a beautiful, unified creature:

> The flight-feathers in tail and wing,
> The shorter coverts, and the white
> Merged into russet, marrying
> The bright breast to the pinions bright,
> Gold sequins, spots of chestnut, shower
> Of silver, like a brindled flower.

In short, enjambment helps the poem as a whole achieve its emotional resonance and power.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “aloof / From”
- **Lines 3-4:** “roof / Hangs”
- **Lines 5-6:** “bread / But”
- **Lines 9-10:** “chorister / Burst”
- **Lines 11-12:** “spied / Him”
- **Lines 17-18:** “wide / And”
- **Lines 19-20:** “ray / Of”
- **Lines 22-23:** “made / The”
- **Lines 26-27:** “white / Merged”
- **Lines 27-28:** “marrying / The”
- **Lines 29-30:** “shower / Of”
- **Lines 32-33:** “blow / But”
- **Lines 33-34:** “crack / How”
- **Lines 35-36:** “dressed / Like”
- **Lines 40-41:** “contrive / As”
- **Lines 41-42:** “smile / On”

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The major extended metaphor in the poem is that of the stormcock, who on one level is an ordinary bird, but on a metaphorical level represents many other things: the splendor of nature itself; the power of faith and spirituality; and hope, resilience, and optimism, traits that the bird embodies beautifully.

The poem deftly balances both the literal and figurative depictions of the stormcock by focusing on the concrete details of the bird's behavior and physical form while also using figurative language to extend the meanings of those details. For instance, the bird and his song are described as "loud," a concrete physical detail, but then also compared to an "old unfailing chorister," implying a religious or spiritual component as well.

This interplay between the physical and the spiritual happens again and again throughout the poem, such as when the bird is first introduced as "celestial food," and most explicitly when the speaker compares the stormcock to the angel Gabriel ("As bright as Gabriel to smile"). The same is true of the bird's traits, which on one level simply represent his survival skills in a harsh winter season, but on a more metaphorical level represent the human qualities of hope, optimism, and resilience.

It's important to note however that even without the undercurrent of religious figurative language, the obvious change in the speaker's state by the time this encounter with the stormcock is over indicates that the bird represents more than the sum of its parts. This is particularly clear when considering the bird as a metaphor for the splendor of nature. This metaphor is more subtle, but no less impactful; rather than being achieved through figurative language, the sheer outpouring of joy and delight the speaker expresses over the bird's beauty indicates that he represents the beauty of the entire natural world, and the impact that beauty has on human beings.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-42

IMAGERY

Imagery is a powerful force in "Stormcock in Elder." Quite literally, it is the sight of the stormcock that stirs the speaker to a spiritual awakening. Physical beauty is one of the primary qualities in the stormcock that moves the speaker's soul. Fittingly, therefore, Pitter dedicates the majority of the poem to vivid descriptions and images of the stormcock, and her deployment of this poetic tool is masterful.

For starters, the specificity of each image—attending, for example, to the "throbbing throat," "the scale, the sinew, and the claw"—is vital to conjuring a detailed and vivid picture of the stormcock for readers. The same is true of the brief images used to describe the speaker's position in relation to the stormcock; "suddenly close at my ear," for instance, is an expressive and tangible way to convey the bird's abrupt arrival into the speaker's home. Even the hermitage is deftly drawn, its loneliness and isolation depicted in just a handful of images, like the image of the speaker who "grope[s] along the shelf for bread."

In addition, the poem does a beautiful job mirroring the speaker's emotional state through the power and force of its imagery. The more of a profound effect the stormcock has on the speaker, the richer and more vivid the imagery in the poem becomes. The fifth stanza (starting in line 25 with "The flight-feathers in tail and wing,") in particular employs ecstatic language and a range of metaphors in order to convey the beauty of the stormcock's plumage.

This use of imagery not only allows readers to feel they really *see* the stormcock, it also conveys the deeper impact that the bird's beauty has on the speaker's state of mind and soul. The imagery in this poem is thus not only a descriptive tool, but an emotional one, helping readers experience that same inspiration and transformation.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 3-4
- Line 5
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 13-14
- Lines 15-18
- Lines 19-30
- Lines 32-36
- Lines 39-42

PERSONIFICATION

The stormcock in the poem is consistently personified, or described as having human attributes. For starters, the speaker refers to the bird with a human pronoun, "he." This indicates from the get-go that the speaker views the bird as possessing human qualities, not just as the stormcock begins to have an impact on the speaker's outlook, but from the very moment that the speaker first spots him. This personification is a key component of the poem, because it elevates the bird's status in both the speaker and readers' minds. No wonder then that the speaker is able to look upon the stormcock as a role model.

Other elements of personification in the poem include the comparison of the stormcock to human figures, like a "chorister," a "soldier," "northwest Jack," a "braggart," and "a rich merchant at a feast." He is even compared to a decidedly non-human (but far more superior figure), the angel Gabriel. In addition, the stormcock's traits are elevated beyond simple animalistic tools of survival, and instead cast in a human light. His birdsong is "poetry" and the sound of "bagpipes," his feet are "strongly used," and even his feathers are "married" to one another. Last but not least, the penultimate line of the poem describes the bird as "smil[ing,]" a decidedly humanoid habit!

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-12:** "Loud, loud and wild, with wintry glee, / The old unfailing chorister / Burst out in pride of poetry; / And through the broken roof I spied / Him by his singing glorified."
- **Line 14:** "I saw him there;"
- **Lines 22-23:** "How strongly used, how subtly made / The scale, the sinew, and the claw,"
- **Lines 31-36:** "Soldier of fortune, northwest Jack, / Old hard-times' braggart, there you blow / But tell me ere your bagpipes crack / How you can make so brave a show, / Full-fed in February, and dressed / Like a rich merchant at a feast."
- **Lines 39-42:** "So sing your song and go your way, / And still in February contrive / As bright as Gabriel to smile / On elder-spray by broken tile."

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton occurs throughout the poem, most notably in the central stanzas dedicated to descriptions of the stormcock. This poetic device is frequently used to speed up the rhythm of a phrase or line, and also to make it more memorable and urgent. All of these effects can be seen, for example, in the third stanza of the poem. Rather than link together their descriptions of the bird's body parts of the bird with, say, the word "and," the speaker instead flows freely from one image to the next:

> The throbbing throat that made the cry,
> The breast dewed from the misty air,
> The polished bill that opened wide
> And showed the pointed tongue inside;

The asyndeton here creates a rolling rhythm that moves

readers from line to line, enhancing the musicality of the poem, as well as conjures a very vivid picture of the bird. Later in the poem, asyndeton takes on more urgency, which helps capture the increasingly profound experience the speaker has with the stormcock:

> The feet that grasped the elder-spray;
> How strongly used, how subtly made
> The scale, the sinew, and the claw,
> Plain through the broken roof I saw;

The cadence here is almost breathless, with many short phrases linked together without pause for any conjunction. That breathless ecstasy is crucial to conveying the stormcock's impact on the speaker, and to understanding the poem as a whole.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-17:** "The throbbing throat that made the cry, / The breast dewed from the misty air, / The polished bill that opened wide"
- **Line 22:** "How strongly used, how subtly made"
- **Lines 29-30:** "Gold sequins, spots of chestnut, shower / Of silver"
- **Lines 31-32:** "Soldier of fortune, northwest Jack, / Old hard-times' braggart, there you blow"

REPETITION

Like many poems, "Stormcock in Elder" relies on repetition to make its point. The clearest of this is anaphora, which appears often in the poem as the speaker addresses different aspects of the bird. This anaphora also may dovetail with parallelism in many points. Take line 22, which features two clauses that begin with the word "how," followed by an adverb, followed by a verb:

> How strongly used, how subtly made

This line is in fact also an example of antithesis (and, for that matter, asyndeton and parataxis), as "strongly" contrasts sharply with "subtly"; being subtle is essentially the *opposite* of being strong and forceful. This antithesis is supported by the alliteration of these words as well. Altogether, this line serves to underscore the grace and power of the bird, created by the deft, or subtle, hand of God; the stormcock's fierce "scale," "sinew" (or muscle), and "claw" are beautiful evidence of God's craftsmanship, and also powerful body parts. These parts, in turn, are again connection by the anaphora of "the":

> The scale, the sinew, and the claw,

This anaphora echoes anaphora used throughout the poem, as the speaker introduces a new aspect of the stormcock with "The" followed by a body part. Take lines 15-17 (which again are examples of aysndeton):

> The throbbing throat that made the cry,
> The breast dewed from the misty air,
> The polished bill that opened wide

Repetition is also crucial on a language level. Returning again and again to several words allows their meanings to accrue more layers, depth, and complexity. For instance, the repetition of the word "broken" serves to emphasize the mental and spiritual state of the speaker. Though at first it seems only to refer to the hermitage's old roof, the fact that the speaker again and again characterizes this home as a "broken" place makes clear that it is more than just the hermitage who suffers. Conversely, the repetition of the word "bright" in line 28, and example of diacope ("bright breast to the pinions bright") continually adds to the characterization of the stormcock, making clear it is not just brightly-colored but suggestive of a bigger brighteness: the glory of God and religion itself.

Finally, the use of epizeuxis in line 8 ("Loud, loud and wild") is another form of repetition related to the stormcock's song, emphasizing powerfully the sudden impact of the bird's song on the speaker.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "the old roof"
- **Line 8:** "Loud, loud"
- **Line 11:** "through the broken roof I spied"
- **Line 15:** "The throbbing throat"
- **Line 16:** "The breast "
- **Line 17:** "The polished bill"
- **Line 19:** "The large eye"
- **Line 21:** "The feet "
- **Line 22:** "How strongly used, how subtly made"
- **Line 23:** "The scale, the sinew, and the claw"
- **Line 24:** "through the broken roof I saw"
- **Line 25:** "The flight-feathers"
- **Line 26:** "The shorter coverts, and the white"
- **Line 28:** "bright breast," "bright"
- **Line 33:** "ere your bagpipes crack"
- **Line 37:** "One-half the world"
- **Line 38:** "half the world"
- **Line 39:** "sing your song"
- **Line 41:** "bright "
- **Line 42:** "broken "

SIMILE

There are many instances of metaphor in "Stormcock in Elder," which compare the bird to other things, and create meaning *beyond* the literal meanings of those things and words. In

particular, however, there are also several instances of simile, a type of metaphor that more explicitly and directly compares two unlike things, usually using the connecting words "like" or "as." They occur in the latter half of the poem, when the stormcock is described in the following ways: "like a brindled flower," "like a rich a merchant at a feast," and "bright as Gabriel."

Each of these similes is important due to both their placement and the unlike comparisons they are making. The fact that the speaker begins to heighten the metaphors used to describe the bird, by drawing explicit attention to the comparison being made via the words "like" or "as," indicates the speaker's growing awareness that the stormcock represents more than just a bird. These metaphors are no longer unconscious or subtle, such as the moment when the stormcock is referred to as a chorister; they are showy, dramatic. This bird is as beautiful as a flower! He is a rich and prosperous as a merchant at a feast! He shines as brightly as the angel Gabriel!

Each of these, at face-value, might seem a bit hyperbolic when describing a bird, but that is indeed part of the power of these similes. They compare the bird to things very different than himself, and in so doing make clear just how unusual and important the speaker's experience with the stormcock has been. It's not a coincidence, therefore, that these similes arrive late in the poem, when the speaker is at the fullest recognition of the stormcock's message and impact.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 30:** "like a brindled flower."
- **Lines 35-36:** "dressed / Like a rich merchant at a feast."
- **Line 41:** "bright as Gabriel"

VOCABULARY

Hermitage (Line 1) - The remote dwelling place of a hermit or religious figure.

Aloof (Line 1) - Removed or distant, either physically or emotionally.

Groped (Line 5) - Felt about blindly or uncertainly.

Celestial (Line 6) - Of, relating to, or suggesting heaven or divinity.

Chorister (Line 9) - A singer in a church choir.

Throbbing (Line 15) - Vibrating or pulsing with force or rapidity.

Breast (Line 16, Line 28) - The front part of a bird's body below the neck.

Dewed (Line 16) - Condensed drops of moisture.

Minion (Line 20) - Delicate, dainty.

Elder-spray (Line 21) - Small branch or sprig of an elder tree, a common tree in England.

Sinew (Line 23) - Tendon, or tissue that ties muscle to bone.

Coverts (Line 26) - Feathers that cover other feathers, helping to smooth airflow over a bird's wings and tail.

Russet (Line 27) - Reddish brown.

Pinions (Line 28) - Outer sections of a bird's wings, visible in flight.

Brindled (Line 30) - Dark streaks or flecks against a light background.

Northwest Jack (Line 31) - A personification of frost, ice, snow, winter, and cold, a variant of Jack Frost or Old Man Winter.

Braggart (Line 32) - Someone who boasts a lot.

Ere (Line 33) - Before, prior to.

Contrive (Line 40) - Devise, plan, figure out.

Gabriel (Line 41) - The archangel Gabriel, the angel of revelation or announcement. He plays a significant role in Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, acting as a messenger for God.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Though "Stormcock in Elder" does not fit within a specific poetic form like the sonnet or villanelle, its form is nevertheless highly regular, repetitious, and traditional. It is composed of seven stanzas, each of which is exactly six lines long, forming a sestet. This consistent structure lends the poem a sense of cohesion and continuity. It provides a clear and dependable architecture on which to hang the speaker's steady progression from loneliness and spiritual hunger to hope, optimism, and renewed faith.

It also serves as a reminder that the poem should be read as belonging and responding to a centuries-old literary tradition. Rather than experiment with form, as did many of the Modernist poets of her era, "Stormcock in Elder" author Ruth Pitter preferred to follow in the footsteps of her Romantic English predecessors, like poets George Herbet and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Their work also employed classic forms while exploring themes of religious faith and rural English life. Thus the use of the sestet and a regular rhyme in "Stormcock in Elder" is a clear signal of its literary origins and aspirations.

METER

Each line of the poem consistently contains eight syllables, and often those syllables create iambs, a two-syllable metrical pattern in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable. This makes the poem's meter primarily iambic tetrameter (which just means there are four iambs, four da-DUM feet, per line). The final two lines of first stanza are a

good example (albeit with "celestial" being elided as two syllables instead of three):

I groped | along | the shelf | for bread
But found | celes- | tial food | instead:

However, the poem does often stray from its reliance on iambic feet. In the first stanza for, for example, line 2 might be scanned as follows:

From the | world's sight | and the | world's sound,

There are still eight syllables, four of which receive a stress, but those stresses aren't arranged in iambs. Instead, the line has two pyrrhics (unstressed-unstressed) interspersed with two spondees (stressed-stressed). The first foot here might also be read as "From the," but what's important to notice is how this tactic that draws extra attention to the "world's sight" and "sound."

Another spondee pops up in line 8, in the form of the back-to-back stressed words "loud, loud." Again, the meter here adds variation to the poem and essentially turns up the poetic volume on a phrase fittingly about loudness.

Sometimes whole lines deviate from having eight syllables as well. For example, line 19 contains both a spondee and an anapest (three syllables in the pattern unstressed-unstressed-stressed) alongside an iamb:

The large | eye, ringed | with ma- | ny a ray

Lines 29-32, which contain more spondees, a trochee, and some feminine endings (and additional unstressed syllable at the end of a line, as in "shower" below):

Gold se- | quins, spots | of chest- | nut, shower
Of sil- | ver, like | a brin- | dled flower.
Soldier | of for- | tune, north- | west Jack,
Old hard- | times' brag- | gart, there | you blow

These deviations from iambic tetramter often serve to herald major moments of epiphany in the poem. In particular, the use of irregular meter throughout the speaker's rhapsodic description of the stormcock's beauty emphasizes the speaker's experience of religious epiphany. Similarly, the break from iambic tetrameter when the speaker directly addresses the stormcock indicates a change in the speaker's audience at a pivotal moment in the poem, just before the speaker bids the bird farewell.

Nevertheless, the majority of the poem hews to a consistent meter, and coupled with the highly regular rhyme and form, the poem retains a strong sense of cohesion and rhythm.

RHYME SCHEME

"Stormcock in Elder" is written in a regular rhyme scheme. Each six-line stanza, or sestet, follows an ABABCC rhyme pattern. This means that the first and third lines rhyme, the second and fourth lines rhyme, and then the fifth and sixth lines rhyme, forming a final couplet. For example, take stanza 3:

Scarcely an arm's-length from the eye, A
Myself unseen, I saw him *there*; B
The throbbing throat that made the cry, A
The breast dewed from the misty *air*, B
The polished bill that opened wide C
And showed the pointed tongue inside; C

However, the rhyme scheme does vary from stanza to stanza, so that the ABABCC pattern and the end rhymes do not correspond from one sestet to the next. This allows the poet greater freedom when it comes it word choice. It is also another indicator that the poem, though very consistently structured and rhymed, does not adhere to any particular verse form.

There are a few instances when the rhyme scheme deviates from the ABABCC pattern, or relies on eye rhyme to make a near-match. The first is in lines 7 and 9 ("For suddenly ... chorister") where the words "ear" and "chorister" don't actually rhyme; however, the final syllables do resemble one another in terms of spelling. Similarly, lines 38 and 40 ("Knows not ... contrive") rely on the slant rhyme of "live" and "contrive" to create a sense of cohesion.

On the whole, however, the rhyme scheme is regular. The recurring sounds lend the poem a strong sense of unity, as well as a sing-song cadence that mirrors the poem's focus on the beauty of birdsong.

SPEAKER

The speaker in "Stormcock in Elder" is unidentified—no age, gender, occupation, etc. is given. Nevertheless, a few things about the speaker can be deduced. The first is based on the speaker's home, which is described as a "hermitage" where the speaker lives "aloof / from the world's sight and the world's sound." This emphasis on the speaker's solitude suggests that the speaker is a lonely person with little contact with the outside world. The speaker is also a poor person, "grop[ing] along the shelf for bread," but not finding any. This deprivation and isolation lays the ground for the speaker's transformative experience with the stormcock.

The speaker is also evidently a lover of nature, as seen by the attention and praise that the speaker lavishes on the stormcock. In addition, the fact that the speaker is comfortable identifying the bird's features—such as "coverts" and

"pinions"—indicates that the speaker has some expertise as a birdwatcher, or is at least connoisseur of the natural world and its creatures.

Perhaps most importantly, the speaker is clearly a religious person. The metaphors and similes the speaker uses to describe the stormcock are steeped in religious language and imagery, such as the comparisons to a chorister and to the angel Gabriel. The fact that the speaker lives in a hermitage, usually the home of religious figures, also suggests that the speaker leads a religious life.

Lastly, given the poem's reliance on religious wordplay, it may be safe to assume that the speaker is an elderly person, and perhaps a former leader in their faith community. Though the "elder" in the poem technically refers to a tree, it may also represent the speaker, especially in line 21, when the stormcock "grasp[s] the elder-spray," metaphorically guiding the speaker, a religious elder, back to faith at a time of doubt.

SETTING

The setting of "Stormcock in Elder" is the "dark hermitage" where the speaker lives. The word hermitage refers to an isolated dwelling, tucked away from society, where hermits or religious figures live. In keeping with that understanding of a hermitage, the speaker goes on to describe this home as far from "the world's sight and the world's sound," further emphasizing the setting as a distant, isolated place, where one person lives alone. Furthermore, the broken roof and the speaker's search for bread on an empty shelf indicates that this setting is marked by poverty.

In addition, the poem is set during the winter, in the cold month of February. This is indicated by the speaker's description of the stormcock as singing "with wintry glee," and the speaker's two references to the month of February. The speaker also mentions several times the stormcock's ability to withstand bad winter weather.

Both elements of the setting are very important to the poem. The speaker's isolation and hunger for both companionship and spiritual nourishment are key to laying the foundation for the speaker's transformative relationship with the stormcock. Indeed, the hermitage is what leads the speaker to encounter the stormcock in the first place. Without the broken roof, the speaker might never have heard or seen the stormcock and received its message of hope and optimism.

Likewise, the winter setting is key to understanding the stormcock's impact on the speaker. The fact that the stormcock is "full-fed in February" and sings "with wintry glee" despite the bad weather, indicates its resilience, which in turn inspires the speaker. Had the speaker not encountered the stormcock during the harsh winter, it is unlikely this person would have learned the same lessons from the bird and its hardy survival skills.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The author of "Stormcock in Elder," Ruth Pitter, was an English poet who lived from 1897-1992. Raised in Essex by two teachers with a modest income but deep appreciation of the natural world, Pitter published her first poem at 14. She went on to publish over 17 volumes of poetry between the late 1920s and 1990, and developed a loyal readership. In the preface to her second volume, in which "Stormcock in Elder" was first published, novelist and poet James Stephen wrote that he considered Pitter a poet "second only to William Butler Yeats."

Pitter maintained close relationships with a number of literary greats, including the poet and author Hilaire Belloc, who facilitated the publication of her first collection, and the writer C.S. Lewis, to whom she attributed her devout faith. In 1955, Pitter was the first woman to be awarded the Queen's Gold Medal in Poetry, and in 1974, the Royal Society of Literature elected her a Companion of Literature, its highest honor.

Nevertheless, Pitter's poetry remained largely outside the major literary movements of her day. Unlike her contemporaries, the modernists T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and W.H. Auden, Pitter was a staunch traditionalist who rarely experimented with meter or verse forms. This can be seen in "Stormcock in Elder," which makes use of the classic sestet. Indeed, Belloc described Pitter as "an exceptional reappearance of the classical spirit," and her poetry is better understood as part of a long English poetic lineage running from medieval religious poetry through nineteenth-century pastoralism and romanticism.

Perhaps Pitter's closest forebears are the poets George Herbert, whose metaphysical poetry similarly plumbs religious depths, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose work also celebrates spirituality within the beauty of the natural world (see: "Pied Beauty", "The Windhover", "The Caged Skylark", and "God's Grandeur"). Like these predecessors, Pitter's poetry, of which "Stormcock in Elder" is a preeminent example, is largely preoccupied with questions of religious faith and doubt, and reflects a deep admiration for the natural world.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ruth Pitter's life spanned the majority of the 20th century. She lived through both world wars, and was unable to attend university as a result of World War I, during which she worked as a junior clerk in the War Office. Though she began publishing poetry at an early age, Pitter was determined not to make a living through her poetry, and later reflected, "From the very first I realized that there was no money in poetry, and

determined not to write for money."

After the war, Pitter worked primarily as a furniture restorer, until World War II forced her to close her workshop and take another war job. Around this time, Pitter experienced a deep spiritual crisis. She converted to Anglicanism in 1945, a decision she attributed in large part to the influence of C.S. Lewis. In the decades that followed, Pitter was a frequent guest on BBC radio programs, wrote about country life for *Woman* magazine, and continued to publish poetry through 1990, when her *Collected Poems* was released.

Nevertheless, despite the personal impact of both wars, Pitter's poetry reflects very little of the historical context in which she was writing. Like "Stormcock in Elder," the majority of her work focuses on the natural world. Neither current events nor literary trends seem to have shaped her poetry in any significant way. Perhaps, however, Pitter's deep-rooted traditionalism can be read as a response to the tumult and rapid change of her time. Rather than join the poetic avant-garde, or respond on the page to the changes of a swiftly modernizing world, Pitter remained deeply invested in England's rural tradition and the poetic forms of an earlier era.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Ruth Pitter's Life Story — An overview of Ruth Pitter's biography at the "Women in World History" encyclopedia. (https://www.encyclopedia.com/women/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/pitter-ruth-1897-1992)
- The Ruth Pitter Project — A website dedicated to Ruth Pitter by literary scholar and Pitter expert Don W. King. (http://sites.montreat.edu/faculty/don-king/ruth-pitter-project)
- "Stormcock in Elder" Aloud — Listen to a reading of "Stormcock in Elder" by an English teacher. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kSy5dDNjD9E)
- The Stormcock — More about the stormcock bird, a.k.a. the mistle thrush. (https://www.discoverwildlife.com/animal-facts/birds/facts-about-mistle-thrush/)
- Ruth Pitter and C.S. Lewis — More on the relationship between Ruth Pitter and writer C.S. Lewis. (https://dc.swosu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1299&context=mythlore)

HOW TO CITE

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