The Brook

POEM TEXT

I come from haunts of coot and hern:
I make a sudden sally
And sparkle out among the fern,
To bicker down a valley.

By thirty hills I hurry down,
Or slip between the ridges,
By twenty thorps, a little town,
And half a hundred bridges.

Till last by Philip's farm I flow
To join the brimming river,
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on for ever.

I chatter over stony ways,
In little sharps and trebles,
I bubble into eddying bays,
I babble on the pebbles.

With many a curve my banks I fret
By many a field and fallow,
And many a fairy foreland set
With willow-weed and mallow.

I chatter, chatter, as I flow
To join the brimming river,
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on for ever.

I wind about, and in and out,
With here a blossom sailing,
And here and there a lusty trout,
And here and there a grayling,

And here and there a foamy flake
Upon me, as I travel
With many a silvery waterbreak
Above the golden gravel,

And draw them all along, and flow
To join the brimming river;
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on for ever.

I steal by lawns and grassy plots:
I slide by hazel covers;
I move the sweet forget-me-nots
That grow for happy lovers.

I slip, I slide, I gloom, I glance,
Among my skimming swallows;
I make the netted sunbeam dance
Against my sandy shallows;

I murmur under moon and stars
In brambly wildernesses;
I linger by my shingly bars;
I loiter round my cresses;

And out again I curve and flow
To join the brimming river;
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on for ever.

SUMMARY

The speaker of the poem, the brook itself, explains that it started out in a body of water where birds called coot and heron often gather. Suddenly, the brook rushes forward. The sunlight glitters on the water as the brook weaves through greenery that grows beside the stream bank. The brook then flows gently into a valley.

Gaining momentum, the brook tumbles down many hills and seeps through narrow crevices on some of the hillsides. Along the way, the brook passes several villages and a small town, and flows underneath lots of bridges.

Finally, the brook glides past a farm that belongs to a man named Philip. The brook is on its way to be absorbed by the river, which is already huge and overflowing. The brook claims that while humans live short, impermanent lives, the brook itself will always endure.

Picking its journey back up, the brook rushes over stone paths and streets, sounding like music as it flows over the rocks. The brook pools into bays filled with churning water and then tumbles over small stones that line the shore or are at the bottom of the bay.

The brook curves around the stream bank and passes many meadows and plots of farmland, both in use and left to rest, as it travels through the countryside. It also flows alongside land that seems to belong to fairies, its landscape dotted with green leafy plants and delicate blossoms.

Rushing along, the brook makes little trickling noises as it travels to the almost overflowing river. The brook reminds the listener that human life is fleeting, but the brook itself is eternal.

The brook meanders through the countryside, zig zagging across the landscape. It points out a flower drifting along with its waters, a few particularly hearty trout, and some freshwater fish called graylings.

Occasionally, the brook's water bubbles up and foams as it journeys toward the river. The surface of the brook sometimes forms little waves that crash melodically on top of the pebbles and sand down below in the stream bed.

The vigorous brook pulls the pebbles, flower petals, and fish along with it as it rushes to join up with the large river. While humankind's time on earth is short and temporary, the brook will continue to live on with no end in sight.

The brook quietly creeps past meadows and fields carpeted with grass and slips through densely planted hazel trees that shade the landscape. The rippling water nudges wildflowers called forget-me-nots that grow along the stream bank; the brook says these particular wildflowers are meant for people who are blissfully in love.

The brook describes how it moves along quietly, sometimes looking dark and murky. Other times, the light playfully bounces off of the stream (or perhaps the stream bounces off of the riverbank). All the while, birds called swallows barely brush the water's surface as they search for food. The sunlight shines through the foliage that surrounds the stream, casting a woven pattern on the surface of the water; reflecting on a moving surface, the sunlight looks like it is dancing playfully upon the brook's sandy, shallow water.

The water makes low, quiet sounds as it travels during nighttime, flowing past a forest filled with prickly shrubs. The stream slows its pace when it comes to a sandbank heaped with little pebbles and spends another unhurried moment swirling around the leafy greens (such as watercress) that grow in the shallow waters of the stream.

Once again, the brook continues its winding journey to merge with the big river. The brook reminds listeners that although individual humans are born and die, the brook is eternal.

THEMES

MORTAL HUMANS VS. ETERNAL NATURE

In Tennyson's "The Brook," the poem's refrain, "For men may come and men may go, / But I go on for ever" is repeated four times, as the speaker of the poem—the brook—emphasizes the central theme of the poem: that human life is fleeting, while the brook, as part of the larger tapestry of nature, will endure forever.

The refrain treats humankind as impermanent—as individuals who "come" and "go"—and nature as eternal. In fact, the only two verbs associated with humans in the poem are "come" and "go," suggesting that human life is breezy and short-lived, and that humans don't endure the way that nature does. The brook, in contrast, firmly asserts that "I go on for ever." This claim of permanence is bolstered by the way that the brook appears to be constantly renewing itself and changing throughout the poem, adapting effortlessly to the surrounding landscape. On the journey to the "brimming river," the brook "make[s] a sudden sally" (rushes forth), condenses itself so that it can "slip between the ridges" of a rocky hillside, and contorts itself to fit the landscape as it "curve[s]" along the twists and turns of the riverbank. Paradoxically, such constant change and adaptability allow the brook to be unchanging on a more fundamental level—to "go on for ever," despite whatever lies in its path. The water of the brook moves constantly, but the brook remains forever a brook. Near the end of the poem, though the brook seems to be slowing down in the second to last stanza as it "linger[s]" and "loiter[s]," it finds new energy in the final stanza: "And out again I curve and flow / To join the brimming river; / For men may come and men may go, / But I go on for ever." The use of the word "again" in these lines further draws attention to the way that the brook will continue to renew itself time and time again, never ceasing to exist the way that humans do.

The brook further points to the fleeting nature of human life in lines 39-40, when the brook rushes past "the sweet forget-me-nots / That grow for happy lovers." The "forget-me-not" is a type of wildflower. Its name hails from a German legend about two lovers walking alongside a river. Seeing the blossoms on the riverbank, the man decides to pick a handful of the wildflowers for his love. As he does so, though, he gets swept up in the churning river and calls to his lover to never forget him. This myth imbues Tennyson's "happy lovers" with deeper significance. The poem implies that all things human, both individual lives and the love between two people, will be swept away by the passage of time and mortality, while the brook and nature itself will live on.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 2

- Line 6
- Line 10
- Lines 11-12
- Line 17
- Line 22
- Lines 23-24
- Line 25
- Line 34
- Lines 35-36
- Lines 39-40
- Lines 45-50
- Lines 51-52

THE BEAUTY AND POWER OF NATURE

In "The Brook," Tennyson illustrates how nature, though captivating in its beauty, is at the same time powerful and indifferent to the plight of humankind, making it worthy of appreciation, respect, and perhaps even fear.

Tennyson uses a lively group of verbs and thoughtful imagery to depict the brook as both beautiful and powerful. Throughout its journey, the brook describes how it "sparkle[s]," "bubble[s]," and "make[s] the netted sunbeam dance." These positive verbs infuse the brook, and the wider natural world, with a certain playfulness and beauty. Tennyson further depicts nature as being lovely and idyllic through evocative images like the "lusty trout" and the delicate "blossom sailing" gently on the water's surface. The brook's beauty is even reflected through the various sounds it makes. As the brook "chatter[s] over stony ways," the sound of the water tumbling over rocks rings out like "little sharps and trebles," clearly aligning the brook with music. Similarly, Tennyson's use of onomatopoeia means that many of the brook's actions contain a sort of musical quality, as the brook "babble[s]," "chatter[s]," and "murmur[s]" as if it were singing. Furthermore, the brook's resilience lends it a certain presence and power; it molds itself around the rest of the landscape, effortlessly "slip[ping] between the ridges" of rocky hills, bumping across the backs of stones along the way, and "wind[ing] about, in and out," whenever necessary—nothing will stand in its way.

Even as it highlights the depths of nature's beauty and power, the poem also underscores that nature is indifferent to humankind. The refrain, "For men may come and men may go, / But I go on for ever" neatly encapsulates this idea, painting human life as wholly insignificant. The brook is concerned only with itself and other elements of nature, as evidenced by the brook's frequent repetition of the word "I" and observations about the surrounding "brambly wildernesses," "moon and stars," and "lawns and grassy plots." In contrast, the brook barely mentions humans at all. Near the beginning of the brook's journey (lines 7-8), the brook flows alongside "twenty thorps, a little town, / And half a hundred bridges." In this instance, the brook mentions the spaces that humans have carved out for themselves on the natural landscape without bothering to acknowledge the humans themselves. Moments later, the brook slides past "Philip's farm" on the way to the river. Although it's curious that the brook knows this man's name in the first place, the brook doesn't pause to explain who Philip is or give him any wider significance. It is not Philip that the brook recognizes, but the farm that will outlive him—even as the brook itself will outlive the farm. Another example of the brook's indifference to humans appears in lines 39-40, which briefly mention a pair of "happy lovers" among the wildflowers. Folded into these lines is an allusion to a German myth about a man who is swept away in a river while trying to pluck forget-me-nots for his beloved, presumably resulting in his death by drowning—making these "happy lovers" a dark reminder of nature's overwhelming power and callousness toward humans.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 2
- Line 3
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 7-8
- Line 9
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 13-14
- Lines 15-16
- Line 17
- Lines 18-20
- Line 21
- Lines 23-24
- Line 25
- Lines 26-28
- Lines 31-32
- Lines 35-36
- Lines 37-38
- Lines 39-40
- Lines 43-44
- Lines 45-48
- Lines 51-52

HUMAN LIFE AND DEATH

Even as the poem sets up a contrast between the eternal brook (and eternal nature as a whole) versus mortal humanity, it simultaneously establishes the brook as an extended metaphor for human life and, perhaps, death.

The brook changes and matures as the poem unfolds, reflecting the natural aging process that all humans experience, and signaling that the brook's journey to "join the brimming river" represents the course of a human life. At the beginning of the poem, the brook is dynamic; it "hurr[ies]," "chatter[s]," "bickers," "babble[s]," and "sparkle[s]" as it curves across the landscape like an energetic, exuberant child. As the poem continues and

then comes to a close, though, the brook gradually seems to ease its pace, echoing the way time works on humans, transforming them from spirited children to elderly folks who, like the brook just before it reaches the river, "murmur," "linger," and "loiter" as they move slowly through their days.

As part of the extended metaphor of the brook representing human life, the brook's joining with the river could be read as death and afterlife, as the brook is absorbed by something greater than itself and lives on for eternity that way. However, this reading is complicated by the certainty of the brook's refrain that it "go[es] on for ever," while humans merely "come" and "go"; the refrain states unequivocally that while the brook lives on as part of the "brimming river," humans only live from birth to death, and no further. Thus, the brook in the poem asserts that men are simply mortal and therefore do not "go on for ever," but the extended metaphor that equates the brook's path to human life can be seen as implying that humans, in death, join a kind of afterlife—a "brimming river" of their own. This tension surrounding human life and death is never resolved in the poem, a fact which perhaps reflects a kind of uncertainty or fear on Tennyson's part about whether there really is such a thing as human immortality as taught by Christianity (that is, that Christians receive "everlasting life" by going to Heaven after death). This uncertainty is a notable theme found in many of Tennyson's later poems even as some other of his poems, such as his famous poem "Crossing the Bar," express more confidence in Christian teachings of human immortality in Heaven.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-6
- Lines 10-12
- Line 13
- Lines 15-16
- Line 21
- Lines 22-24
- Lines 34-36
- Line 45
- Lines 47-48
- Lines 50-52

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

I come from haunts of coot and hern:
I make a sudden sally
And sparkle out among the fern,
To bicker down a valley.

The brook, the speaker of the poem, explains its origins in the first line of the poem, claiming to have "come from haunts of coot and hern," meaning ponds or marshes frequented by coot and heron (two kinds of coastal and freshwater birds). This description of a location both gives the brook a starting point from which it can begin its journey, and is significant because it foregrounds nature—the "coot and hern," along with their "haunts," meaning their natural habitats. In this way, the first line hints at the brook's attitude toward nature versus humankind; it is altogether focused on the natural world around it (of which it is also a part), and sees nature as powerful, important, and enduring. (Humans, in contrast, are just insignificant and temporary visitors—something the brook will explicitly spell out later.)

In the second line, the brook begins its journey with a big rush of energy. The word "sally" suggests that the brook surges forward enthusiastically, but the word can also have a militaristic meaning, suggesting that the brook is making a sudden raid or assault. While the brook isn't exactly harsh and combative throughout the poem, the martial language emphasizes that the brook is nonetheless a powerful force to be reckoned with. This ties in with the broader idea that nature is powerful and enduring.

The brook is energetic and lively throughout the bulk of the poem. For instance, the word "sparkle" in the third line gives the brook a certain playfulness, and implies that sunlight is reflecting off of the water's surface. In the fourth line, the word "bicker" means that the brook is making a pleasant trickling sound as it flows into the valley; however, the other, and perhaps more common, meaning of the word bicker—to squabble or argue—subtly gives the brook a more human quality, setting the brook up to be an extended metaphor for human life. In this part of that journey, with its quickness and energy, the brook is like a young child.

The first stanza showcases the structure and meter that persists for the rest of the poem. As a ballad, "The Brook" is broken up into stanzas of four lines, which breaks the poem up into more digestible chunks. The lines are written in common meter—a commonly used meter that alternates between lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, or four metric feet per line and three metric feet per line, each with an unstressed-stressed pattern of syllables. However, as the first stanza shows, Tennyson put a little twist on common meter:

I come from haunts of coot and hern:
I make a sudden sally
And sparkle out among the fern,
To bicker down a valley.

Note how the second and fourth lines of the poem diverge slightly from common meter by ending in an extra unstressed syllable. In other words, the second and fourth lines of the poem are written in iambic trimeter, or three metric feet of unstressed-stressed syllables—with an extra unstressed syllable floating at the end. This is called a feminine ending, and

is actually quite common in poetry. The purpose of feminine endings in "The Brook" is manifold. For now, notice how the feminine endings actually draw attention to the masculine (stressed) endings of the first and third lines: "hern" and "fern." In giving these words special emphasis, the poem emphasizes the importance of the "hern" and "fern" themselves, as elements of nature. In other words, the feminine endings in this stanza actually underscore the poem's broader claim that nature's power and importance is unparalleled.

LINES 5-8

By thirty hills I hurry down,
Or slip between the ridges,
By twenty thorps, a little town,
And half a hundred bridges.

The second stanza of the poem begins to give shape to the poem's pastoral setting. After flowing "down a valley" and out of its rural origin of the first stanza, the brook now traverses over numerous hills (thirty likely being an arbitrary number meant to signal that the landscape is just *really* hilly), past towns, and under bridges, providing a fuller picture of the landscape. The brook's ability to "slip between the ridges," meaning the narrow crevices in the hillside, is the first example of the brook's resilience and dynamism; throughout the poem, the brook shape-shifts to mold to its environment, which is part of what makes it so lasting and mighty. Interestingly, the poem's meter seems to reflect the brook's ability to change shape.

Also notice how the alternating length of each line actually makes the poem look a bit like a winding stream on the page:

> By thirty hills I hurry down,
> Or slip between the ridges
> By twenty thorps, a little town,
> And half a hundred bridges.

In addition, by alternating between lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter (with an extra unstressed syllable, or feminine ending, tacked onto the end of the line), the meter of the stanza itself replicates the winding journey of the poem. With this in mind, line 6 both visibly and aurally reflects the way that the stream can "slip between the ridges," as the line itself condenses and narrows in comparison to the longer line that follows.

Meanwhile, the mention of the "thorps" (villages) and bridges is significant because it is one of the few times that the brook mentions humans, even if briefly and indirectly. In fact, the brevity and indirectness with which the brook acknowledges humans is actually crucial to understanding these lines, as well as the poem as a whole. One of the central themes of the poem is nature's towering power and importance; later in the poem, the brook suggests that humans are mere wisps that float in and out of the world, suggesting that human life is neither important nor lasting, while nature is both of these things. Backpedaling to the second stanza, then, lines 7-8 take on additional significance:

> By twenty thorps, a little town,
> And half a hundred bridges.

Notice that actual humans are nowhere to be seen in these lines, as the villages and bridges embody the brook's indifference (or downright disregard) for human life. Only the villages themselves are worth mentioning for the brook, perhaps because they are more lasting than the fleeting lives of their inhabitants. At the same time, it is possible to read the villages and bridges as being a possible acknowledgment of the rapid industrialization that took place during Tennyson's lifetime. Since the poem details what looks like a mostly untouched swath of the countryside but then abruptly notes "twenty thorps, a little town, / And half a hundred bridges," the villages seem a bit jarring and out of place. While this could be the poem gently criticizing industrialization for infringing on the natural landscape, this is complicated by Tennyson's status as Poet Laureate. This lofty title meant that Tennyson was essentially Britain's spokesperson, albeit only through poetry, and was charged with celebrating Britain and its achievements—including progress in the vein of industrialization. As Poet Laureate, then, it seems somewhat unlikely that Tennyson would want to criticize industrialization in a published poem. On the other hand, perhaps Tennyson was banking on the multiple interpretations inherent in lines 7-8.

On a more granular level, the word "thorps" also suggests that these villages are not representative of industrialization. "Thorp" is a Middle English word that means small village or hamlet—not a big, bustling, industrialized city. In addition, the fact that there are "twenty thorps" and only one "little town" (implied to be larger than the hamlets), suggests that the landscape is still firmly rooted in slower, older ways of life. Even so, once can *still* read even these details as being related to industrialization through the way that they imagine what seems to be a time before industrialization took hold. In this way, the poem can be read as nostalgically looking back to a pre-industrial past in England.

LINES 9-12

Till last by Philip's farm I flow
To join the brimming river,
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on for ever.

In the third stanza, the brook's indifference for humans is again on display; it surges past a farm that belongs to someone named Philip, but the brook doesn't pause to meaningfully explain who Philip is, instead leaving him as just a name. Besides, it's not Philip but rather Philip's *farm* that is of more

interest to the brook, once again showing the brook's interest in the natural world rather than in the humans who inhabit it. The fact that Philip is the only named character in the poem, and is disregarded as unimportant, suggests that Philip is a type of everyman figure representative of all humans. By vaguely acknowledging Philip but not pausing to give him any wider significance, the brook also vaguely acknowledges and swiftly disregards the importance of all humans.

It's apt that this reference to Philip comes just before the poem's refrain, which spells out the brook's attitude toward humankind versus nature. Lines 15-16 read as follows:

> For men may come and men may go,
> But I go on for ever.

This refrain, which will bubble up three more times throughout the poem, encapsulates the poem's overarching idea that human life is fleeting and insignificant—humans merely "come" and "go." In contrast, the brook will "go on for ever," unbound by mortality. While the brook asserts that "I go on for ever," it seems to imply that all of nature, of which it is one small but significant part, will endure "for ever," too.

In line 10, the brook also outlines its purpose for taking this journey through the landscape in the first place, noting confidently that it is going "To join the brimming river." That is, the "brimming" (large and overflowing) river is going to absorb the smaller brook into itself, allowing the brook to live on in that way. As the poem goes on, the idea of the brook joining the brimming river takes on increasingly spiritual significance, implicitly raising the question of if humans, after they "come" and "go" on earth, also join up with a kind of "brimming river" in the form of an afterlife, allowing them to live on in a different form.

LINES 13-16

I chatter over stony ways,
In little sharps and trebles,
I bubble into eddying bays,
I babble on the pebbles.

The fourth stanza is brimming with instances of onomatopoeia, allowing readers and listeners to "hear" the trickling water of the stream through the words used to describe its movement. In line 13, the brook "chatter[s]" as it rushes over the stony riverbed, the word "chatter" conveying the lively trickling noise that water makes as it flows over rocks. The same applies for lines 15-16:

> I bubble into eddying bays,
> I babble on the pebbles.

As the stream flows from a stone path to a large pool of water—a bay where water is "eddying," or churning and swirling—it makes sense for the brook to now be making a deeper sound. The word "bubble" (as opposed to the word "chatter" in line 13) reflects the noise that the brook makes as it enters deeper, churning waters. In line 16, the brook reverts back to a hollow, light sound as it "babble[s]" and flows over stones once more. The liberal use of onomatopoeia in this stanza lends the brook a playful, musical quality. Line 14 addresses that musical aspect directly; as the brook rushes over rocks, it makes "little sharps and trebles," gesturing to the pitch and tone of music. Adding to this musical quality, every line in the fourth stanza is end-stopped with a comma, lending the stanza a consistent, singsongy rhythm that speaks to the brook's almost childlike playfulness.

By this fourth stanza of the poem, it's becoming increasingly clear that the brook is supposed to seem spirited and lighthearted like a child. The words "chatter," "babble," and "bubble" in this stanza reaffirm as much, and also implies that the brook is going to go through a sort of aging process as the poem unfolds and the brook makes its way to the river. This sets up the idea that the brook is an extended metaphor for human life; its long and winding journey to join up with the river (where it will presumably cease to exist in brook form) is a human's journey through life, which travels from youth to adulthood and old age and ends in death, and possibly in some sort of afterlife (joining up with a kind of spiritual "brimming river" and living on in that new form).

LINES 17-20

With many a curve my banks I fret
By many a field and fallow,
And many a fairy foreland set
With willow-weed and mallow.

Building on the idea that the brook is an extended metaphor for human life, the word "fret" in line 17 also imbues the brook with a human quality. While "fret" in this instance means to wear away over time—that is, the water is constantly splashing against the stream bank and is beginning to wear it down—the word more commonly means to worry incessantly. By using a relevant word that happens to gesture to an element of the human experience, the poem subtly personifies the brook and makes it seem more like a human rather than an impersonal stream. Furthermore, since the brook's journey to join up with the river is a metaphor for death—or, perhaps, going on to some sort of afterlife or heavenly "brimming river"—it seems fitting that the brook would "fret" as it gets closer to its fate. (This also potentially points to Tennyson's own deep-rooted anxieties surrounding death, the afterlife, and religion, which abounded in the latter part of his life.)

Lines 18-20 diverge from the themes of life and death and instead refocus the brook's attention on the power and importance of nature. Once again, the traces of humankind are faint: the stream glides past "many a field and fallow," meaning

farmland that is plowed but unplanted. Of course, humans are the ones who did that plowing, but they're nowhere to be found in the stanza, underscoring the poem's depiction of humans as insignificant. Instead of humans, the brook turns its attention to the supernatural, declaring that this particular slice of the landscape is so beautiful, it's fit for fairies. In referring to this particular spot in the wilderness as "a fairy foreland," the brook underscores the unparalleled beauty of the natural world. The phrase may also be suggesting that this area is populated by birds and butterflies that flit around the "willow-weed and mallow" (two types of foliage that thrive in the wild) like fairies.

LINES 21-24

I chatter, chatter, as I flow
To join the brimming river,
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on for ever.

The brook's journey continues in the sixth stanza. The word "chatter," an onomatopoeia that previously appeared in line 13, is repeated twice in a row, emphasizing the brook's continued childlike playfulness and melodiousness.

Line 21 is enjambed, causing the word "flow" to spill over into line 22, just like the rushing stream itself:

> I chatter, chatter, as I flow
> To join the brimming river,

In these lines, enjambment helps quicken the pace of the poem, and, by extension, the pace of the brook's journey to the river. As if on cue, the brook then restates its goal "To join the brimming river." Since the first line of this stanza is enjambed, the following three end-stopped lines—two of which contain the poem's refrain—are consequently given more emphasis. After barely having to pause between the first two lines, the reader is forced to take longer, more intentional pauses when end-stopped lines appear:

> To join the brimming river,
> For men may come and men may go,
> But I go on for ever.

While lines 22-23 force readers to pause by nature of the commas, it's fitting that line 24 ends in a period: "But I go on for ever." This compels readers to linger for an extra moment on the line, giving it an air of importance and finality. Since the line is espousing the poem's main idea that nature is enduring, while humans are not, this finality is fitting. Furthermore, line 24 resonates even more strongly because of the difference in length between line 23 and line 24 — because line 24 is made up of such short one-syllable words, the line looks shorter and visually stands out, giving its punchy statement "But I go on for ever" even more weight.

LINES 25-28

I wind about, and in and out,
With here a blossom sailing,
And here and there a lusty trout,
And here and there a grayling,

In stanza 7, the brook continues to be strong and energetic, but the nature of its movement seems different from what came before. In previous stanzas, the brook described its movement in two-syllable words like "chatter," "bubble," and "babble." Now it uses the word "wind," which still communicates strength, but is a smoother, less sprightly strength. In terms of the extended metaphor of the poem, in which the brook stands for a human life, it is as if the brook has passed from the sharp jumpiness of early youth to smoother power of young adulthood.

Line 25 also contains internal rhyme, as "about" and "out" both rhyme. Internal rhyme produces a singsongy rhythm that speeds up the line and speaks to the brook's own quickening pace as it "wind[s] about" toward the river. In the following three lines, the repetition of "here" and "there" builds on this singsongy quality. The spirited, lighthearted rhythm of the stanza ties in with the brook's continued youthful energy and vigor.

The bulk of the stanza centers around elements of the natural world. In lines 26-28, the brook points out fish and flora (plant life):

> With here a blossom sailing,
> And here and there a lusty trout,
> And here and there a grayling.

By drawing attention to the "blossom," "trout," and "grayling" (a type of freshwater fish), the brook reaffirms its interest in the goings-on of the natural world and its role in that world. While earlier in the poem, the brook was uninterested in acknowledging humans (as in lines 7-8, where the brook points out several villages but not their human inhabitants), here the brook examines its environment in finer detail, pointing out individual fish and flowers. Once again, the brook sees nature as being far more worthy of interest than humans are.

LINES 29-32

And here and there a foamy flake
Upon me, as I travel
With many a silvery waterbreak
Above the golden gravel,

The singsongy repetition of "And here and there" from lines 27-28 spills over into the eighth stanza, creating a continuity between those two stanzas as the now-strong brook pushes onward toward the river. The brook points out the occasional "foamy flake," meaning the foamy, frothy whitewater that is produced when the brook's waters churn vigorously. Similarly,

in line 31, the brook also points out the "silvery waterbreak[s]" that crash above the sandy stream bed, or "golden gravel"; the brook is again referring to whitewater from crashing waves. The word "silvery" has two meanings in this line, referring both to the color of the waves ("silvery," because the water is white and bubbly) and the musical sound the water makes ("silvery" also meaning melodious).The fact that there are so-called "foamy flake[s]" and "silvery waterbreak[s]" popping up "here and there" speaks to the brook's energy and vigor—it's not flowing sluggishly toward the river, it's churning, swirling, and surging through the landscape.

Almost every line in the eighth stanza is enjambed, meaning that each line overflows into the next without some sort of punctuation at the end of the line to provide an extra pause:

> And here and there a foamy flake
> Upon me, as I travel
> With many a silvery waterbreak
> Above the golden gravel,

The three enjambed lines in a row reinforce the content of those lines; the lines are detailing the way that the brook's water is sloshing around vigorously, and the quickened pace brought about by the enjambed lines strengthens the idea that the brook is moving quickly and energetically.

LINES 33-36

And draw them all along, and flow
To join the brimming river;
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on for ever.

The phrase "And draw them all along" in line 33 seems to be gesturing back to lines 26-28, when the brook pointed out a flower and two types of fish drifting along with it, though the brook could alternately mean that the "foamy flake[s]" and "silver waterbreak" from lines 29 and 31 are being pulled along with the rest of the stream. The lines "And draw them all along, and flow / To join the brimming river" may also be subtly anticipating lines 39-40, which contain an allusion to German folklore about a man who gets swept away by the river while trying to pick flowers and presumably dies. In restating the brook's ability to pull other things along with it, the poem once again highlights the idea that the brook, and, more broadly nature, is supremely powerful.

The refrain reappears for the third time in lines 35-36:

> For men may come and men may go,
> But I go on for ever.

As with every instance of the refrain, notice how the stressed syllables in the line "For men may come and men may go," when put together, encompass the poem's key theme: "men come [and] men go." By stressing these words, the poem underscores the fleetingness of human life. In fact, the *only* verbs the poem ever links to humans are "come" and "go," which not only stresses that humans live short, temporary lives, but also suggests that their lives are wholly insignificant and uninteresting. In the poem, humans merely "come" and "go" and aren't given any meaningful purpose or role in the poem (except to show by contrast just how mighty and lasting nature is), while the brook describes itself at various times as "chattering," "bubbling," "hurrying," "winding," and so on. The humans are always doing the same thing, just living and dying. The brook is always changing, always doing different things, and yet it never dies at all.

LINES 37-40

I steal by lawns and grassy plots:
I slide by hazel covers;
I move the sweet forget-me-nots
That grow for happy lovers.

In the tenth stanza, the tone of the poem shifts significantly, seen most clearly through the verbs that are now associated with the brook. Before the brook "chatter[ed]," "sparkle[d]," "bubble[d]," and "babble[d]," and wound against its banks, now the brook moves at a considerably slower pace. Notice the verbs in lines 37-39:

> I steal by lawns and grassy plots:
> I slide by hazel covers;
> I move the sweet forget-me-nots

Instead of a spirited brook, these lines depict a slower, calmer brook that "steal[s]" (meaning to move quietly), "slides," and "moves" things in its path (after nine stanzas brimming with imaginative, dynamic verbs, the verb "move" in line 39 feels particularly unenergetic). These verbs reveal that the brook is slowing its pace substantially. In this way the brook continues its extended metaphor for human life, and its "aging" process continues into a more staid adulthood. This slowing, or aging, of the brook will intensify in the last few stanzas of the poem, indicating that the brook is metaphorically moving into old age.

Because of the more muted verbs associated with the brook, the tenth stanza's emphasis is focused less on the brook itself and more on the natural world around it—the "lawns and grassy plots," dense bunches of hazel trees that form a tight-knit canopy over the stream, and wildflowers called forget-me-nots. The mention of forget-me-nots is particularly significant, as it contains a very subtle allusion to German folklore. The myth goes as follows: a man and woman are walking along a riverbank in the countryside. The man notices a bunch of lovely wildflowers growing near the river and resolves to pick them for his beloved. When he tries to yank the roots out of the earth, however, the man tumbles backward into the rushing

river. As the waters sweep him away, he shouts to his love, "Forget me not!"

With this folkloric history in mind, lines 39-40 take on a darker, more somber tone and meaning:

> I move the sweet forget-me-nots
> That grow for happy lovers.

Drawing on the German story, the "happy lovers" are the man and woman in the myth; however, given the poem's overarching idea that humans live short, temporary (and largely unimportant) lives, the "happy lovers" also represent all humans, who, blissfully unaware of their own impermanence, are soon to be swept away by the raging river of mortality and time regardless even of their most powerful emotions, like love. This reading is strengthened by the brook's own journey "To join the brimming river," which, given the brook's status as an extended metaphor for a human life, is an afterlife of sorts. Thus, by gesturing to the myth about the man being swept away by the river, the poem also gestures to the way that humans are swept away by death—and, possibly, live on in some sort of spiritual "brimming river" (afterlife) just as the brook intends to. Line 40 is also end-stopped with a period, which is perhaps a nod to the finality of the mythic man being swept away by the river, as well as humankind's own impermanence.

LINES 41-44

I slip, I slide, I gloom, I glance,
Among my skimming swallows;
I make the netted sunbeam dance
Against my sandy shallows;

Building off of the slower verbs that cropped up in the tenth stanza, the eleventh stanza begins with four even more passive and slower-paced verbs that start the stanza out on a calm, almost sleepy, note:

> I slip, I slide, I gloom, I glance.

No longer is the brook bouncing around and playfully winding through the countryside like a delighted child. Now, the brook moves further into metaphorical old age, "gloom[ing] and "glanc[ing]" as it makes its way toward the "brimming river."

The word "gloom" in this instance suggests that the brook looks or acts sullen and somber, while the word "glance" can also mean a kind of angled ricochet or rebound (the brook is somewhat gently bouncing off of the stream bank). The alliteration between "glance" and "gloom" further connects those two words, and allows the dour "gloom" to sap "glance" of energy. Alternatively, one can also read "gloom" and "glance" as referring to the different way that the rippling waters of the brook interact with light, sometimes reflecting it ("glance") and sometimes seeming to swallow it so that the water looks dark ("gloom").

Interestingly, it is other creatures and elements of nature that do most of the vigorous action in stanza eleven. The swallows, a type of bird, skillfully "skim" the surface of the brook, presumably in search of their next meal. Meanwhile, the sunlight "dance[s]" on the surface of the water, taking on that same youthful energy that the brook demonstrated for the first part of the poem. The sunlight looks "netted" because it's shining through a canopy of dense foliage in the forest or countryside, casting a woven pattern of shadows and "sunbeam[s]" that appear to "dance" because the surface they're glinting off of, the waters of the brook, is moving and lapping (even if "gloom[ily]"). The interplay of the slowing, "aging" brook and the rest of nature, which seems just as vigorous as ever, is another way that the poem emphasizes the way that nature exists in a cycle of constant change that is nonetheless always enduring, always alive, and always full of power.

LINES 45-48

I murmur under moon and stars
In brambly wildernesses;
I linger by my shingly bars;
I loiter round my cresses;

The slowing verbs of the tenth and eleventh stanzas now reach an even slower register in the twelfth stanza. Once again the verbs are two syllabled. But while the two-syllabled verbs of the brook's "childhood" were sharp and quick ("chatter," "babble," etc.), now those verbs are filled with the softer, slower blended r's, m's, n's and g's of "murmur" and "linger." It's now also nighttime—the brook "murmur[s] under moon and stars"—which intensifies the calm, sleepy feeling of the stanza, and the continued "aging" of the brook into metaphorical "old age."

Clearly, the brook is no longer in a hurry to reach the "brimming river" that it once bounded towards. Instead of "wind[ing] about" and rushing forward in a "sudden sally," the brook takes its time, pausing for a moment by its "shingly bars" (pebble-encrusted beaches) and "cresses" (the vegetation like watercress that grows in the brook's shallow waters). The words "linger" and "loiter" suggest hesitance—that the brook is not just moving more slowly toward the "brimming river" but is now a little reticent to join up with it. This perhaps reflects humankind's own anxieties about approaching death, and the question of whether there really is the existence of an afterlife (a topic that fascinated and tormented Tennyson himself).

LINES 49-52

And out again I curve and flow
To join the brimming river;
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on for ever.

Despite the slowness of stanzas 10, 11, and 12, the tone of stanza 13 shifts suddenly. While in lines 47-48, the brook was "linger[ing]" and "loiter[ing]" on its way to the river—dragging its feet, so to speak—in line 49, the brook gathers itself and resumes its journey toward the river with renewed energy and purpose:

> And out again I curve and flow
> To join the brimming river;

One can read this moment as either aligning to or standing in contrast to the extended metaphor connecting the brook's progress with the passage of a human life. If read as being aligned with a human life, it's possible to see a person approaching personal death (just as the brook will cease to be a brook when it joins the river) as gaining a new determination and even desire for that next adventure. This is a person saying, "I'm ready to die" and moving onto heaven with a sense of a life purposefully lived. On the other hand, one can read the way the brook now "curve[s]" and "flow[s]," just as it did in its metaphorical youth, as standing in contrast to humans, as showing that the brook isn't bound by birth and death the way humans are. In this reading, unlike humans, the brook can regain its energy and continue on indefinitely, tying into the poem's broader message that nature is eternal and enduring. It isn't that one of these readings is more right or correct than the other. Both are possible, and can exist simultaneously.

It's fitting, then, that the poem ends with the refrain, which encapsulates this message:

> For men may come and men may go,
> But I go on for ever.

By ending the poem with the refrain, Tennyson lends those two lines extra weight and resonance. The refrain is the last thought in the poem that the reader will leave with, and leaves them to mull over the brook's belief that it is part of something that endures, while humans (including the reader) are insubstantial and do no more than "come" and "go." Should the poem be read literally, as if the brook's beliefs are the correct ones? Or should it be read metaphorically, in which the brook stands in for human life and the brook's "afterlife" as part of the river suggests that humans, too, have an afterlife to look forward to? The poem doesn't answer these questions. It offers the last refrain, and ends, leaving the reader to wrestle with these questions on his or her own. In this way, one might argue, that the poem leaves the reader wrestling with the same questions about life and death and the afterlife that Tennyson himself seemed to be wrestling with when he wrote the poem.

SYMBOLS

VILLAGES AND BRIDGES

In the second stanza of the poem, the brook flows past "twenty thorps, a little town, / And half a hundred bridges." These human constructions contain a few levels of symbolic significance. Notably, the brook acknowledges these "thorps" (small villages) and the "little town" but doesn't bother to mention their human inhabitants. Likewise, the brook points out "half a hundred bridges" but doesn't bring up the people who built the bridges or travel on them. In this way, the villages and bridges, seemingly devoid of life, symbolize humankind's insignificance in the face of nature. This fits with the broader attitude of the poem—seen most clearly in the poem's refrain—that humans are just temporary guests on earth, as they "come" and "go" quickly. That impermanence is perhaps why the individual humans who inhabit those "twenty thorps" and "little town" don't matter to the brook—they'll be gone soon, while their bridges and villages will stay standing for at least a little longer.

The villages and bridges also represent human progress—but not necessarily in a good way. Tennyson wrote the poem in 1886, during Queen Victoria's reign, which was a time of explosive technological advancement called the Industrial Revolution. The underbelly of the Industrial Revolution, though, was that advancement (especially the increasing industrialization of cities) often happened at the expense of nature. The "twenty thorps" and "half a hundred bridges"—numbers most likely used to signify a lot of villages and bridges more so than a specific number of them—are perhaps instances of human progress creeping into a previously untouched countryside. This may be why the brook is uninterested in the villages' human inhabitants: the towns and bridges themselves, more so than the people, are representative of increasing industrialization. In this reading, the brook's belief in its permanence can be read as being either dispiriting or hopeful: that the brook in fact will eventually be fouled and maybe even destroyed by creeping industrialization, or that despite growing industrialization that the brook, and nature, will nonetheless endure.

However, Tennyson's use of the word "thorps," though, may modify this reading of the poem and its relation to industrialization. The word "thorp" is a Middle English word, thus gesturing to an England of yore, or a time gone by. Furthermore, the word "thorp" specifically means a hamlet or small village, not necessarily a bustling city, thus suggesting that these "twenty thorps" are slices of old English life, before the wild frenzy of industrialization. If this is the case, Tennyson may be subtly lamenting the loss of this quaint, idyllic way of life (as Poet Laureate of England, which he was at the time, his job was to praise England's pursuits, including industrialization, so

this critique would have to be so faint as to go unnoticed by then-contemporary readers). Tennyson fostered a deep connection to nature throughout his life, which may add weight to the possibility that he is mourning or at least remembering the old England, which was a swath of countryside dotted with hamlets rather than a series of industrial cities dotted with the occasional countryside.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "twenty thorps, a little town"
- **Line 8:** "half a hundred bridges"

POETIC DEVICES

EXTENDED METAPHOR

In the poem, the brook's journey "to join the brimming river" represents the course of a human life—a person's journey from birth to death. This extended metaphor highlights the similarities between both journeys, like the way that the brook seems to gradually "age," transforming over the course of 13 stanzas from a lively, energetic little brook to a languid stream just like an energetic child gradually growing into adulthood and then old age. In emphasizing the similarities between the stream's course and the course of a human life, the poem allows readers to use something they can understand easily (a small stream flowing to a river) to better understand more complex concepts (human life, aging, mortality).

The extended metaphor also brings up questions surrounding death and the afterlife: namely, if the stream's path to "join the brimming river" really does represent the trajectory of a human life, does the brook's joining up with something bigger than itself (the river) and living on in that new form mean that humans go on to some sort of afterlife and live on that way? By framing this question within the extended metaphor, Tennyson sidesteps the responsibility of having to answer it directly—and perhaps he didn't have an answer, considering his deep anxieties surrounding mortality and the Christian promise of an afterlife, which consumed much of his later poetry following the death of his dear friend, Arthur Hallam (Tennyson's poem "In Memoriam" is one such example), as well as the death of his son.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "I make a sudden sally"
- **Line 3:** "sparkle"
- **Line 4:** "bicker"
- **Line 5:** "hurry"
- **Line 6:** "slip"
- **Line 10:** "To join the brimming river,"
- **Lines 11-12:** "For men may come and men may go, / But I go on for ever."
- **Line 13:** "chatter"
- **Line 15:** "bubble"
- **Line 16:** "babble"
- **Line 21:** "chatter, chatter"
- **Line 22:** "To join the brimming river,"
- **Lines 23-24:** "For men may come and men may go, / But I go on for ever."
- **Line 34:** "To join the brimming river;"
- **Lines 35-36:** "For men may come and men may go, / But I go on for ever."
- **Line 37:** "steal"
- **Line 38:** "slide"
- **Line 41:** "I slip, I slide, I gloom, I glance,"
- **Line 45:** "murmur"
- **Line 47:** "linger"
- **Line 48:** "loiter"
- **Line 50:** "To join the brimming river;"
- **Lines 51-52:** "For men may come and men may go, / But I go on for ever."

PERSONIFICATION

Tennyson personifies the brook—the speaker of the poem—lending it an almost human presence. Much of this personification shines through the many verbs linked with the stream, which crop up in nearly every line. As the brook's journey "To join the brimming river" unfurls, it "bicker[s]," "chatter[s]," "babble[s]," "fret[s]," "travel[s]," "murmur[s]," and "loiter[s]," much like a real person. Many of these verbs carry twofold or even threefold meanings, thus painting the brook as both a simple stream and as an almost humanlike being, and its journey as an extended metaphor for the course of a human life.

For instance, the words "bicker," "chatter," and "babble" are instances of onomatopoeia that speak to the pleasant watery sounds the brook makes as it trickles through the landscape; however, the words also point to the way that humans "bicker," "chatter," and "babble" as they go about their daily lives, subtly infusing the brook with human qualities. By giving the brook these human qualities and associations, the poem underscores that the brook is very much alive, like all of nature. This dovetails neatly with the brook's 28 repetitions of the word "I," emphasizing that it is, at least in the confines of the poem, a sentient being with consciousness and agency. In personifying the brook, the poem encourages its readership to recognize nature as a living, breathing thing that exists alongside—and outlives—human beings.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "bicker"

- **Line 5:** "hurry"
- **Line 13:** "chatter"
- **Line 16:** "babble"
- **Line 17:** "fret"
- **Line 21:** "chatter, chatter"
- **Line 30:** "travel"
- **Line 37:** "steal"
- **Line 41:** "gloom," "glance"
- **Line 45:** "murmur"
- **Line 47:** "linger"
- **Line 48:** "loiter"

REPETITION

Repetition plays a key role in the poem. Most notable are the four repetitions of the refrain, "For men may come and men may go, / But I go on for ever," which encapsulates the poem's overarching message that humans are insignificant and their time on earth is temporary, while nature, as a fundamental part of the earth, is as enduring as it is powerful. Repetition serves to emphasize this point again and again, ensuring that it sticks with the reader.

But the refrain is not at all the only instance of repetition in the poem. The speaker of the poem, the brook of the poem's title, uses the word "I" 28 times throughout the poem. The repetition of the word "I" reinforces the idea that the brook is alive in this poem. The poem lends the brook this vitality and consciousness in order to reinforce to the reader that humans aren't the only things that live on the planet. The repetition of the word "I" is part of the poem's effort to have readers humble themselves in the face of nature and recognize its towering power, resilience, and constancy.

While the brook speaks of itself in first person 28 times, it only vaguely gestures to humans three times: it acknowledges a few towns (but not the human inhabitants of those towns) in lines 7-8, makes mention of someone named Philip who owns a farm in line 9, and speaks abstractly of "happy lovers" in line 40. The brevity and sparseness of these references in contrast with the 28 repetitions of the word "I" emphasize that the brook is focused squarely on itself (and other elements of nature, which it acknowledges frequently). In this way, repetition serves to deemphasize and devalue human life—a notion that the refrain reinforces—and instead elevates the brook and nature as a whole over humankind.

Other instances of repetition serve more stylistic purposes. For instance, stanzas 7 and 8 play on the phrase "here and there," adding a playful, rhythmic quality to the poem:

> I wind about, and in and out,
> With here a blossom sailing,
> And here and there a lusty trout,
> And here and there a grayling,
> And here and there a foamy flake.

The repetition of "here" and "here and there" happens in quick succession, making the lines seem to tumble into one another quickly. This makes the brook seem almost like a hasty tour guide, quickly pointing out elements of the landscape as it surges through the wilderness (the repetition of the word "chatter" in lines 13 and 21 also reinforces this pace). The repetition is also noteworthy because each instance of "here" or "here and there" is followed by some element of nature, be it flower, fish, or froth from the churning water. Once again, repetition serves to highlight nature, elevating it as supremely beautiful and important.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I"
- **Line 2:** "I"
- **Line 5:** "I"
- **Line 9:** "I"
- **Lines 9-12:** "flow / To join the brimming river, / For men may come and men may go, / But I go on for ever."
- **Line 13:** "I"
- **Line 15:** "I"
- **Line 16:** "I"
- **Line 17:** "I"
- **Line 21:** "I," "I"
- **Lines 21-24:** "flow / To join the brimming river, / For men may come and men may go, / But I go on for ever."
- **Line 25:** "I"
- **Line 26:** "With here"
- **Line 27:** "And here and there"
- **Line 28:** "And here and there"
- **Line 29:** "And here and there"
- **Line 30:** "I"
- **Lines 33-36:** "flow / To join the brimming river; / For men may come and men may go, / But I go on for ever."
- **Line 37:** "I"
- **Line 38:** "I"
- **Line 39:** "I"
- **Line 41:** "I," "I," "I," "I"
- **Line 43:** "I"
- **Line 45:** "I"
- **Line 47:** "I"
- **Line 48:** "I"
- **Line 49:** "I"
- **Lines 49-52:** "flow / To join the brimming river; / For men may come and men may go, / But I go on for ever."

ALLITERATION

Alliteration crops up several times in the poem, each time echoing the sounds of the brook itself as it trickles to the river. For instance, the "s" sounds in lines 2-3 forms a melodious, sweet sound that reflects the sound of the flowing water.

Similarly, the "f" sounds in the third and fifth stanzas also reflect the sound of rushing water. The shift from "s" sounds at the very beginning of the poem to the slightly more forceful "f" sounds also sounds like the stream is picking up its pace, shifting from a trickling brook to a rushing stream. The "s" sounds return in stanza 11, which signals that the stream is slowing down again (reinforced by the shift to more unhurried, languid verbs in stanzas 11 and 12). By signaling the river's change in pace, alliteration also strengthens the idea that the brook is undergoing a sort of aging process throughout its journey. This points back to the brook's journey as an extended metaphor for the course of a human life, emphasizing that humans are mortal beings whose time on earth is temporary and short-lived.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "sudden sally"
- **Line 3:** "sparkle"
- **Line 9:** "Philip's farm," "flow"
- **Line 17:** "fret"
- **Line 18:** "field and fallow"
- **Line 19:** "fairy foreland"
- **Line 29:** "foamy flake"
- **Line 32:** "golden gravel"
- **Line 41:** "slip," "slide," "gloom," "glance"
- **Line 42:** "skimming swallows"
- **Line 43:** "sunbeam"
- **Line 44:** "sandy shallows"

IMAGERY

"The Brook" is brimming with moments of evocative imagery. One such moment appears in stanza 11, as the poem paints a playful image of the rippling water. The "skimming swallows" are birds that just barely brush the surface of the brook, making its water lap playfully and thus making the sunlight look like it's "danc[ing]" as it reflects upon the surface. This imagery engages the reader or listener's senses, inviting them to imagine such a scene. In painting mental masterpiece after mental masterpiece, the instances of imagery in this poem emphasize the unparalleled beauty of nature, which is one of the poem's key themes. For example, in line 19, the brook slides alongside "fairy foreland[s]." In describing the natural landscape as a fairyland—and all the lovely mental associations that accompany such a thought—the brook underscores that nature is so beautiful, it's practically magical.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 18-20:** "By many a field and fallow, / And many a fairy foreland set / With willow-weed and mallow."
- **Lines 37-39:** "I steal by lawns and grassy plots: / I slide by hazel covers; / I move the sweet forget-me-nots"
- **Lines 42-44:** " Among my skimming swallows; / I make the netted sunbeam dance / Against my sandy shallows;"
- **Lines 45-48:** "I murmur under moon and stars / In brambly wildernesses; / I linger by my shingly bars; / I loiter round my cresses;"

END-STOPPED LINE

Unlike enjambment, which reflects the unceasing, fast-flowing nature of the brook, end-stopped lines in the poem provide natural moments of pause that lend the poem (and the brook) a measure of regularity, rhythm, and slowness. This is especially true near the end of the poem, when the verbs associated with the brook also reflect that the brook is beginning to slow down. For example, lines 45-48 read:

> I murmur under moon and stars
> In brambly wildernesses;
> I linger by my shingly bars;
> I loiter round my cresses;

This stanza contains three semi-colons in a row. These semi-colons provide a longer stop than the commas that end-stop many of the lines in the poem, lending the stanza weight and slowness. The verbs "murmur," "linger," and "loiter" suggest as much, revealing that the dynamic, spirited brook is now a languid stream.

The brook is both ever-changing (one minute, it slims itself down to slip between narrow crevices, while another minute it's pooling lazily around the beach) and fundamentally unchanging (in that it will "go on for ever" as part of the river, and its life isn't bookended by birth and death). The combination of end stopped and enjambed lines throughout the poem seem to reflect this duality. While enjambment points to the ever-flowing, ever-changing nature of the brook, the slowness and finality that end-stopped lines provide point to the brook's enduring nature. In particular, the end of the refrain, "For men may come and men may go, / But I go on for ever" is always end-stopped, serving to emphasize the concept of human impermanence and nature's continuity and to give that assessment of humanity an air of finality.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "hern:"
- **Line 3:** "fern,"
- **Line 4:** "valley."
- **Line 5:** "down,"
- **Line 6:** "ridges,"
- **Line 7:** "town,"
- **Line 8:** "bridges."

- **Line 10:** "river,"
- **Line 11:** "go,"
- **Line 12:** "ever."
- **Line 13:** "ways,"
- **Line 14:** "trebles,"
- **Line 15:** "bays,"
- **Line 16:** "pebbles."
- **Line 18:** "fallow,"
- **Line 20:** "mallow."
- **Line 22:** "river,"
- **Line 23:** "go,"
- **Line 24:** "ever."
- **Line 25:** "out,"
- **Line 26:** "sailing,"
- **Line 27:** "trout,"
- **Line 28:** "grayling,"
- **Line 32:** "gravel,"
- **Line 34:** "river;"
- **Line 35:** "go,"
- **Line 36:** "ever."
- **Line 37:** "plots:"
- **Line 38:** "covers;"
- **Line 40:** "lovers."
- **Line 41:** "glance,"
- **Line 42:** "swallows;"
- **Line 44:** "shallows;"
- **Line 46:** "wildernesses;"
- **Line 47:** "bars;"
- **Line 48:** "cresses;"
- **Line 50:** "river;"
- **Line 51:** "go,"
- **Line 52:** "ever."

ENJAMBMENT

By spilling a sentence over from one line to the next, enjambment echoes the way that the brook is eternally flowing through the landscape. In fact, instances of enjambment in the poem often occur after the word "flow" and before the phrase "To join the brimming river," like in stanzas 3, 6, 9, and 13, thus forming a link between form and content. Like the word "flow," enjambment allows a sentence or phrase to flow from one line to the next without pause, just as the river flows across the landscape without stopping. In addition, the phrase "To join the brimming river" reveals that the brook is going to spill into something else, just as enjambment means one line will run over into the next.

Enjambment also makes the poem itself flow faster, since enjambed lines lack punctuation (such as a period or comma) that would cause a reader to pause for an extra moment beyond just a normal line break. In stanza 8, near the middle of the poem, nearly every line is enjambed:

> And here and there a foamy flake
> Upon me, as I travel
> With many a silvery waterbreak
> Above the golden gravel.

Beyond emphasizing that the brook never ceases and is a constant flurry of activity, enjambment also suggests that the stream is picking up speed as it rushes toward its destination. In this way, enjambment adds to the brook's dynamism and power, reinforcing the broader idea that nature is supremely powerful and lasting.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "sally"
- **Line 3:** "And"
- **Line 9:** "flow"
- **Line 10:** "To"
- **Line 17:** "fret"
- **Line 18:** "By"
- **Line 19:** "set"
- **Line 20:** "With"
- **Line 21:** "flow"
- **Line 22:** "To"
- **Line 29:** "flake"
- **Line 30:** "Upon," "travel"
- **Line 31:** "With," "waterbreak"
- **Line 32:** "Above"
- **Line 33:** "flow"
- **Line 34:** "To"
- **Line 39:** "forget-me-nots"
- **Line 40:** "That"
- **Line 43:** "dance"
- **Line 44:** "Against"
- **Line 45:** "stars"
- **Line 46:** "In"
- **Line 49:** "flow"
- **Line 50:** "To"

ALLUSION

Lines 39 and 40 mention "the sweet forget-me-nots," a type of wildflower, which "grow for happy lovers." These lines contain a subtle allusion to German folklore. According to lore, forget-me-not flowers earned their name when a man and woman were strolling alongside a riverbank. Noticing a clump of beautiful blossoms near the river's edge, the man stopped to pick a handful for his love. However, the flowers were rooted deeply in the ground, and the man had to use all his strength to rip them from the earth. He yanked too hard, though, and lost his balance, tumbling into the churning river. As he was being swept away by the rushing water, he called out (or perhaps gurgled) to his lover to "forget me not," thus coining the wildflower's wistful name.

This moment adds a darker tone to lines 39 and 40, which seem on the surface to merely be about pretty flowers and "happy lovers" in the beautiful countryside. Folded inside these sentences is instead the notion that human life is fleeting, easily swept away in a single instant. In contrast, the rushing river in the German myth—and, by extension, the brook and "the brimming river" of Tennyson's poem—is strong and overpowering. The allusion thus reinforces one of the poem's key themes, which is encapsulated in the refrain:

> For men may come and men may go,
> But I go on for ever.

In other words, humans—and even the deepest human emotions, like love—merely flit in and out of existence, living short and insubstantial lives, while nature is mighty and eternal.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 39-40:** "I move the sweet forget-me-nots / That grow for happy lovers."

ONOMATOPOEIA

The poem is laden with instances of onomatopoeia, usually arising in the form of a verb. The brook "chatter[s]," "babble[s]," and "bubble[s]" throughout its journey to join up with the river. These verbs allow the reader or listener to both understand what the brook is doing and actually hear the action in question. Once such instance appears in lines 13-16:

> I chatter over stony ways,
> In little sharps and trebles,
> I bubble into eddying bays,
> I babble on the pebbles.

The speaker of the poem, the brook, describes itself as "chatter[ing] over stony ways"; the word "chatter" has a trickling, hollow sound to it that reflects the sound water makes as it flows over a bumpy stone path. The following line affirms as much—the brook "chatter[s] over stony ways, / In little sharps and trebles," suggesting that the "chatter[ing] sound has a varied musical quality. Moments later, the brook "bubble[s] into eddying bays." The word "bubble" suggests a kind of deep, gurgling sound, which is fitting since the stream is flowing into a deeper pool of churning water. The word "babble" in the next line again takes on a more hollow, light sound as the brook once again flows over stones. As this stanza exemplifies, onomatopoeia allows the poem to explain the brook's course while having the very sounds the brook makes mimic its actions. In addition, the poem's extensive use of onomatopoeia brings the brook to life—which makes sense for such an energetic, churning, rushing stream—and allows the reader to be swept along with it.

Where Onomatopoeia appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "sparkle"
- **Line 4:** "bicker"
- **Line 6:** "slip"
- **Line 13:** "chatter"
- **Line 15:** "bubble"
- **Line 16:** "babble"
- **Line 21:** "chatter, chatter"
- **Line 41:** "slip"
- **Line 45:** "murmur"

VOCABULARY

Haunts (Line 1) - A place where a particular person or group spend a lot of time. In this case, "haunts" refers to the ponds or lakes that freshwater birds frequent.

Coot and Hern (Line 1) - Coot are duck-like water birds that dwell in ponds, lakes, and streams. "Hern," a word Tennyson made up, refers to herons: large, long-legged birds that wade in fresh water and eat fish.

Sally (Line 2) - A journey that is begun abruptly; in the poem, the brook "make[s] a sudden sally," meaning that it abruptly begins its journey to the river. Sally may also refer to a sudden military attack, which speaks to the brook's energy and power.

Bicker (Line 4) - To pitter patter gently on a surface. Here, the brook is flowing down a valley and making pleasant trickling sounds in the process.Bicker can also refer to arguing about small and meaningless things. At the beginning of the poem, the brook is lively and energetic like a child, and this youthfulness is strengthened by the word "bicker," which paints a mental image of small children squabbling about something trivial, like their toys.

Thorps (Line 7) - A Middle English word for small villages.

Brimming (Line 10, Line 22, Line 34, Line 50) - Full or overflowing. In this case, the brook is going to be absorbed by a river that is so big, it's already spilling over.

Eddying (Line 15) - Swirling and churning. The "eddying bays" are lively and powerful, like a small whirlpool.

Fret (Line 17) - To form small waves, or to slowly corrode something by rubbing against it. In the case of the first definition, the brook's surface breaks into small waves as it sloshes around the curved stream bank. The second definition of "fret" suggests that the brook is slowly wearing down the bank by constantly flowing around the curvature of the land.

Fallow (Line 18) - Farmland that is plowed but unsown, often left alone for a certain period of time so that the land can rest and become more fertile between harvests.

Foreland (Line 19) - A narrow strip of land that juts out into a

body of water.

Willow-weed and Mallow (Line 20) - Willow-weed is a leafy green weed that grows on land or in swampy areas. Mallow are flowering plants that produce purple, pink, and white blossoms.

Lusty (Line 27) - Hearty, energetic, and healthy.

Grayling (Line 28) - A type of freshwater fish known for its vibrant silver and violet coloring.

Foamy Flake (Line 29) - Small waves capped with whitewater, or foam.

Waterbreak (Line 31) - A disruption on the surface of a stream, usually caused by an obstruction (such as a large rock) down in the stream bed.

Hazel Covers (Line 38) - A dense thicket of hazel trees and shrubs. The vegetation is so close together that it forms a kind of "cover" or canopy.

Forget-me-nots (Line 39) - A type of wildflower, usually with vibrant blue petals. The name "forget-me-nots" comes from a German myth that tells the story of two lovers strolling alongside a river. The man notices the beautiful blue wildflowers and stops to pick and handful for his love. In picking the flowers, the man loses his balance and is promptly swept away by the river. As he disappears, he yells to his beloved to "forget me not."

Skimming Swallows (Line 42) - Swallows are a type of bird that are known for just barely brushing the surface of the ground or water as they fly, hence the swallows in this poem that "skim" the surface of the brook in search of a meal.

Brambly (Line 46) - A bramble is a thorny shrub or tree (such as a blackberry shrub or a rose bush), so "brambly wildernesses" means that the landscape is studded with these prickly shrubs.

Shingly Bars (Line 47) - Shingle refers to a pile of small stones that accumulates on the seashore. A bar is a sandbank in a shallow part of a river or in the sea. In the poem, then, "shingly bars" means bank covered in stones, like a pebble beach.

Cresses (Line 48) - Cress is a leafy vegetable that grows when submerged in water. A commonly known type of cress is watercress.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Brook" is a form of poem called a ballad. Like traditional ballads, the poem is comprised of quatrains, stanzas of four lines, and features a refrain, which is a repeated set of lines in various parts of the poem. As is also typical in a ballad, the refrain serves as a kind of chorus that distills key ideas or themes of the poem into a few lines. In "The Brook," the refrain "For men may come and men may go, / But I go on for ever" describes the poem's central idea that human life is short-lived and insignificant, while nature is powerful and enduring. The poem also ends with the refrain, leaving readers to grapple with this thought even as they leave the pages of the poem and go back out into the world.

The poem's structure is also interesting in other ways that subtly support and comment on the poem's themes. The poem contains 13 quatrains, which means it contains 52 total lines, and the refrain appears roughly at each quarter point of the poem—it appears every three stanzas for its first three repetitions (stanzas 3, 6, and 9), and after four stanzas for its last repetition in stanza 13. The poem's structure, in which 52 lines are grouped into stanzas of 4 lines, and with its entirely cut into four quarters by the refrains, therefore matches the pattern of a year (52 weeks, grouped into months of roughly 4 weeks, and all quartered into the 4 seasons).

This structural echo of a year connects with the themes of the poem, in two main ways. First, it aligns with the poem's structure with the cycles of nature, which makes sense in a poem that describes a brook that is at once always changing and at the same time enduring. Nature itself, with the shift of the seasons, is itself always changing and enduring. At the same time, the passage of a year also connects with the way that time affects humans—the march of the weeks, and months, and seasons connects to the way that each individual person, inescapably, ages and dies. The poem's structure captures both the two main themes of the poem, and the way that those themes are connected through the passage of time.

"The Brook" diverges from balladic tradition when it comes to rhyme scheme: while most ballads follow an ABCB rhyme scheme, Tennyson's poem is written in alternate rhyme, meaning that the rhyme scheme follows an ABAB pattern. Although Tennyson diverges from tradition here, his ABAB rhyme scheme still fits the typical jaunty rhythm that ballads are known for.

METER

The poem is written in common meter, though Tennyson puts a bit of a twist on it. Traditionally, common meter involves alternating lines of 8-syllable and 6-syllable lines, with both sets of lines using an iambic rhythm of unstressed-stressed syllables. Take, for example, the first line of the poem:

I come from haunts of coot and hern:

This is iambic tetrameter, as there are four metrical feet that each follow a unstressed-stressed pattern.

Common meter dictates that following this line of iambic tetrameter should be a line of iambic trimeter, meaning three metrical feet, with each foot following the same unstressed-stressed pattern. However, notice what happens in the second line of the poem:

I make a sudden sally

When broken down into iambs, the line looks like this: I make / a sud / den sal / ly. The extra unstressed syllable at the end ("ly") is extrametrical, meaning that it exceeds the number of syllables that are expected for the line (and is often not counted toward that number of syllables, meaning that a poetry "expert" might still refer to this seven syllable line as being iambic tetrameter).

Ending on an unstressed syllable is called a feminine ending, and is common in poetry (a prime example being Shakespeare's "Sonnet 20"). In the case of "The Brook," every line of iambic trimeter has a feminine ending (an unstressed syllable), while every line of iambic tetrameter ends on a stressed syllable. Zooming out to look at the entire poem, that means that the entire poem ends alternatingly on stressed and unstressed syllables. Such a pattern heightens the musical quality of the ABAB rhyme scheme, giving the brook itself musical quality as it makes its way through the landscape (an idea reinforced by lines 13-14, in which the brook "chatter[s] over stony ways, / In little sharps and trebles).

RHYME SCHEME

"The Brook" diverges from balladic tradition when it comes to rhyme scheme: while most ballads follow an ABCB rhyme scheme, Tennyson's poem is written in alternate rhyme, meaning that the rhyme scheme follows an ABAB pattern. (the next stanza being CDCD, then EFEF, and so on). Although Tennyson diverges from tradition here, his ABAB rhyme scheme still fits the typical jaunty rhythm that ballads are known for.

This rhyme is scheme is consistent throughout the poem, though it is slightly imperfect in stanzas that contain the refrain, where "river" is meant to rhyme with the similar-sounding but not-quite-rhyming word "ever." For example, the sixth stanza reads as follows:

I chatter, chatter as I flow
To join the brimming river,
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on for ever.

This sort of rhyme is called a slant rhyme (or half rhyme), in which the words are close but don't quite rhyme. In maintaining a perfect ABAB rhyme throughout the entirety of the poem but only slipping up slightly in the refrain (which appears four times), it seems that the poem is trying to intermittently catch the reader or listener's attention, encouraging them to linger on the refrain. This is significant, as those two lines—"For men may come and men may go, / But I go on for ever"—enfold the poem's key theme: that humans live short, temporary lives on earth, while nature is enduring.

Overall, though, the otherwise perfect ABAB rhyme scheme lends the brook with a uniform, balanced quality. This, too, points to the overarching message that nature is enduring. Like the constancy and regularity of the alternating rhyme, the brook, as part of nature, is also constant and unchanging on a fundamental level. On the other hand, the fact that the rhyme itself does change in some sense—the rhyme scheme isn't AAAA but is instead the alternating ABAB—also reflects the way that the brook is dynamic and forever changing throughout its journey. Like the rhyme scheme that alternates between A and B, the water of the brook is constantly changing (it slims down to squeeze through two rocks, expands to pool out onto a stone path, and so on) but the brook itself always remains.

A moment of Internal rhyme appears in line 25, "I wind about, and in and out." This quickens the pace of the line and emphasizes the stream's playfulness and vigor at this moment, and perhaps, by extension, the power that underpins all of nature.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is the brook from the poem's title. A small but lively stream, the brook seeks to merge with "the brimming river" and become part of something bigger than itself. Throughout the poem, it remains committed to this goal, repeating it four times as a refrain. Although the poem never makes it explicit if the brook ever does merge with the river, it restates its intentions to do so in the last stanza, revealing its unflinching determination, and implying that the brook will join with the river.

The brook is also adamant about nature's beauty and power and also emphasizes that nature is eternal—humans "come" and "go," but nature "go[es] on for ever." The brook is fairly indifferent to humans, hardly acknowledging them at all as it moves through the landscape. As the poem unspools, the river shifts from an energetic little thing to a languid, slow-moving stream, mirroring the way that humans age. This reinforces that the brook's journey is an extended metaphor for the course of a human life. However, the brook is not actually a human—even after it has undergone its "aging" process, the brook finds it within itself to pick up the pace once more in line 49, with renewed vigor and purpose. Throughout the poem, the brook is constantly changing, becoming a thin stream of water in one moment as it trickles through a narrow crevice between two rocks (like in line 6), and becoming expansive not long after, pooling lazily and spreading out into the bay (like in lines 47-48). At the same time, though, the brook is, like nature, also unchanging. Though its water shifts and changes, it never ceases to be a brook.

SETTING

"The Brook" is set in the beautiful wilderness that, given Tennyson's Britishness and status as Britain's Poet Laureate, is most likely the British countryside. As the poem unfolds, and the brook embarks on its long and winding journey to join up with a large river, elements of the countryside crop up one by one. Throughout its journey, the brook points out different kinds of fish and foliage, and acknowledges the sun, moon, and starlight, painting a fuller picture of the wooded scene. The brook also passes a handful of villages and bridges but mostly passes swaths of untouched countryside that is so majestic and undisturbed that it's like a "fairy foreland." This lush landscape is a fitting setting for the poem, which emphasizes the unrivaled beauty of nature.

Tennyson wrote this poem in 1886, in the wake of the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth century and the rise of the Second Industrial Revolution. With the rapid advancement and industrialization of cities still in the public consciousness—so-called progress that encroached on the previously untouched countryside—it's interesting that Tennyson chooses to paint such an idyllic picture of nature and minimize any trace of humans. In one of the few instances in which it acknowledges humans in some capacity, the brook glides past "twenty thorps, a little town, / And half a hundred bridges" (lines 7-8). These two lines provide a hazy picture of how industrialization has impacted the countryside. Are the "half a hundred bridges" (the number likely meant only to signify that there are a lot of bridges, not that there were actually 50) evidence of industrialization bleeding into the brook's terrain? Or does the fact that there is only one "little town," while there are "twenty thorps" (small villages), mean that this scene is still one of a quaint, pre-industrialized Britain? Regardless, the brook passes the towns in an instant, making Tennyson's purpose clear: to show nature in its best light—when "the netted sunbeam[s] dance"—and elevate nature's beauty, eternalness, and importance in comparison to humans, who are merely passing through in their brief time on Earth.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Just as the brook wishes "To join the brimming river" in Tennyson's "The Brook," so too does the river join the sea in Emily Dickinson's short poem "My River Runs to Thee." Dickinson's poem has a romantic texture that Tennyson's poem lacks, but both poems highlight the constancy of nature. Both poems are also brimming with "s" sounds that reflect the sound of rushing water. Rupert Brooke's "Heaven" also resembles Tennyson's "The Brook" in that both poems entertain the concept of an afterlife. While this is far more subtle in "The Brook" (with the eponymous brook being absorbed into the "brimming river" in a way reminiscent of a human living on in some kind of afterlife), Brooke's "Heaven" asks directly if "there [is] anything Beyond." Brooke's "Heaven," which follows fish swimming along in a stream, is also far more optimistic about the existence of something "Beyond," while Tennyson's "The Brook" remains vague and questioning.

Tennyson wrote the poem in 1886, when he was 77 years old. Around this time, Tennyson's age began to bleed through his work, as he increasingly engaged the concepts of mortality and the afterlife. This reflective quality appears in "The Brook," which emphasizes the constancy of nature and the fleetingness of human life—as the brook itself says in the refrain in stanzas 3, 6, 9, and 13, "For men may come and men may go, / But I go on for ever." During his lifetime, Tennyson was forced to grapple with two particularly painful deaths: that of his best friend, Arthur Hallam, and Tennyson's youngest son, Lionel. It is no wonder, then, why Tennyson became increasingly consumed with questions surrounding death, mortality, and the afterlife. In the poem "In Memoriam," Tennyson grapples with his heavy feelings of grief over Arthur's death and, in the process, raises pressing but unanswerable questions about human life and religion. "The Brook" only vaguely gestures at the question of the afterlife: if the brook's journey, as an extended metaphor for a human life, culminates with the brook "join[ing] the brimming river" and living on in that new form, does that mean humans also live on in some form of afterlife? Tennyson leaves this ambiguous, a reflection of his own perhaps uncertain mind.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During the time he wrote "The Brook," Tennyson was serving as Poet Laureate (a kind of spokesperson-meets-poet) for Queen Victoria, succeeding the late William Wordsworth. Throughout the Queen's six-decade reign, the British colonial empire continued to expand (Victoria was named empress of India just ten years before Tennyson wrote "The Brook). At the same time, industrialization continued to expand across Britain. While there was much to be gained from industrial progress, rapid technological advancement also spelled trouble for the natural landscape, as factories, machinery, and industrial cities began to crop up and infringe on the wilderness (a fact that Gerard Manley Hopkins, for instance, decried in his 1877 poem "God's Grandeur").

Both colonialism and industrialization are often portrayed in literature as negative. But as Poet Laureate, it was Tennyson's job to unflinchingly praise England's so-called progress to buoy the English people. Interestingly, he sidesteps the issue altogether in "The Brook," which depicts an idyllic slice of the English countryside. The speaker of the poem, the brook itself, does flow past a town, a handful of small villages, and dozens of bridges, but that is the only possible glimpse of industrialization

Tennyson provides. Of course, it's unclear if these villages are quaint, old-timey hamlets, untouched by industrialization, or if they are cropping up as part of a larger trend of concentrated, industrialized communities. The poem leaves those questions up to the reader to ponder.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "The Brook" Put to Music — Enjoy this archived copy of vintage sheet music—or even play along! (https://archive.org/details/TheBrook39682)
- More Background — Read more about Tennyson's private and public life. (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alfred-Lord-Tennyson)
- "The Brook" Read Aloud — Listen to a reading of Tennyson's "The Brook." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkYB3kMLaLA)
- Tennyson's Life — Read about how Tennyson's personal life shaped his work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/alfred-tennyson)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ALFRED LORD TENNYSON POEMS

- Crossing the Bar
- Tears, Idle Tears
- The Charge of the Light Brigade
- Ulysses

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Weeks, Rachel. "*The Brook*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 21 Dec 2018. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Weeks, Rachel. "*The Brook*." LitCharts LLC, December 21, 2018. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/alfred-lord-tennyson/the-brook.