Frost at Midnight

POEM TEXT

The Frost performs its secret ministry,
Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry
Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.
The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
Have left me to that solitude, which suits
Abstruser musings: save that at my side
My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.
'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs
And vexes meditation with its strange
And extreme silentness. Sea, hill, and wood,
This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood,
With all the numberless goings-on of life,
Inaudible as dreams! the thin blue flame
Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;
Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
Making it a companionable form,
Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
By its own moods interprets, every where
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
And makes a toy of Thought.

But O! how oft,
How oft, at school, with most believing mind,
Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars,
To watch that fluttering *stranger*! and as oft
With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt
Of my sweet birth-place, and the old church-tower,
Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang
From morn to evening, all the hot Fair-day,
So sweetly, that they stirred and haunted me
With a wild pleasure, falling on mine ear
Most like articulate sounds of things to come!
So gazed I, till the soothing things, I dreamt,
Lulled me to sleep, and sleep prolonged my dreams!
And so I brooded all the following morn,
Awed by the stern preceptor's face, mine eye
Fixed with mock study on my swimming book:
Save if the door half opened, and I snatched
A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up,
For still I hoped to see the *stranger's* face,
Townsman, or aunt, or sister more beloved,
My play-mate when we both were clothed alike!

Dear Babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,
Whose gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm,
Fill up the interspersèd vacancies
And momentary pauses of the thought!
My babe so beautiful! it thrills my heart
With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,
And think that thou shalt learn far other lore,
And in far other scenes! For I was reared
In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,
And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.
But *thou*, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself.
Great universal Teacher! he shall mould
Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple-tree, while the night-thatch
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.

SUMMARY

The winter frost secretly goes about its holy tasks without any help from the wind. The baby owl cried out loudly, and—listen!—cries out just as loud again. The other residents of

my little country house are all asleep, leaving me alone—which is fine by me, since it gives me the chance to ponder some obscure thoughts—except for my baby sleeping peacefully in a cradle next to me. It's very calm tonight! In fact, it's so calm that my thoughts are disrupted by the unusual and extreme quiet. The sea, the hills, the forest—this town full of people! The sea, the hills, the forest, with all the endless things going on inside them, are as silent as dreams! There's only a small blue flame in my fireplace, where the fire's dying, and it doesn't move. Only the film of soot on the grate of the fire place is still fluttering, the one thing in my surroundings that isn't peaceful. Its movement amid all this stillness makes me (who actually is alive) feel like I can relate to it. It's like a companion that is similar to me. My mind interprets the soot's tiny movements as reflections of my own thoughts—everywhere I look, my mind finds echoes or mirrors of itself. As a result, thought become something trivial and easily manipulated.

Oh! How often—how often!—when I was at school and my mind would believe anything and I was alert to omens, would I look deeply into the grate of the fireplace. There I watched the soot fluttering around like a strange visitor. And just as often, with my eyes open, I would have already dreamt about my hometown. I dreamt about the old church tower whose bells, the only music that those living in poverty had, would ring all day during the hot fair. These bells sounded so lovely that they filled me with an uncontrollable joy. Their sounds came to my ears just like words from the future. And so when I was at school I would look into the fire until these soothing dreams helped me fall asleep, and sleep in turn continued these dreams. And then I'd keep thinking about them all the next morning, while sitting in terror of the strict teacher's face. I'd stare straight at my book, pretending to read, while my daydreams made the words feel like they were swimming. However, if anyone opened the door just a bit, I would look up quickly and slyly, and my heart would skip a beat. I still was hoping to see someone's face, someone I didn't know, or someone from my hometown, or my aunt, or my sister, whom I loved so much—who was my play mate back when we were so young they dressed us in the same clothes.

My dear infant child, sleeping in your cradle at my side, with your gentle breaths that I can hear in this totally calm night, your breaths fill all the moments of silence and emptiness in my thoughts! My dear beautiful child! It fills me with gentle happiness to look at you and know that you won't have to grow up like I did. Instead, you'll learn other things and in other places! After all, I was raised in the big city, shut up in dark schools. I didn't see any beautiful things except for the sky and stars. But *you*, my child, you'll get to explore nature like a drifting breeze, wandering by lakes and beaches, under the cliffs of old mountains, under clouds, whose size mimics the size of lakes and beaches and cliffs. As a result, you'll see and hear the signs and words of the eternal language that God speaks. From God's realm in eternity, he teaches people how he made everything, and how everything leads back to God. He teaches everyone about everything. He will form your soul, and by teaching it make it ask more questions.

As a result, all the seasons will be pleasant to you. It will be pleasant if summer covers the earth with green, or if a robin sits and sings between clumps of snow on the empty branch of an apple tree, while mist rises from the straw roof drying under the sun. It will be pleasant whether the sound of rain dripping from the roof is heard only by the howling wind, or if the secret tasks of frost hangs the dripping rain as icicles, which silently shine in the silent moonlight.

THEMES

THE DIVINITY OF NATURE

The speaker of "Frost at Midnight" believes that people can become closer to God through nature. Since God created the natural world, the poem implies, it follows that lakes and forests and mountains are like God's language; communing with nature, then, is a way of communing with God. The divinity of nature ultimately teaches people how to find spiritual fulfillment, whether in the depths of winter or the heights of summer.

This idea that nature is the language of God becomes clearest at the end of the poem, when the speaker says that "lakes and shores / And mountain crags" are the "lovely shapes and sounds" in God's "eternal language." In other words, God communicates through the sights and sounds of nature, using the natural world to speak to human beings. More specifically, God "doth teach / Himself in all, and all things in himself." In other words, through things like clouds and mountains and lakes, God teaches people about himself, and about how everything ultimately comes from God. According to the speaker, people who study the natural world find that God is the source of all things.

The speaker seems to suggest that nature in fact teaches people the most important things about existence itself. And when people learn from God through nature, they find peace and fulfillment. The speaker believes that God can "mould" the "spirit" of those who spend time in nature. That is, in immersing themselves in the world that God created, people can fill their very souls with the language of God, which will "mould"—or shape—them positively. As a result, people can develop spiritually when they spend time in nature. For such people, "all seasons shall be sweet." Whether it is summer or winter, they have a sense of spiritual well-being because they are close to God.

Ultimately, the speaker concludes that time spent in nature is the best thing for a person's soul. God created the natural

world, and it's through this world that God speaks to people—teaching them how he created everything and is the source of all peace and fulfillment.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 8-13
- Lines 49-75

CHILDHOOD, NATURE, AND HOPE

The speaker grew up feeling lonely and isolated at an urban school, and the poem reflects the hope of many parents that their kids will have it better than they themselves did. Holding his "cradled infant," the speaker talks about wanting his child to grow up amid nature, which he argues will be much more fulfilling than city life.

Speaking to his infant child, the speaker presents being raised in "the great city" as a stifling, deeply lonely experience. His descriptions create a claustrophobic atmosphere; he was "pent 'mid cloisters dim / And saw naught lovely but the sky and stars." In other words, when the speaker was a kid, the city crowded out all beautiful things except the sky above. Making matters worse, the speaker went to a school in the city where the teacher was a "stern preceptor[]." Clearly feeling lonely and isolated in this urban environment, the speaker would spend all day hoping that a "Townsman, or aunt, or sister" would show up. For him, the city was the worst place to spend childhood.

The speaker also clearly loves his child, and apparently mentions all this because he wants something different for that child—specifically, a youth spent closer to nature. Instead of leaving home to go school in the city, the speaker imagines the child having a youth filled with freedom and fulfillment within the natural world.

This speaker imagines, for example, that his child will "wander like a breeze / By lakes and sandy shores." In other words, the speaker's child shall be free as wind, and be immersed in beautiful natural sights. Enthusiastically describing such a childhood, the speaker clearly believes it will be "sweet" in "all seasons"—the best youth the speaker's child could have.

Instead of having a "stern preceptor" (i.e., a strict teacher) the speaker imagines his child being taught by God himself. In nature, according to the speaker, his child will "see and hear / The lovely shapes and sounds" of God. In other words, God will teach the speaker's child through the sights and sounds of nature. The speaker's child will feel free and spiritually fulfilled, wandering through beautiful nature and learning from God himself.

It thus fills the speaker with "tender gladness" to think that his child won't have to grow up in the city and go to such a repressive boarding school. Instead, his child will have freedom out in nature, where God himself will teach the child everything that needs to be known.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-7
- Lines 24-66

ENVIRONMENT AND STATE OF MIND

For the speaker, environments have a big effect on how people think and feel. Throughout the poem, the speaker describes how surroundings can both guide and interrupt one's thoughts. The mind is intimately linked to its surroundings, the poem implies, and as such different environments can conjure different moods, bring up old memories, and even create anticipation for the future.

From the beginning of the poem, the speaker emphasizes the way that his environment affects how he thinks, sometimes helping his thoughts progress, other times hindering them from getting anywhere. For example, the speaker begins by describing the winter night, with its slow onset of frost and the "owlet's cry." The "solitude" of such a night "suits" the speaker, granting the space to think. As a result, the speaker's thoughts depend on this wintry environment—after all, the poem is called "Frost at Midnight."

Soon after, however, the speaker also describes how this kind of night "disturbs / And vexes meditations"—that is, sometimes it interrupts or frustrates trains of thoughts. Here, the speaker captures how environments can impede people's thoughts, so that their minds wander, or they have a hard time getting into the right headspace. The beginning of the poem, then, captures the two extremes when it comes to how surroundings can affect people's thoughts: either helping them work through things, or distracting them at every turn.

The speaker's environment also leads him to recall powerful memories that are saturated with a sense of place. These memories capture how people's environments can both transport them into the past and be full of anticipation for the future. For instance, soot in the fireplace leads the speaker to recall looking at soot as a child: at boarding school, the speaker would stare into the fireplace and dream about his "sweet birth place" (his home). In other words, the sooty fireplace is associated with memories of looking into the fire as a kid. This moment captures how surroundings can trigger memories, and how memories are often soaked in impressions of a particular place.

Other times, places can seem to conjure the future. For instance, the sound of church bells on "the hot Fair-day [...] stirred and haunted" the speaker. The bells seemed to be full of "articulate sounds of things to come." In other words, the fair day and its pervasive bells made the speaker feel anticipation,

sensing that exciting things were going to happen in the future.

In the present moment, though, the adult speaker greatly values serene environments. The poem ends on tranquil images of the natural world that are meant to resonate with the reader, capturing how an environment can create a sense of peace. In the last stanza, the speaker lyrically conjures different seasons. The speaker describes, for example, “summer cloth[ing] the general earth / With greenness,” and “silent icicles / Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.” These images are imbued with a deep sense of stillness and peace. It’s as if these final lines create an environment and state of mind *for the reader*, so that the reader shares the speaker’s tranquility. By creating this shared environment for both reader and speaker, the poem ends on a deep, resonant feeling of peace.

Throughout the poem, then, the speaker describes how his surroundings guide his thoughts, transporting him through many memories and moods and concluding with the images of the happiness that natural surroundings provide.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-75

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

The Frost performs its secret ministry,
Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry
Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.
The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
Have left me to that solitude, which suits
Abstruser musings:

"Frost at Midnight" is one of Coleridge's most famous poems, and is often considered among the best of his so-called "conversation poems." Compared to other poems written at the time—and to most poems written in English before then—Coleridge's conversation poems have a distinctly personal feel to them. In "Frost at Midnight," a speaker mulls over his life and surroundings late at night, talking about things as they happen outside or as they pop into his head. As a result, the poem feels like a piece of an intimate conversation the speaker is having with the reader.

The poem takes place in a cottage late at night. The speaker is up while everyone else has gone to bed. His young child is sleeping in a cradle next to him. Outside, it's winter, and "Frost performs its secret ministry." In other words, frost (a thin coat of ice) is forming on the landscape.

"[M]inistry" refers to the tasks of a minister (i.e., a priest). Right off the bat, then, the speaker hints at the feeling that there is something sacred about nature. This sacredness has a "secret" quality to it, in that it's happening outside, unobserved, while a baby owl cries again and again. Apart from this cry, the night is mysteriously still and quiet—so still that it's as if the speaker can sense the frost forming. As a result of this stillness, the speaker can let his mind delve into "abstruser musings"—that is, into obscure thoughts, the kind of things people ponder when they're up late at night.

The poem is written in iambic pentameter, a meter of five iambs per line (feet with a da-DUM rhythm):

Unhelped | by a- | ny wind. | The owl- | et's cry

Although the speaker follows this meter relatively closely, it's also pretty unobtrusive. In fact, the meter lends the poem a relaxed, spoken feel. It doesn't feel like the speaker is trying to dress things up too much. Instead, the speaker describes things as they happen or pop into his mind, such as when the speaker hears the baby owl's cry, "The owlet's cry / Came loud," and then hears it a second time: "and hark, again! loud as before." Here, it's as if the poem is happening real time, as if the reader is sitting next to the speaker and his baby in their warm, cozy cottage.

This conversational feel doesn't mean that the speaker doesn't strive for evocative or precise language. In fact, throughout the poem, the speaker describes his surroundings very carefully. Yet he doesn't make these descriptions overly flowery. Instead, he just tries capture, in relatively unadorned language, how different images appear to him in the moment.

Of course, no one these days talks like this. But while the poem's language may feel elevated and composed to modern-day readers, to Coleridge's contemporary readers it felt daringly informal. Many had a hard time seeing its beauty. So, beneath the friendliness and cozy descriptions, there is radical innovation and a measure of risk-taking—the speaker is going out on a limb to address the reader in this way, extending a perhaps improper invitation to his own intimate thoughts.

LINES 6-11

save that at my side
My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.
'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs
And vexes meditation with its strange
And extreme silentness. Sea, hill, and wood,
This populous village!

Having set the scene, the speaker adds in some more specific details that complicate things a bit. First off, the speaker introduces his child: "at my side / My cradled infant slumbers peacefully." The speaker is a new parent sitting next to his sleeping baby.

Meanwhile, the speaker begins to feel that the night is actually a little *too* calm. It is "so calm, that is disturbs / And vexes meditation." There's something "strange / And extreme" about

the night's silence, which actually makes it a little hard to concentrate. Though the speaker wants to engage in "abstruser musings"—deep thoughts—something about the night keeps interrupting or distracting him. As a result, the poem will not follow a straight and logical course, but instead twist and turn as the speaker's mind drifts through memories, thoughts, and observations.

Here, the speaker abruptly turns away from his inner "musings" to evoke the surrounding landscape: "Sea, hill, and wood, / This populous village!" In this moment, the speaker seems to procrastinate—rather than delving into deep thoughts, the speaker directs his attention outward.

As before, the speaker continues in blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter:

My cra- | dled in- | fant slum- | bers peace- | fully.

Here, the straightforward da-DUM rhythm captures the calmness of the night and the lulling sound of a peacefully sleeping baby. For the most part, the speaker stays true to this meter.

Sometimes, however, he does change it up for emphasis. For instance, this is line 10:

And ex- | treme sil- | entness. | Sea, hill, | and wood,

Employing two pyrrhics (da-da) as well as two spondees (DUM-DUM), the speaker creates a choppy rhythm. This captures the sudden change in direction of the speaker's thoughts, like momentary choppiness as a video refreshes.

LINES 11-16

Sea, and hill, and wood,
With all the numberless goings-on of life,
Inaudible as dreams! the thin blue flame
Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;
Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.

The speaker once again invokes the landscape—the "Sea, and hill, and wood." Speaking off the cuff, the speaker repeats this phrase as he gathers his thoughts. With the extra "and" the speaker slows down a little, considering each word individually: "Sea," "hill," "wood." The speaker thinks about how each of these—the ocean, the hills, and the forest—are full of life, even at night. Yet on such a quiet night, it's impossible to hear all that life. Anything happening outside the speaker's cottage is as inaccessible as somebody else's dreams.

Feeling isolated from these other lives, the speaker returns to his own existence. He gazes at the remains of the fire in his fireplace, where all that's left is a small blue flame that barely seems to move. In fact, the only thing that moves in the speaker's world is the film of soot (ash) that has gathered on the grate of the fireplace. This soot "flutters" slightly, making it "the sole unquiet thing." "[U]nquiet" can mean *not quiet*, but it can also mean *uneasy*. In other words, this soot has a sort of anxious quality to it.

This moment of close observation of the speaker's humble surroundings is a signature move of Coleridge and associated writers (such as William Wordsworth). These writers, who are now generally called Romantic, believed that artists should try to depict what the world around them—especially the natural world—was actually like. Even though these artists also explored intense feeling, inner experiences, and even outright fantasy, they always returned to the natural world and careful observation as the root of all these things.

Coleridge demonstrates that belief in this poem. Although the speaker is about to follow his thoughts through a complex train of memories and hopes, that train begins with this description of the fireplace. The speaker isn't fancy in his description of the fireplace, but he is precise, allowing the reader to visualize it. This isn't a generic fireplace, but the speaker's particular fireplace at this particular place and time. This departs from much poetry of Coleridge's time, which tended to write more generalized and abstract descriptions, often referencing classical mythology (for instance) instead of trying to create concrete images.

LINES 17-19

Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
Making it a companionable form,

Having described the soot's "film, which fluttered on the grate," the speaker now compares that soot to his own mind. Just as the soot is "unquiet"—that is, not only *not quiet*, but also *uneasy* or *anxious*—the speaker's mind is similarly anxious.

The speaker feels a connection to the soot's "motion in this hush of nature," its fluttering amid the calm of night. More specifically, the speaker feels "dim sympathies" with the soot. Here, "dim" means *cloudy* or *obscure* (think back to "abstruser musings") and "sympathy" is a feeling of similarity or relatability. In other words, the speaker's kinship with the soot is vague, mysterious. This kinship makes the soot a "companionable form," something like a companion or friend.

The speaker doesn't just observe the soot from a detached perspective, then, but feels an emotional connection with it. Again, this is the kind of perception that Coleridge and other Romantics preferred, believing that engaging with nature on an emotional level could help people understand both themselves and the world around them. With everyone else asleep, the speaker instead turns towards a distinctly non-human object, a thin mass of soot, as his conversation partner. In fact, this flame isn't even alive!

The speaker uses consonance to capture the movement of the

soot:

> Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
> Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
> Making it a companionable form,

The sibilant and near-sibilant /s/, /sh/, and /ch/ sounds in the first two lines capture the hushed feeling of the scene, as if the speaker is whispering. Meanwhile, the /m/ sound throughout these lines links the speaker ("me") and with the "motion" of the "companionable form," so that the speaker and fireplace form one cohesive tableau.

LINES 20-23

> *Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit*
> *By its own moods interprets, every where*
> *Echo or mirror seeking of itself,*
> *And makes a toy of Thought.*

At the end of the first stanza, the speaker continues to describe the connection he feels with the soot. The speaker says that his mind interprets the flame as reflecting its own moods. In other words, whatever state of mind that speaker is in—happy, anxious, peaceful, etc.—he'll feel like the soot captures that state. More specifically, the speaker refers to "the idling Spirit" here. "Spirit" is the speaker's mind or imagination, and "idling" means *unoccupied*. The speaker says his idle mind "By its own moods interprets," meaning that the mind interprets things according to its own moods.

That is, the speaker's idle mind seizes upon anything that grabs its attention, loading that thing (here, the soot) with its own baggage. The human mind wants to find an "Echo" or "mirror" in the surrounding world; it looks for things that will reflect its own moods, thoughts, and desires. It's commonly thought that the Romantic writers loaded up the world around them with their own emotions, making the natural world a kind of "mirror." Note, however, that's not quite what's going on here. Rather, the speaker says the human mind "seek[s]" for such mirrors. People *try* to find things in the world that will reflect their own states of mind, but that doesn't mean they find such things everywhere, or even that they should.

In fact, as a result of such seeking, thought becomes a "toy," a manipulatable and insignificant thing. In other words, when people try to see themselves in everything, they end up having flimsy and inconsequential thoughts—they can't think too clearly anymore. With regard to his particular situation, the speaker suggests that by identifying so strongly with the soot, his mind has become like the soot: fluttering, thin.

LINES 24-29

> *But O! how oft,*
> *How oft, at school, with most believing mind,*
> *Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars,*
> *To watch that fluttering stranger*
> *! and as oft*
> *With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt*
> *Of my sweet birth-place,*

The leap from the first to the second verse paragraph, or stanza, represents a leap in the speaker's mind. The fluttering soot takes the speaker back to his schoolboy days, when he used to stare at the soot and daydream.

The speaker begins, "But O! how oft, / How often, at school." This "But" acts as rebuttal to the speaker's earlier assertion that identifying with the soot makes a "toy" of the speaker's thought. Instead, the speaker is going to assert a meaningful relationship with the soot. As a boy, the speaker looked at the soot with "most believing mind"—that is, looked at it earnestly. To him, the soot seemed "Presageful," it seemed like some kind of sign about the future. According to Coleridge, such films of soot were colloquially called *strangers* in England because they were supposed to be omens signaling that some old friend would be arriving. It makes sense, then, that the young speaker looked into the soot with a feeling of anticipation. The repetition (more specifically epizeuxis) of "how oft / How oft" captures the speaker's strong emotions here.

It's also telling that the speaker dreamt of his "sweet birth-place," his hometown. The speaker was at boarding school and feeling homesick. If the film of soot is supposed to signal the arrival of some absent friend, then this must have made the speaker think of all the people left behind in his hometown. In fact, the young speaker would dream of being home even when he was still awake and his eyes were open. Up late at night, he stared into the fire while his mind drifted through memories.

Sound familiar? That's because this is what the adult speaker was just doing in the first stanza. Thus, although the poem appears to make a sudden leap here, in retrospect it's actually quite logical in its own way: the adult speaker stares into the fire, drifting through memories, which makes him remember doing the same thing as a child.

LINES 29-34

> *and the old church-tower,*
> *Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang*
> *From morn to evening, all the hot Fair-day,*
> *So sweetly, that they stirred and haunted me*
> *With a wild pleasure, falling on mine ear*
> *Most like articulate sounds of things to come!*

Stanza 2 began as a memory of the speaker's boarding school days. The speaker recalled gazing into the fire as a young boy, dreaming of home. Now the poem dives into the young speaker's memories of home. These next lines become a memory of a memory, the adult speaker remembering being a boy remembering life at home.

Specifically, the speaker dreams about the "Fair-day" in his town, a festive time when everyone was out and the church bells rang all day. These bells are the focal point of the speaker's memory, just as the soot in the fireplace was previously the center of attention. The imagery, then, shifts from sight (the fluttering soot) to sound, conjuring the quality of church bells ringing music that resounds all over the town.

These church bells ring "From morn to evening"—that is, all day—and are "the poor man's only music." In an era before mp3 files, CDs, or records, the only way to experience music was to hear it live. For those who couldn't afford to go to concerts, church was one of the main ways they got to listen to music. For common folk, then, the church wasn't just a spiritual fixture but an aesthetic one as well. Even just going to a festival meant that the church enlivened the day with music and a sense of celebration.

This mixing of church, music, and everyday life signals one of the speaker's more general beliefs: that spirituality, art, and people's surroundings are all intertwined. Here, the speaker addresses this idea by describing how the bells affect him. The speaker says, "they stirred and haunted me / With a wild pleasure." The bells create a powerful and mysterious feeling in the speaker. To him, the sounds of the bells almost seem like "articulate sounds of things to come." Put bluntly, the music sounds like words from the future. The music is, as the speaker put it in line 26, "Presageful."

The environment's ability to awaken powerful emotions is a central element of Coleridge's poetic philosophy. More specifically, Coleridge is interested in this feeling "of things to come," a sense of things beyond oneself. Coleridge and his friend the poet William Wordsworth devoted a lot of energy to investigating how such feelings get awakened. They believed that this feeling of anticipation isn't just for some future event, but that it was a sudden awareness of the deeper nature of reality, a glimpse of God.

LINES 35-39

So gazed I, till the soothing things, I dreamt,
Lulled me to sleep, and sleep prolonged my dreams!
And so I brooded all the following morn,
Awed by the stern preceptor's face, mine eye
Fixed with mock study on my swimming book:

Now, the young speaker returns from his memory of "the hot Fair-day" back to his place by the fire at boarding school. Daydreaming of home by the fire, the speaker begins to fall asleep, where his dreams of home continue. As a result, sleep "prolong[s]" the speaker's dreams. The speaker spends all evening and all night dreaming about his hometown. Even in the classroom the next day, the speaker continues to daydream about his home.

As the speaker describes his daydreaming in the classroom, he paints a picture of the kind of environment he was educated in. His teacher is a "stern preceptor[]" whose "face" the speaker feels "Awed by." In other words, the speaker has a strict teacher who scares him. Yet this strictness doesn't inspire the speaker to work harder. Instead, he engages in "mock study," only pretending to read. This description hints at the experience of being a young English boy attending school in the late 1700s. It wasn't a fun, colorful, or happy experience. It doesn't even appear that the speaker necessarily learned all that much. Instead, school was stifling, even repressive.

The speaker finds it hard to focus on his reading, so that the text in his book appears to be "swimming." Just as the adult speaker is easily distracted, finding it hard to continue down a single train of thought, so too does the young speaker's mind wander. In contrast with the strict requirements of the teacher, the speaker emphasizes people's natural tendency to daydream, to let their imaginations carry them away. Although Coleridge himself was very well-read, he valued his own imagination just as much as book learning, and he had a troubled and conflicted relationship with schooling. Ultimately, he doesn't seem to have been convinced that English educational methods were sufficient for developing people's mind and souls, something he begins to hint at in these descriptions.

The meter in lines 36-36 mixes bumpy and smooths rhythms, capturing both the "Lull[]" of the dreams and fireplace as well as the speaker's deep feelings of homesickness and isolation:

> So gazed | I, till | the soo- | thing things, | I dreamt,
> Lulled me | to sleep, | and sleep | prolonged | my dreams!

The second halves of each of these lines are regular iambic pentameter, capturing the "soothing" effect of the speaker's dreams. The first halves of the lines are a little rockier, however. Each begins with a spondee (DUM-DUM) (though it's possible to read "So gazed"as an iamb), and the first follows that with a trochee (DUM-da). This rougher rhythm conveys the speaker's turmoil as he longs for home and strives to satisfy that longing in his dreams.

LINES 40-44

Save if the door half opened, and I snatched
A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up,
For still I hoped to see the
stranger's
face,
Townsman, or aunt, or sister more beloved,
My play-mate when we both were clothed alike!

At the end of the first stanza, the speaker looks up from his "swimming book" as he glances at a "door half opened." Any time the door to the classroom opened even just a little, the speaker stole a quick look, hoping it was someone he knew.

The speaker describes how his "heart leaped up," or skipped a beat, hoping to see a familiar face. The speaker reintroduces the term "*stranger*" here, a colloquial name for the film of soot that forms on the grate of the fireplace, and which was supposed to signal that an old friend would be arriving. The speaker hopes this means that someone from his old town, or his aunt, or best of all his sister, will be arriving. The speaker's sister is most "beloved" of all these people, since she had been his "play-mate" when they were little children.

Before the 20th century, it was common to dress very young children, regardless of gender, in dresses. Effectively, babies, toddlers, and youngsters wore gender-neutral clothing. As a result, the speaker and his sister "were clothed alike" as little kids. The speaker looks back fondly on these early days. From his isolation in school, he longs to for the companionship of his sister again.

The speaker uses repetition, specifically diacope and polyptoton, to capture his momentary excitement at the door opening:

> Save if the door half opened, and I snatched
> A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up,
> For still I hoped to see the *stranger's* face,
> Townsman, or aunt, or sister more beloved,

The repetition of "and," "still," and "or" create a breathless feeling, each repeated word extending the sentence just a bit more as the speaker describes his thought process.

LINES 45-48

> *Dear Babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,*
> *Whose gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm,*
> *Fill up the interspersèd vacancies*
> *And momentary pauses of the thought!*

In the third stanza, the speaker turns from his memories back to the present moment. It's as if those memories have run their course, and thinking about himself and his sister as babies makes the speaker return to his own baby.

So, back in the present, the speaker observes his sleeping child, "[w]hose gentle breathings [are] heard in this deep calm." Basically, the speaker pauses and listens to his baby breathe. The baby's breath is very "gentle," yet because the night is such a "deep calm" that speaker can still hear his baby clearly.

These breaths:

> Fill up the interspersèd vacancies
> And momentary pauses of the thought!

In other words, the sound of the baby's breathing fills the speaker's mind when his thoughts go blank. Having come to the end of a sequence of memories, the speaker seems to lose his train of thought and instead lets this gentle sound fill his mind.

This moment captures the speaker's love for his child. Sitting up late by his sleeping child's cradle, he shares a tender moment with the "Dear Babe." The way the baby's breath fills the speaker's mind also captures the change of perspective that comes with being a parent. The speaker's life is now entangled with that of his child. As his child's breath mingle with his thoughts, it's as if their two beings merge in some way. There's a deep sense of spiritual responsibility here, one that the speaker will try to address in the coming lines.

This sense of entanglement is also captured through the stanza's use of apostrophe: the speaker directly addresses his sleeping child as "Dear Babe." The child is asleep and can't respond in any way. This use of apostrophe captures the speaker's powerful emotions, as if he can't hold back his love and address his child in this intimate manner.

LINES 49-54

> *My babe so beautiful! it thrills my heart*
> *With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,*
> *And think that thou shalt learn far other lore,*
> *And in far other scenes! For I was reared*
> *In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,*
> *And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.*

In these lines, the speaker directly address his hopes for his child. The speaker talks about the kind of childhood he had, and wishes something better for his child.

The speaker says "it thrills my heart / With tender gladness" to think that his child won't have the same kind of education as he had. The speaker is exceedingly happy that his child will "learn far other lore, / And in far other scenes!" "[L]ore" is traditional knowledge that has been passed down for generations, often with connotations of being spiritual, legendary, mystical, or even occult. Here, the speaker implicitly seems to contrast his strict and formal education with something more spiritual. Furthermore, he hoes child will learn this lore in a totally different setting than the speaker did. The speaker grew up in "the great city," confined among buildings so that the only beautiful things he saw were "the sky and the stars."

The speaker also conveys his dislike of the city. For him, the city is associated with his unhappy time at school (Coleridge himself went to school in London). Additionally, he doesn't think cities are beautiful. There's not much nature in them, for one. Early industrial London could indeed be a bleak place, as factory smoke began to fill the sky and water became more polluted. The speaker implies that were he lived there weren't even any trees, and certainly none of the mountains or lake shores that he references in the next section of the poem.

Again in this section the speaker employs apostrophe, once more addressing his child directly, even though the "babe" is asleep. This kind of address captures the intimate thoughts

parents have about their children. The speaker's heart is full of love and his head is full of hopes for his child. The child can't hear any of this, but that doesn't stop the speaker from carrying on.

LINES 55-59

But
thou
, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
And mountain crags:

The speaker begins to elaborate on his vision for his child's youth and education, again beginning with apostrophe. Instead of attending a stuffy boarding school in a depressing city, the speaker imagines his child being as free as "a breeze" to explore nature. His child will get to see the beautiful sights of "lakes and sandy shores" as well as "the crags," or cliffs, "Of ancient mountain." Above, the huge clouds will mirror the hugeness of the water and beaches and cliffs.

Here, the speaker emphasizes two things that he values very highly: freedom and nature. In the speaker's formulation here, these things seem to be intertwined. Being in nature gives people more freedom, and having freedom gives people the chance to get the most out of nature. Furthermore, the speaker implies that roaming about in nature with a sense of freedom is in fact a better education that going to a proper school. In school, there are only "stern preceptor[s]" and "swimming book[s]," while in nature there is "lore," or spiritual knowledge.

In emphasizing the superiority of nature, the speaker suddenly opens up the poem's imagery. Up until now, everything had been confined. The speaker began by describing a single room in a little cottage, then the confined rooms of boarding school and the cramped feeling of the city. Now, the imagery zooms out. The speaker evokes giant lakes and mountains, conjuring grand landscapes and wide open nature. After the claustrophobia of the preceding imagery, this turn offers a breath of fresh air. And that's exactly the speaker's point: nature is much better for people's minds and souls than the cramped conditions of cities and classrooms.

LINES 59-65

so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself.
Great universal Teacher! he shall mould
Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.

Having evoked the kinds of landscapes he wants his child to grow up in, the speaker describes why he thinks those landscapes are spiritually beneficial. According to the speaker, nature is the language of God.

More specifically, the speaker says that the "lovely shapes and sounds" of nature are part of God's "eternal language." These shapes and sounds are "intelligible," meaning they can be understood. They are like symbols and words. In the speaker's vision of reality, the natural landscape is like a giant text or conversation that God is having with mortals. Although God exists in the realm of "eternity," the everlasting realm of Heaven, he speaks to humans with nature and teaches them the right way to live.

God's teachings, according to the speaker, have two components that are mirror images of each other. He teaches "Himself in all" and teaches "all things in himself." That is:

1. Each individual thing in nature provides some lesson about God.
2. God is the ultimate root of—or reason for—all things.

As a result of these two components, nature (and even more broadly, reality itself) and teaching become powerfully intertwined. It seems that God created nature as a means of teaching humans. God is the "Great Universal Teacher" because he uses the universe to teach everyone about everything.

The speaker has radical ideas about nature and education, and big hopes for his child. He believes that spending time in nature allows God to "mould," or shape, one's "spirit." In other words, people can develop their souls and become more enlightened beings simply by spending time in nature, studying the "eternal language" of God. Doing so will give people more spiritual satisfaction, and it will also lead them to ask more questions: "by giving make [them] ask." Thus, for the speaker, a spiritual education in nature is never over. It always provides sustenance for people's souls, but it also always leads people on to deeper and deeper questions as they ponder the nature of existence.

LINES 66-71

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple-tree, while the night-thatch
Smokes in the sun-thaw;

In the final stanza, the speaker elaborates what he thinks the results will be of a life spent in spiritual communion with God and nature. In particular, he thinks it will lead to satisfaction and peace in all seasons. "Therefore all season shall be sweet to thee," says the speaker. And rather than going on to abstractly describe those feelings, the speaker instead puts his faith in

imagery. The stanza describes different seasonal scenes, implicitly conveying how each of these scenes creates its own unique sense of peace for an enlightened observer.

First, the speaker describes the greenery of summer: "Whether the summer clothe the general earth / With greenness." Here, the green leaves of summer metaphorically become the earth's clothing. By evoking "the general earth"—roughly, the whole world—the speaker again conjures large landscapes. It's easy to image rolling green hills under a summer sun. Additionally, in comparing leaves to clothes, the speaker suggests a sense of wellness, of being well-clothed and well-cared for. That is one kind of peace.

Next, the speaker a different, more wintry sense of peace. He imagines seeing:

> [...] the redbreast sit and sing
> Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
> Of mossy apple-tree [...]

Here, a red robin stands out among the white snow and black bark of a branch in the winter, and its song stands out just as the "owlet's cry" did at the beginning of the poem. The lush imagery of this description ("tufts of snow," "mossy apple-tree") captures how even winter has its own richness, its own "sweet[ness]." Although the branch is "bare" of leaves, it still has the beauty of the robin and the snow.

Meanwhile, in this same scene, things are melting under the winter sun. The "night-thatch"—the frozen straw roof of a cottage—"Smokes in the sun-thaw." Mist rises from the roof as the sun melts its snow and ice. Again, there is a sense of life, beauty, and peace. This isn't quite the same peace as that of summer, but it is "sweet" nonetheless.

LINES 71-75

> *whether the eave-drops fall*
> *Heard only in the trances of the blast,*
> *Or if the secret ministry of frost*
> *Shall hang them up in silent icicles,*
> *Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.*

In the final lines of the poem, the speaker comes full circle. First, he evokes the harsher experiences of nature: "the eave-drops fall / Heard only in the trances of the blast." Here, raindrops fall from the roof during a storm. Nothing can hear them amid the howling wind except the wind itself.

Evoking the harshness of the wind, the speaker calls it "the blast." And yet even this rainstorm has a measure of serenity to it, captured by the word "trances"—that is, a state of something like hypnosis. In other words, there's a kind of meditative quality to the storm, eradicating all the senses yet, again, not without its own peculiar form of tranquility.

The next phrase is where the speaker comes full circle:

> Or if the secret ministry of frost
> Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
> Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.

Recall that Frost's "secret ministry" was also in the first line of the poem. By repeating this phrase in slightly modified form, like a kind of refrain, the speaker explicitly signals that he's come back to where he began. This circularity creates a feeling of satisfaction. It assures the reader that the poem has had some sort of structure all along. Although the speaker's mind has wandered, it turns out that he was actually progressing through a meditation on childhood, parenting, education, nature, and God.

By returning to the poem's initial imagery, the speaker reveals how he has changed in the meantime, how he has deepened his understanding of nature. Now he zooms in on what exactly the frost's "secrete ministry" is. The speaker personifies the frost as hanging frozen drops of rain as "silent icicles" from the roof. One might even picture a little frosty creature (e.g., Jack Frost) literally hanging icicles drop-by-drop from the house.

Finally, the speaker ends on an image that is equally, if more subtly, magical. He describes the icicles "Quietly shining to the quiet Moon." What's magical is that the speaker describes the shining as "quiet," because shining is a visual image, while "quietly" has to do with sound. The speaker poetically marries sound and sight in this image, as if there is a quiet sound made by the shining ice. Additionally, he conjures the similar silver appearances of both the moon and the moonlit ice.

Altogether, the picture captures a kind of reverberation between icicles and moon. Very different from summer's "clothe[s]" of "greenness," this image also captures a deep and powerful sense of peace. After a claustrophobic urban childhood, the adult speaker now feels a reverberating tranquility with the world around him, a tranquility he hopes his child will someday feel as well.

SYMBOLS

FROST

In "Frost at Midnight," Frost symbolizes the sacredness or divinity of nature.

Images of frost bookend the poem. At the beginning, the speaker says, "The Frost performs its secret ministry, / Unhelped by any wind." "[M]inistry" is the key word here. It refers to the duties of a minister, or priest. In other words, the speaker is personifying frost as a priest. As a result, the frost seems to be up to something that is both sacred and mysterious.

On a literal level, all that's happening is that ice is forming silently outside. But for the speaker, there's something holy

about this ice. As he goes on to elaborate, the speaker believes that all of nature is part of the "eternal language" of God. As a result, even frost can come to seem like one of God's priests.

At the end of the poem, the speaker describes how:

> [...] the secret ministry of frost
> Shall hang [rain drops] up in silent icicles,
> Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.

Here, the speaker fleshes out what exactly frost's "secret ministry" is, whimsically imagining the priestly frost hanging icicles drop by frozen drop from the edges of the roof. As before, this image suggests that even the formation of icicles is part of the sacred language of God. The image conveys a sense of "sweet" peace, a sense that anyone who feels close to God is also close to nature, and vice-versa.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "The Frost performs its secret ministry, / Unhelped by any wind."
- **Lines 73-75:** "Or if the secret ministry of frost / Shall hang them up in silent icicles, / Quietly shining to the quiet Moon."

SOOT

The film of soot in the fireplace symbolizes the speaker's own mind and is also specifically linked to his memories of isolation at boarding school.

In the first stanza, the speaker describes the soot as "the sole unquiet thing" in the cabin. It "flutters" with "puny flaps and freaks." These erratic movements make the speaker think of his own mind. The soot is like an "Echo or mirror" of his "Spirit." He feels that he, like soot, keeps fluttering around in his thoughts. Rather than thinking clearly and deeply, and rather than achieving a feeling of stillness and peace, the speaker's mind is anxious, unsettled, jumpy. Thus, this early description of the soot reflects how the poem itself will progress, not logically or linearly, but in unpredictable fits and starts.

Additionally, the soot is linked to the speaker's memories of boyhood, particularly boarding school. At school, he would also stare into the fire, dreaming about his hometown. He was homesick. According to Coleridge, the film of soot that forms on a grate is colloquially known as the *stranger*, and it's supposed to signal the arrival of an old friend. The speaker hoped it might signal the arrival of someone from his home, perhaps his sister. Again, then, the soot captures something about the speaker's mind: this time, the power of his school day memories and the sense of isolation associated with them.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-27:** "Only that film, which fluttered on the grate, / Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing. / Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature / Gives it dim sympathies with me who live, / Making it a companionable form, / Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit / By its own moods interprets, every where / Echo or mirror seeking of itself, / And makes a toy of Thought. / But O! how oft, / How oft, at school, with most believing mind, / Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars, / To watch that fluttering / stranger / !"

CHURCH BELLS

In the speaker's memories of his home town, church bells symbolize the connection between art, religion, and the environment, as well as how external environments can evoke powerful feelings within people.

As the speaker mentions in line 30, church bells were "the poor man's only music." In this era before recorded music, people who couldn't afford to hear live music mainly got to hear it at church. This means that, for such people, art and religion were closely connected.

Additionally, in this case, music isn't heard at the church but out in the town as the church bells ring. This music fills the air, soaking the environment in its suggestive sound. As a result, art, religion, and the physical environment begin to fuse. This provides an early example for the speaker of how all these things can be connected. After all, the poem "Frost at Midnight" itself is an attempt to use art to talk about how God and nature are connected.

Additionally, the sound of the bells evokes a powerful feeling in the speaker; the bells "stirred and haunted me, / With a wild pleasure," he says. In fact, the bells seem full of the "articulate sounds of things to come." That is, to the young speaker, the bells sound like words from the future. Here, then, the sound of church bells symbolizes how environments can suggest things beyond themselves, such as the future (and later, God), awakening powerful feelings in people.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 29-34:** "the old church-tower, / Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang / From morn to evening, all the hot Fair-day, / So sweetly, that they stirred and haunted me / With a wild pleasure, falling on mine ear / Most like articulate sounds of things to come!"

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

Apostrophe is a central device in the second half of "Frost at Midnight." Beginning in the third stanza, the speaker addresses his sleeping infant directly. Although the baby is sleeping, and so doesn't hear or respond to this address, this apostrophe nonetheless conveys the speaker's deep love and hope for his child. (Note that while the entire third to fourth stanzas are apostrophe, we've specifically highlighted the moments where the speaker explicitly begins and repeats this address—"Dear babe," etc.)

The introduction of apostrophe in the third stanza represents a significant shift in the poem. In the first two stanzas, the speaker isn't explicitly talking to anyone. He simply begins by describing the night: "The Frost performs its secret ministry, / Unhelped by any wind." As with so many lyric poems, the speaker is basically talking to the reader. In fact, the speaker talks as if the reader is right there with him, as when he describes the cry of a baby owl: "The owlet's cry / Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before." In effect, the speaker asks the reader to listen as the owl cries out again. The speaker acts as if the reader can hear the owl too, as if the reader is sitting next to him in the cottage. The first half of the poem, then, becomes like one part of late night conversation between speaker and reader—one reason that this poem is typically classified as one of Coleridge's so-called *conversation poems*.

This changes in the second half of the poem. At the beginning of the third stanza, the speaker directly address his child: "Dear Babe, that sleepest cradled by my side." And again a few lines later: "My babe so beautiful!" And again "But *thou*, my babe!" Throughout the rest of the poem, the speaker talks specifically to his child, telling the baby about his life, his views on religion and education, and his hopes for the child. The poem shifts gear from the speaker's reflections on his own life and feelings of isolation (such as sitting up at night while everyone is asleep, or being homesick at boarding school as a child). Now, the speaker devotes his attention to another life, the life of his child.

Of course, the sleeping infant doesn't hear the speaker. As a result, this apostrophe isn't meant to literally communicate with the child. Rather it represents a change in the speaker's mindset as he opens himself up to hopes about nature and spirituality. It functions almost as a kind of prayer or blessing, in which the speaker articulates certain goals for his child—both so that the speaker will be better able to achieve them, and perhaps hoping that God will hear and make them come true.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 45:** "Dear Babe,"
- **Line 49:** "My babe so beautiful!"
- **Lines 55-55:** "But / thou / , my babe!"
- **Line 66:** "Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,"

ALLITERATION

"Frost at Midnight" is usually considered one of Coleridge's so-called *conversation poems*, meaning the speaker talks to the reader as if having a conversation. In comparison to other poetry of the time, the language is plainer and more informal. As a result, alliteration doesn't play a very noticeable role. And even when it does appear, it's often in a toned-down manner.

All the same, this toned-down alliteration (some of which we've highlighted here) is still crucial for how the poem functions. It allows the speaker bring out the beauty in poem's relatively plainspoken or simple language. Additionally, it helps the speaker draw attention to moments of heightened emotion and specific images.

The first four lines don't use much alliteration. Rather, they convey a rustic plainness, so that the language almost sounds like prose. Then in lines 5-7, however, the speaker introduces /s/ alliteration (a form of sibilance):

> Have left me to that solitude, which suits
> Abstruser musings: save that at my side
> My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.

This repetition of the /s/ sound (bolstered by the consonance of "suits," "Abstruser," and "peacefully") heightens the language's rhythm. It's as if the speaker introduces it to assure the skeptical reader that this is in fact still a poem—that even this new kind of informal writing can have its own lyrical quality to it. Additionally, the quietness of the /s/ sound helps the speaker evoke the solitude and his "slumber[ing]" child, weaving a unified picture of the scene.

Sometimes, repeated sounds draw out the speaker's excitement, such as when the speaker exclaims "My babe so beautiful!" Other times, the speaker uses alliteration to draw attention to certain images. For instance, /f/ and /m/ sounds capture the fluttering of soot on the grate of the fireplace:

> Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
> Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
> Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
> Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
> Making it a companionable form,
> Whose puny flaps and freaks [...]

Here, the /f/ sounds themselves are like "flutters," "flaps," and "freaks," or erratic and flimsy movements. Additionally, the /m/ sound helps link "motion" and "me," capturing how the speaker feels so connected to the soot's activities. As this example shows, the speaker isn't afraid of break out the alliteration

when the time is right, emphasizing his own strong emotions.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "cry"
- **Line 3:** "Came"
- **Line 5:** "solitude," "suits"
- **Line 6:** "save," "side"
- **Line 7:** "slumbers"
- **Line 8:** "calm," "calm"
- **Line 9:** "strange"
- **Line 10:** "silentness," "Sea"
- **Line 14:** "Lies," "low"
- **Line 15:** "film," "fluttered"
- **Line 16:** "flutters"
- **Line 17:** "Methinks," "motion"
- **Line 18:** "me"
- **Line 19:** "Making," "form"
- **Line 20:** "flaps," "freaks"
- **Line 21:** "moods," "every"
- **Line 22:** "Echo," "mirror"
- **Line 23:** "makes"
- **Line 25:** "most," "mind"
- **Line 30:** "music"
- **Line 31:** "morn"
- **Line 32:** "sweetly," "stirred"
- **Line 33:** "With," "wild," "mine"
- **Line 34:** "Most"
- **Line 38:** "mine"
- **Line 39:** "mock," "study," "swimming"
- **Line 40:** "Save," "snatched"
- **Line 41:** "hasty," "still," "heart"
- **Line 42:** "still," "see," "stranger's"
- **Line 43:** "sister," "beloved"
- **Line 44:** "both"
- **Line 45:** "Babe," "sleepest," "by," "side"
- **Line 46:** "breathings"
- **Line 49:** "babe," "beautiful"
- **Line 50:** "thus"
- **Line 51:** "think," "that," "thou," "learn," "lore"
- **Line 54:** "saw," "sky," "stars"
- **Line 55:** "babe," "breeze"
- **Line 56:** "By," "beneath," "crags"
- **Line 57:** "beneath," "clouds"
- **Line 58:** "bulk," "both"
- **Line 59:** "so," "shalt," "see"
- **Line 60:** "shapes," "sounds"
- **Line 64:** "mould"
- **Line 65:** "make"
- **Line 66:** "seasons," "sweet"
- **Line 67:** "summer"
- **Line 68:** "sit," "sing"
- **Line 69:** "Betwixt," "snow," "bare," "branch"
- **Line 71:** "Smokes," "sun-thaw"
- **Line 75:** "Quietly," "quiet"

ASSONANCE

As with alliteration, assonance plays a quiet and sparse role in the poem. The speaker doesn't go for a lot of flourishes in terms of sound. Rather, he uses assonance as a subtle means of creating a cohesive feel to the language.

For instance, in the first line the long /ee/ sound in "secret ministry" gives this phrase a sense of unity and draws attention to it. This unity adds to the phrase's own "secret" and mysterious quality. The "secret ministry" of frost is the process of frost's formation, as water vapor in the air slowly condenses into ice crystals on the ground. Yet the sound of this phrases evokes something even more mysterious, more sacred. As the speaker will come to argue, all natural phenomena are signs of God, so it makes sense that the phrase captures some of that sacredness.

Another clear moment of assonance comes in lines 5-6:

> Have left me to that solitude, which suits
> Abstruser musings [...]

This resounding /oo/ sound ropes together the speaker's description of his solitude. In the deep bass of the /oo/ vowel, these lines seem to capture the peculiar feeling that comes with being up late at light, pondering obscure thoughts—a sort of melancholy sweetness.

Later, the long /ee/ sounds of lines 66 and 69 add brightness and melody to the speaker's hope for his child's future:

> Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
> [...]
> With greenness, [...]

Finally, the long /i/ assonance in the poem's final two lines ends the poem on an especially lyrical, reverent note, drawing readers' attention to the still, wintry imagery at hand:

> Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
> Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.

Much of the poem's use of assonance functions similarly: relatively muted, yet still playing a role in conjuring the poem's many moods and images.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "secret," "ministry"
- **Line 2:** "any"
- **Line 4:** "rest"

- **Line 5:** "left," "to," "solitude," "suits"
- **Line 6:** "Abstruser," "musings," "my," "side"
- **Line 7:** "peacefully"
- **Line 8:** "indeed"
- **Line 9:** "meditation," "strange"
- **Line 10:** "extreme," "Sea"
- **Line 14:** "Lies," "fire," "quivers"
- **Line 15:** "film," "which"
- **Line 18:** "Gives," "it," "dim," "sympathies," "with," "live"
- **Line 26:** "Presageful," "gazed"
- **Line 27:** "stranger"
- **Line 36:** "me," "sleep," "sleep," "dreams"
- **Line 37:** "all," "following"
- **Line 38:** "Awed," "mine," "eye"
- **Line 39:** "mock," "on"
- **Line 40:** "half," "snatched"
- **Line 42:** "stranger's," "face"
- **Line 44:** "both," "clothed"
- **Line 45:** "Babe," "sleepest," "cradled," "by," "my," "side"
- **Line 46:** "breathings," "deep"
- **Line 48:** "pauses," "thought"
- **Line 53:** "mid," "dim"
- **Line 54:** "saw," "nought"
- **Line 58:** "Which," "image," "in"
- **Line 62:** "eternity," "teach"
- **Line 63:** "Himself," "in," "things," "in," "himself"
- **Line 65:** "Thy," "spirit," "by," "giving," "it"
- **Line 66:** "seasons," "be," "sweet," "thee"
- **Line 68:** "greenness"
- **Line 73:** "secret," "ministry"
- **Line 74:** "silent," "icicles"
- **Line 75:** "Quietly," "shining," "quiet"

CONSONANCE

While the poem keeps alliteration and assonance fairly sparse, consonance is much more widespread (we've highlighted some of the clearest consonance here). The pervasiveness of repeated consonants adds a great deal of texture to the poem's language, accentuating the speaker's many twists and turns of thought.

The first three lines immediately display the role consonance will play in the poem:

> The Frost performs its secret ministry,
> Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry
> Came loud [...]

Here, /f/, /r/, /s/, /m/, /n/, /l/, and /c/ sounds form a tight-knit fabric. They give the language a feeling of cohesion and focus. Although the language is informal—by 18th-century standards at least—the carefully organized sounds of this passage convey a great deal of craftsmanship, suggesting that it takes skill to make language sound this natural and this good.

The sounds also accentuate what the speaker describes. For instance, the delicate hiss of /s/ sounds in the first line mimics the delicate task of frost, as it quietly forms on the landscape outside. Then, the percussive /c/ sound conveys the sudden intrusion of the owl's sound on this delicate landscape.

Sibilance is especially common throughout the poem. Often, as with the description of the frost, it captures the quietness of the night, as in lines 8-10:

> [...] so calm, that it disturbs
> And vexes meditation with its strange
> And extreme silentness.

Here, the hissing /s/ has a kind of eerie quality to it, just like the "extreme silentness of the night." Sometimes, when it's so silent, people start to hear their own heart beating, their own breath, a slight ringing in the ears, etc., and the /s/ hiss mimics that: the sound of simply existing. Overall, the frequent sibilance in the poem drapes a hush over its atmosphere, reflecting the speaker's quiet, late-night contemplation.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Frost," "performs," "its," "secret," "ministry"
- **Line 2:** "Unhelped," "any," "wind," "owlet's," "cry"
- **Line 3:** "Came," "loud," "hark," "before"
- **Line 5:** "solitude," "suits"
- **Line 6:** "Abstruser," "musings," "save," "my," "side"
- **Line 7:** "My," "cradled," "slumbers," "peacefully"
- **Line 8:** "calm," "so," "calm," "disturbs"
- **Line 9:** "vexes," "strange"
- **Line 10:** "extreme," "silentness," "Sea," "hill"
- **Line 11:** "populous," "village," "Sea," "hill"
- **Line 12:** "all," "numberless," "life"
- **Line 13:** "Inaudible," "blue," "flame"
- **Line 14:** "Lies," "low," "burnt," "fire," "quivers"
- **Line 15:** "Only," "film," "fluttered," "grate"
- **Line 16:** "Still," "flutters," "sole"
- **Line 17:** "Methinks," "motion," "hush"
- **Line 18:** "dim," "sympathies," "me"
- **Line 19:** "Making," "companionable," "form"
- **Line 20:** "flaps," "freaks," "idling," "Spirit"
- **Line 21:** "interprets," "every," "where"
- **Line 22:** "mirror"
- **Line 25:** "most," "mind"
- **Line 27:** "fluttering," "stranger"
- **Line 28:** "unclosed," "lids," "already"
- **Line 30:** "man's," "music"
- **Line 31:** "morn"
- **Line 32:** "So," "sweetly," "stirred," "haunted"
- **Line 33:** "With," "wild," "pleasure," "falling," "mine"
- **Line 34:** "Most," "like," "articulate"

- **Line 35:** "So," "soothing," "dreamt"
- **Line 36:** "Lulled," "me," "sleep," "sleep," "prolonged," "my," "dreams"
- **Line 37:** "all," "following"
- **Line 38:** "stern," "preceptor's," "face"
- **Line 39:** "Fixed," "mock," "study," "my," "swimming," "book"
- **Line 40:** "Save," "snatched"
- **Line 41:** "hasty," "glance," "still," "leaped," "up"
- **Line 42:** "still," "hoped," "see," "stranger's," "face"
- **Line 44:** "clothed," "alike"
- **Line 47:** "interspersèd," "vacancies"
- **Line 49:** "babe," "beautiful"
- **Line 50:** "tender," "gladness," "thee"
- **Line 51:** "think," "that," "thou," "shalt," "learn," "far," "other," "lore"
- **Line 52:** "far," "other," "scenes," "For," "reared"
- **Line 53:** "great," "mid," "dim"
- **Line 54:** "sky," "stars"
- **Line 55:** "babe," "shalt," "wander," "like," "breeze"
- **Line 56:** "By," "lakes," "sandy," "shores," "crags"
- **Line 57:** "ancient," "mountain," "clouds"
- **Line 58:** "bulk," "both," "lakes," "shores"
- **Line 59:** "so," "shalt," "see"
- **Line 60:** "shapes," "sounds," "intelligible"
- **Line 61:** "eternal," "language"
- **Line 62:** "Utters," "eternity," "teach"
- **Line 66:** "all," "seasons," "shall," "sweet," "thee"
- **Line 67:** "Whether," "summer," "clothe," "general," "earth"
- **Line 68:** "greenness," "redbreast," "sit," "sing"
- **Line 69:** "Betwixt," "tufts," "snow," "bare," "branch"
- **Line 70:** "apple-tree," "while," "night-thatch"
- **Line 71:** "Smokes," "sun-thaw," "whether," "eave-drops," "fall"
- **Line 72:** "only," "trances," "blast"
- **Line 73:** "secret," "ministry," "frost"
- **Line 74:** "silent," "icicles"
- **Line 75:** "Quietly," "quiet"

CAESURA

As with many poems written in blank verse, "Frost at Midnight" relies on caesura to create various textures and rhythms throughout. This is especially important because the poem's language is supposed to mimic someone talking, with all the starts and stops and stutters that come with everyday speech.

A great example of how caesura can mimic the rhythms of everyday speech comes in line 3, when the speaker hears an owl: "The owlet's cry / Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before." Here the speaker uses an em-dash, comma, and exclamation point all as caesurae. These different punctuation marks capture the different phases of the speaker's reaction to the owl, and the different kinds of pauses he takes. First, the em-dash captures how the cry interrupts the speaker. Then, the comma draws attention to "hark," which means *listen*, as if the speaker is asking the reader to listen to the owl as well. And finally the exclamation mark conveys the speaker's enthusiasm over the sound of the owl and his passion for nature in general.

Exclamation marks appear fairly often in the poem as caesurae. Many times, as with the example above, they come in the middle of the sentence. Line 26-27 is another example: "To watch that fluttering *stranger*! and as oft / With unclosed lids." Punctuation like this allows the speaker to capture a sense of excitement without ending the sentence. As a result, such moments have a more conversational feel: people's voices often bounce around as they talk, exclaiming things mid-sentence. Punctuation like this was also more common in the 18th century, when poem was written. Rather than being non-grammatical, it's a legitimate way for the speaker to add expressiveness to the language.

Caesurae like these also help prevent the poem's blank verse from becoming monotonous. They break up the iambic pentameter (five feet per line, each with a da-DUM rhythm) into chunks of various size, so that the poem has starts, stops, and stutters, as well as lines of unbroken language. Again, these various sizes also add to the poem's expressiveness, capturing how people speak in long and short breaths, pausing here, repeating themselves there, and sometimes going on at length without a pause.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "wind. The"
- **Line 3:** "loud—and hark, again! loud"
- **Line 4:** "cottage, all"
- **Line 5:** "solitude, which"
- **Line 6:** "musings: save"
- **Line 8:** "indeed! so"
- **Line 10:** "silentness. Sea, hill, and"
- **Line 11:** "village! Sea, and hill, and"
- **Line 13:** "dreams! the"
- **Line 14:** "low-burnt fire, and"
- **Line 15:** "film, which"
- **Line 16:** "there, the"
- **Line 17:** "Methinks, its"
- **Line 21:** "interprets, every"
- **Line 24:** "O! how"
- **Line 25:** "oft, at school, with"
- **Line 26:** "Presageful, have"
- **Lines 27-27:** "stranger / ! and"
- **Line 28:** "lids, already"
- **Line 29:** "birth-place, and"
- **Line 30:** "bells, the"
- **Line 31:** "evening, all"
- **Line 32:** "sweetly, that"
- **Line 33:** "pleasure, falling"
- **Line 35:** "I, till," "things, I"

- **Line 36:** "sleep, and"
- **Line 38:** "face, mine"
- **Line 40:** "opened, and"
- **Line 41:** "glance, and"
- **Line 43:** "Townsman, or aunt, or"
- **Line 45:** "Babe, that"
- **Line 49:** "beautiful! it"
- **Line 50:** "gladness, thus"
- **Line 52:** "scenes! For"
- **Line 53:** "city, pent"
- **Lines 55-55:** "thou / , my babe! shalt"
- **Line 56:** "shores, beneath"
- **Line 57:** "mountain, and"
- **Line 59:** "crags: so"
- **Line 61:** "language, which"
- **Line 62:** "Utters, who"
- **Line 63:** "all, and"
- **Line 64:** "Teacher! he"
- **Line 65:** "spirit, and"
- **Line 68:** "greenness, or"
- **Line 70:** "apple-tree, while"
- **Line 71:** "sun-thaw; whether"

ENJAMBMENT

Like caesura, enjambment plays an important role in the poem's use of blank verse. Enjambment allows the poem to have its own flow. Rather than going on and on in monotonous end-stopped phrases, the speaker is able to craft sentences that have a sense of movement and unpredictability—much like actual speech.

Enjambment pulls readers forward through the poem, creating anticipation at the ends of lines when the grammatical meaning isn't complete and the reader has to move on to the next line for understanding. Take lines 59-63, where enjambment adds momentum and excitement to the speaker's description of God's "eternal language":

> [...] so shalt thou see and hear
> The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
> Of that eternal language, which thy God
> Utters, who from eternity doth teach
> Himself in all, and all things in himself.

More subtly, the combination of enjambment and caesura allows the speaker to take breaths of different lengths. For example, look at lines 4-7:

> [The inmates of my cottage,] [all at rest,]
> [Have left me to that solitude,] [which suits
> Abstruser musings:] [save that at my side
> My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.]

These first three lines here are all enjambed. As a result, the individual phrases (bracketed above for clarity) vary in length. Their lengths can measured by how many stresses they have: two stresses in the first phrase, three in the second, four in the third, three in fourth, and eight in the fifth (2–3–4–3–8). Although these phrases aren't all the same length, they each sound natural and each can fit into a single breath. Enjambment, then, helps convey that the poem's speaker is a living, breathing person—and that the language is alive as well.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "cry / Came"
- **Lines 4-5:** "rest, / Have"
- **Lines 5-6:** "suits / Abstruser"
- **Lines 6-7:** "side / My"
- **Lines 8-9:** "disturbs / And"
- **Lines 9-10:** "strange / And"
- **Lines 13-14:** "flame / Lies"
- **Lines 15-16:** "grate, / Still"
- **Lines 17-18:** "nature / Gives"
- **Lines 20-21:** "Spirit / By "
- **Lines 21-22:** "where / Echo"
- **Lines 27-28:** "oft / With"
- **Lines 28-29:** "dreamt / Of"
- **Lines 30-31:** "rang / From"
- **Lines 32-33:** "me / With"
- **Lines 33-34:** "ear / Most"
- **Lines 35-36:** "dreamt, / Lulled"
- **Lines 38-39:** "eye / Fixed"
- **Lines 40-41:** "snatched / A"
- **Lines 47-48:** "vacancies / And"
- **Lines 49-50:** "heart / With"
- **Lines 50-51:** "thee, / And"
- **Lines 52-53:** "reared / In"
- **Lines 55-56:** "breeze / By"
- **Lines 56-57:** "crags / Of"
- **Lines 58-59:** "shores / And"
- **Lines 59-60:** " hear / The"
- **Lines 60-61:** "intelligible / Of"
- **Lines 61-62:** "God / Utters,"
- **Lines 62-63:** "teach / Himself"
- **Lines 64-65:** "mould / Thy"
- **Lines 67-68:** "earth / With"
- **Lines 68-69:** "sing / Betwixt"
- **Lines 69-70:** "branch / Of"
- **Lines 70-71:** "night-thatch / Smokes"
- **Lines 71-72:** "fall / Heard"
- **Lines 73-74:** "frost / Shall"

SIMILE

Because the poem is meant to be a kind informal conversation in which the speaker reflects on his life and the world around him, the speaker tends to stay pretty literal. The magic of the

poem is in how it moves about unpredictably and finds spiritual insights in everyday scenes, rather than in any extravagant comparison. As a result, the few similes in the poem stand out all the more. In fact, taken together, the poem's similes chart the development of the speaker's understanding of his relationship with the world around him.

In the first paragraph, the speaker describes:

> [...] Sea, and hill, and wood,
> With all the numberless goings-on of life,
> Inaudible as dreams!

Here, the speaker is talking about how there is all this life around him, but it's all silent. Living things, especially at night, are isolated from each other. Other lives are as inaccessible as other people's dreams. This first comparison captures the sensation of quietness and isolation that the speaker feels at the beginning of the poem. He is attuned to the world around him, but he also feels separate from it: the world's silence speaks volumes.

Next, in the second stanza, the speaker describes hearing church bells at the fair as a boy. To him, the sound of these bells was "Most like articulate sounds of things to come!" In other words, the church bells used to fill the speaker with anticipation. To him, their music was like words from the future. In contrast to the previous simile, which emphasized isolation, this simile captures how a person's environment can seem full of meaning. Later, the speaker will even suggest that all of nature points to God.

In the third stanza, the speaker describes his hopes for his child, saying, "*thou*, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze." Here, the speaker emphasizes freedom. Just as a breeze can travel all over the landscape, by "lakes and sandy shores" as well as "ancient mountain," the speaker hopes for a similar kind of freedom for his child. On a literal level, the speaker wants his child to be able to explore nature. On a more figurative level, the speaker hopes his child will feel connected to nature and have the intellectual freedom to explore many interests. Now, the environment becomes a space of freedom and discovery.

Thus, in each of these three similes, the speaker describes the evolution of his thought, from a feeling of isolation to hopes of profound connection with nature.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-13:** "Sea, and hill, and wood, / With all the numberless goings-on of life, / Inaudible as dreams!"
- **Lines 33-34:** "falling on mine ear / Most like articulate sounds of things to come!"
- **Lines 55-55:** "But / thou / , my babe! shalt wander like a breeze"

IMAGERY

Imagery is essential to "Frost at Midnight." At every step of the way, the speaker carefully describes the world around him and how it affects his emotions (or, later, how it will affect his child). In fact, the poem basically switches back and forth between two types of descriptions: imagistic description of the speaker's environment, and abstract descriptions of the speaker's feelings that result from the environment.

The second half of the first stanza is a good example of this. First, the speaker describes the dying fire and the soot on the grate:

> [...] the thin blue flame
> Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;
> Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
> Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.

In these four lines, the speaker precisely describes the fireplace. First he introduces the striking image of "the thin blue flame," the remains the fire. Then he introduces the motion of the film of soot which "flutters" and is unquiet." In the following lines, the speaker will go into how the soot makes him feel. Specifically, the soot captures the speaker's own state of mind which is also "unquiet"—that is, anxious.

One notable exception to this pattern is the last stanza, which consists simply of a list of peaceful natural images without any resulting descriptions of his subsequent emotions. The speaker just introduces them as "sweet." He then goes on to precisely describe different seasonal occurrences, such as a robin singing "Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch," or rain dripping from the roof amid a windy storm.

Rather than elaborate on how these images would make someone feel, however, the speaker leaves that interpretation up to the reader. Each image conveys its own unique sense of peace. Each is, according to the speaker, a little piece of the language of God. Ultimately, the speaker lets that peace and Godliness resonate with the reader, rather than elaborating on it.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "The Frost performs its secret ministry, / Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry / Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before."
- **Lines 6-7:** "at my side / My cradled infant slumbers peacefully."
- **Lines 13-16:** "the thin blue flame / Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not; / Only that film, which fluttered on the grate, / Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing."
- **Line 20:** "Whose puny flaps and freaks"
- **Lines 26-27:** "have I gazed upon the bars, / To watch that fluttering / stranger / !"

- **Lines 29-31:** "the old church-tower, / Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang / From morn to evening, all the hot Fair-day,"
- **Lines 38-40:** "Awed by the stern preceptor's face, mine eye / Fixed with mock study on my swimming book: / Save if the door half opened, "
- **Lines 45-46:** "Dear Babe, that sleepest cradled by my side, / Whose gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm,"
- **Lines 53-54:** "In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim, / And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars."
- **Lines 55-59:** "shalt wander like a breeze / By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags / Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds, / Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores / And mountain crags:"
- **Lines 67-75:** "Whether the summer clothe the general earth / With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing / Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch / Of mossy apple-tree, while the night-thatch / Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall / Heard only in the trances of the blast, / Or if the secret ministry of frost / Shall hang them up in silent icicles, / Quietly shining to the quiet Moon."

PERSONIFICATION

There are a few important instances of personification in "Frost at Midnight." One comes at the beginning and end of the poem, when the speaker references the "secret ministry" of frost. "[M]inistry" refers to the tasks performed by a minister (i.e., a priest or cleric). The frost's "secret ministry," then, is a mysterious and sacred act that the frost goes about in the middle of the night. Here, the speaker compares the frost to a priest, and the frost's act of forming ice to a priest's responsibilities.

At the end of the poem, coming full circle, the speaker elaborates on these responsibilities:

> [...] whether the eave-drops fall
> Heard only in the trances of the blast,
> Or if the secret ministry of frost
> Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
> Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.

Here, "eave-drops" refers to raindrops dripping from the roof. The speaker imagines the frost "hang[ing]" those drops from the roof as icicles. This beautiful and delicate image suggests the frost's sacred task is simply to freeze things. In other words, the simple act of frost forming on the landscape is sacred. The speaker argues earlier in the poem that nature is the language, and the personification of frost as a priest captures that sentiment: frost becomes a representative of God.

The other use of personification comes in the speaker's identification with the fluttering soot on the grate of the fireplace. The speaker describes this soot as:

> [...] the sole unquiet thing.
> Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
> Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
> Making it a companionable form,

Here, the speaker feels like the motion of the soot captures his own state of mind. "[U]nquiet" can mean *not quiet*, but it can also mean *anxious*. The speaker suggests that the soot is anxious or jittery, just like him. As a result, the soot feels like a "companionable form," a friend.

These two examples of personification capture how the speaker thinks through his relationship with the world around him, as he comes to understand his own mind and his ideas about religion.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The Frost performs its secret ministry,"
- **Lines 16-19:** "the sole unquiet thing. / Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature / Gives it dim sympathies with me who live, / Making it a companionable form,"
- **Lines 27-27:** "To watch that fluttering / stranger / !"
- **Lines 73-75:** "Or if the secret ministry of frost / Shall hang them up in silent icicles, / Quietly shining to the quiet Moon."

REPETITION

There are many instances of repetition throughout "Frost at Midnight." These instances fall into roughly four categories: diacope, refrain, antimetabole, and parallelism.

Diacope is the most pervasive form of repetition in the poem. There are many instances where the speaker repeats a word for emphasis. Many times, this conveys how the speaker is caught up on some particular image or emotion. For instance, the speaker's repetition of "calm" in line 8 conveys the "extreme silentness" of the night, and the speaker's evolving understanding of it.

Similarly, in lines 24-25 the speaker repeats "how oft, / How oft" (more specifically an example of epizeuxis) as he remembers gazing into the fire as a schoolboy. This repetition conveys how powerfully the memory affects him. And in lines 15-16, the repetition of "fluttered" and "flutters" (also an example of polyptoton) captures the speaker's obsession with the way the film of ash moves on the fireplace's grate.

The most noticeably repeated whole phrase in the poem is line 1: "The Frost performs its secret ministry," which reappears in line 73 as "the secret ministry of frost." This repeated phrase (slightly modified) acts as a refrain of sorts, a recurring line that adds a circular quality to the poem. Just as verse and chorus provide a structure to songs, the repeated phrase helps clarify

that poem's structure. The poet's mind has wandered from the present's winter evening into his past, his hopes for his child, and his thoughts on God, all the way back to the present's winter evening. This circularity might have been easy to miss if the speaker didn't include such a noticeable repetition.

There are slightly more complicated instances of repetition as well. First, in stanza 1, the speaker says that his child's breath"

> [...] *disturbs*
> And *vexes meditation* with its *strange*
> And *extreme silentness*

Here, the speaker uses parallelism, because the sentence employs similarly structured phrases: "disturbs / And vexes meditation" and "strange / And extreme silentness." As with the instances of repetition described above, this repetitive phrasing captures how the speaker gets caught up with the eerie silence of the night—just like someone in a conversation who can't get over something.

Then, in lines 62-64, the speaker uses antimetabole:

> [...] who from eternity doth teach
> Himself in *all*, and *all* things in himself.

This mirror-image structure captured the two-fold relationship the speaker is talking about: all natural things teach people about God, and all natural things ultimately come from God.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The Frost performs its secret ministry,"
- **Line 8:** "calm," "calm"
- **Lines 8-10:** "that it disturbs / And vexes meditation with its strange / And extreme silentness"
- **Line 10:** "Sea, hill, and wood,"
- **Line 11:** "Sea, and hill, and wood,"
- **Line 15:** "fluttered"
- **Line 16:** "flutters"
- **Lines 24-25:** "how oft, / How oft,"
- **Line 27:** "oft"
- **Line 35:** "dreamt"
- **Line 36:** "dreams"
- **Line 40:** "and"
- **Line 41:** "and," "still"
- **Line 42:** "still"
- **Line 43:** "or," "or"
- **Line 51:** "And"
- **Line 52:** "And"
- **Line 54:** "And"
- **Line 56:** "beneath"
- **Line 57:** "beneath"
- **Line 63:** "Himself in all, and all things in himself."
- **Line 73:** "the secret ministry of frost"

VOCABULARY

Frost (Line 1, Line 73) - A thin layer of ice that forms on the landscape overnight.

Ministry (Line 1, Line 73) - The tasks and responsibilities of a minister or priest.

Owlet (Line 2) - A baby owl.

Inmates (Line 4) - Residents; other people who live in the cottage.

Cottage (Line 4) - A small country house.

Abstruser (Line 6) - *Abstruse* means obscure, murky, unclear; the speaker's thoughts are murkier than normal.

Musings (Line 6) - Thoughts.

Vexes (Line 9) - Interrupts; makes difficult.

Meditation (Line 9) - Thought; introspection.

Wood (Line 10, Line 11) - Forest.

Film (Line 15) - A thin layer—of soot, in this case.

Grate (Line 15) - The bars in a fireplace that the fire rests on.

Sympathies (Line 18) - Feelings of connection or similarity.

Freaks (Line 20) - Erratic movements.

Idling (Line 20) - Unoccupied.

Spirit (Line 20) - Mind.

Toy (Line 23) - A plaything; something inconsequential, manipulable, amusing.

Oft (Line 24, Line 25, Line 27) - Often.

Presageful (Line 26) - Having a feeling of anticipation or a sense of future events.

Grazed (Line 26, Line 35) - Looked deeply.

Stranger (Line 27, Line 42) - According to Coleridge, this is a colloquial term for the film of soot that a fire leaves behind. It is supposed to signal the arrival of an old friend.

Unclosed Lids (Line 28) - Open eyes.

Morn (Line 31, Line 37) - Morning.

Fair-day (Line 31) - A special day-long festival or market.

Mine (Line 33, Line 38) - My.

Articulate Sounds (Line 34) - The speaker is saying that these "sounds" are almost like words.

Soothing (Line 35) - Calming.

Brooded (Line 37) - Thought about, in a morose or inconclusive way.

Preceptor (Line 38) - Teacher.

Swimming (Line 39) - Whirling. Because the speaker isn't able to focus, the text in the book appears fuzzy, indistinct, or even disorienting—as if it is has a whirling motion to it.

Babe (Line 45, Line 49, Line 55) - Baby.

Interspersèd (Line 47) - Scattered, or having gaps. The accented "é" means that the final syllable should be pronounced: "in-ter-sper-sed."

Vacancies (Line 47) - Empty spaces.

Lore (Line 51) - Old teachings that have been handed down, often with the connotation of being spiritual, mythical, or mystical in nature.

Pent 'mid cloisters dim (Line 53) - Trapped in a darkly lit school.

Nought (Line 54) - Nothing.

Crags (Line 56, Line 59) - Cliffs.

Image (Line 58) - Capture, reflect; the size of the clouds is similar to size of the mountains and lakes.

Bulk (Line 58) - Giant size.

Intelligible (Line 60) - Understandable, word-like.

Mould (Line 64) - Mold; shape.

General earth (Line 67) - The whole planet.

Betwixt (Line 69) - Between.

Night-thatch (Line 70) - Thatch is a straw roof. Night-thatch is presumably such a roof that froze overnight.

Sun-thaw (Line 71) - The melting that happens under sunlight.

Eave-drops (Line 71) - Rain drops dripping from the eaves, or edges of the roof.

Trances (Line 72) - A *trance* is a state of hypnosis or mental blankness.

Blast (Line 72) - Strong wind.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Frost at Midnight" has 75 lines broken up into in four unrhymed verse paragraphs. As this phrase suggests, verse paragraphs are a lot like prose paragraphs except they have line-breaks. They are stanzas of unequal length that help break up the poem into more manageable chunks.

By writing in this way, the poem emphasizes its somewhat informal language. Rather than setting out with stanzas of pre-determined length, the poem works more intuitively. Each stanza is roughly unified in what it's talking about:

- The first is full of descriptions of the speaker's cottage;
- The second describes the speaker's childhood;
- The third addresses the speaker's hopes for his child;
- The fourth is full of descriptions of the natural world.

Furthermore, each stanza break represents a leap within the speaker's mind. For instance, between the first and second stanzas the speaker leaps from describing his fireplace to delving into an old memory.

Additionally, this form has a long and prestigious history. Coleridge was perhaps most explicitly inspired by John Milton's use of blank verse paragraphs in his epic poem *Paradise Lost*. However, while Milton's language captured the epic conflict between good and evil at the beginning of the world, Coleridge's language is meant to convey the twists at turns of an individual mind on one ordinary evening. As a result, it puts the flexibility of Milton's form to new use.

METER

"Frost at Midnight" is written in blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter (meaning there are five feet per line, each with a da-DUM beat pattern). The first line is a straightforward example of the poem's meter:

> The Frost | performs | its se- | cret min- | istry

Iambic pentameter mimics the rhythms of spoken English, and thus makes sense in a poem meant to feel conversational. Much of the poem follows this pattern fairly faithfully. By hewing closely to the meter, the poem provides a sense of regularity as the speaker's thoughts leap through memories and observations.

Additionally, the poem's extensive use of enjambment and caesura helps carve up the stable meter in interesting ways. For instance, here's lines 8-10:

> 'Tis calm | indeed! | so calm, | that it | disturbs
> And vex- | es med- | ita- | tion with | its strange
> And ex- | treme si- | lentness. | Sea, hill, | and wood,

Here, although the first two lines continue to maintain a steadfast iambic pentameter, caesura and enjambment break things up so that they don't feel boring or monotonous.

Next, notice how the third line does vary the meter, particularly by bunching stresses. The second and fourth feet are both spondees (DUM-DUM). This creates an emphatic effect that mirrors that speaker's growing sense of unease. The condensed stress captures the "extreme silentness" of the landscape. Similarly, the stresses of "Sea, hill, and wood" suggest the speaker almost exclaims this phrase. He is suddenly jerked out of his innermost thoughts, and instead passionately evokes the surrounding landscape.

There are moments like this throughout the poem. Although the speaker mostly sticks closely to the meter, he's not afraid to deviate for emphasis or to add some variety.

RHYME SCHEME

"Frost at Midnight" does not rhyme. Because the poem attempts to capture some of the informal qualities of conversational English, while also depicting the twists and turns of the speaker's thoughts, rhyme would only be a hindrance. It would seem artificial, given that people don't usually follow rhyme schemes when they're talking to each other or thinking to themselves!

Additionally, Coleridge was partly inspired here by the blank verse of John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*. By rejecting rhyme (a choice that was controversial at the time), Milton was able to craft a fluid and sinewy kind of language, a language that was full of interesting variety in terms of its grammar and arrangement of words. By embracing a similarly rhyme-less form, Coleridge is able to craft sentences that are uniquely his—that bear that stamp of his own unique thought processes.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Frost at Midnight" is often taken to be Coleridge himself (which is why we've used masculine pronouns throughout this guide), though it doesn't necessarily have to be. However, the speaker is clearly someone who has had many of same life experiences as Coleridge, such as going to boarding school in London and caring for a new-born child while living in a cottage.

Furthermore, the style of the poem is meant to emphasize that this is not some generic speaker, but a specific person with specific life experiences. Some poems are written as if they could be spoken by almost anyone (like Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18," or Emily Dickinson's "I felt a funeral, in my Brain," or T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land"). Coleridge's poem, however, clearly has a flesh-and-blood speaker with a unique biography. In this way, "Frost at Midnight" has sometimes been thought of as an early example of so-called *confessional poetry*, poetry that explicitly takes the events of the poet's life as its focus.

Again, though, it's not necessary to identify the poem completely with Coleridge. A reader doesn't need to know every detail of Coleridge's biography to appreciate the poem. Rather, a reader enjoys the poem *because* it gives the sense of getting to know a particular person, of this person intimately revealing their thoughts and feelings as they occur. In other words, for the reader, the poem is a way to get to know Coleridge—or at the very least, to get to know the voice that Coleridge crafts for himself in this poem. And for Coleridge, the poem is a chance for him to think through his own life, to find a voice that can make sense of all the ideas and feelings swarming around in his head.

SETTING

Coleridge wrote this poem while living in a cottage in the large village of Nether Stowey, in Somerset in South West England. For the reader of the poem, what matters is that it takes place in a small cottage in the middle of a winter night. Frost is forming on the ground outside, and it is very quiet. Everyone has gone to bed besides the speaker, who sits in front of the dying fire with his sleeping baby by his side. The poem is rooted in this cozy, quiet, sweetly lonely scene.

From there, it delves into memories, hopes, and imagined scenes. In the speaker's mind, he travels back to boarding school, then to a festival day in his birthplace, then to magnificent landscapes, and finally back to the present winter night. The speaker describes these imagined settings in vivid terms, emphasizing his emotional connection to each of them.

As these descriptions progress, a split begins to emerge. On one side of the split are environments that provoke a sense of isolation, such as the winter cottage (at least at the beginning of the poem), boarding school, and cities. On the other side of the split are surroundings that create a feeling of openness and closeness to God, particularly "the hot Fair-day," and the scene of "lakes and sandy shores" and "ancient mountain." Ultimately, the speaker seems to reconcile this split, because at the end of the poem he finds peace in his isolated cottage, describing "silent icicles, / Quietly shining to the quiet Moon."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is part of the first generation of English Romantic poets. Romanticism was an artistic and intellectual movement that spread through Europe and America from the late 1700s through the 1800s (this poem was published in 1798). There are many ideas and artistic practices associated with Romanticism, but in terms of Coleridge it is possible to hone in on the body of work produced by him and his friend William Wordsworth.

Together, Coleridge and Wordsworth developed a vision of how God spoke to human beings through nature. They believed that if people wanted to understand reality, they had to examine their own experiences in the natural world. Thus, for these two poets, personal memories were of the utmost importance. After people had passionate or spiritually significant events out in nature, it was through memory that they came to understand the full significance of such events. This link between memory, nature, God, and human understanding is on display in "Frost at Midnight." It would be most thoroughly developed in Wordsworth's long, autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*.

In fact, although *The Prelude* is heavily indebted to "Frost at Midnight," it eventually eclipsed this earlier poem. Coleridge felt that Wordsworth had gone far beyond him, proving himself the superior poet. At the same time, Coleridge's poem paved the way for Wordsworth. Both poets had wanted to find a way to use the kind of blank verse found in Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* as a means of exploring inner thoughts and feelings (rather than depicting awesome battles between angels, as Milton had done). It was Coleridge, in his conversation poems, such as the one here, that first began to work out how this could be done.

It should also be noted that "Frost at Midnight" only represents one side of Coleridge's life as a poet. On the other side is what has been called a "demonic" interest in the supernatural, as exemplified in his famous poems "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan." These poems, which are distinctly Coleridgean, are full of fantasy and horror and a love of ancient "lore." "Frost at Midnight" stands in stark contrast to such poems, and is all the richer for it. Although Coleridge was capable of weaving together incredibly imaginative stories, here he sticks to everyday images and his humble, tender love for his child.

"Frost at Midnight" has gone on to influence poets in many ways. In terms of the way it incorporates autobiographical details, its echoes can be seen in the work of so-called confessional poets in the 20th century, like Robert Lowell ("For the union Dead"). In the way that it attempts to weave together sights from the ordinary world with speculation about the nature of reality, the poems of Wallace Stevens ("Thirteen Ways of Looking at Blackbird"), Elizabeth Bishop ("The Fish)", and John Ashbery are obvious descendants. Although Coleridge may have felt overshadowed by Wordsworth, his influence has been felt for a long time.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Coleridge grew up in a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing England, a process that was often dirty, bleak, and unjust. He attended boarding school on a scholarship in London, which seems to have cemented his ambivalence about cities. His emphasis on nature can be seen in part as a reaction to the brutishness of industrialization as he experienced it.

Coleridge, like Wordsworth and many of their friends, was also a political radical as a young man. The French Revolution coincided with his young adulthood and inspired him. Thoroughly middle-class, Coleridge had no link to the aristocracy. He was, however, profoundly religious, and together with like-minded friends developed a scheme to establish a small settlement in American based around religious communism. They called *Pantisocracy*; it never materialized. All the same, Coleridge's attitude towards nature and religion in "Frost at Midnight" can be seen as bound up in his politics, a sense that nature provides an egalitarian environment where people can become closer to God.

In turn, this politics is a distinct outgrowth of its time. Radical French politics, which inspired Coleridge and others, resulted from the rise of bourgeoisie, or business-owning class, as they displaced the old aristocracy. This rise happened in England as well as France. One consequence of this was that literature no longer had to appeal to aristocrats alone. Poets could address the everyday experiences of common folk. Art was part of the revolution.

Additionally, the success of the empirical sciences throughout the 1700s meant that people looked on the physical world with new interest. Suddenly it seemed that all events could be explained by science. People began to look to nature and science, rather religion, for explanations. Everyday experience seemed to trump religious ecstasy.

For Coleridge and Wordsworth, however, this was an opportunity and a challenge. They set out to write poetry that could combine a radical emphasis on common people's experiences, first-hand observations of nature, and a deep sense of spirituality. The result was the beginning of English Romanticism.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Pantisocracy — An essay on Pantisocracy, the religious-communistic utopia that Coleridge and his friends had hoped to found. (https://wordsworth.org.uk/blog/2015/09/02/coleridge-and-the-pantisocratic-pipe-dream/)
- A Movie Star Reads the Poem — Hear Richard Burton read "Frost at Midnight." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9K7BmjUnkw)
- A Biography of Coleridge — A detailed biography of Samuel Taylor Coleridge from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/samuel-taylor-coleridge)
- Coleridge Cottage — The cottage where Coleridge wrote "Frost at Midnight" is in the southwest of England, where it is preserved by the National Trust. Their website has photos and historical information. (https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/coleridge-cottage)
- More on "Frost at Midnight" — An article of "Frost at Midnight" from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70316/samuel-taylor-coleridge-frost-at-midnight)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SAMUEL COLERIDGE POEMS

- Kubla Khan
- The Eolian Harp

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Griffin, Brandan. "*Frost at Midnight*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 1 Jul 2019. Web. 9 Nov 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Griffin, Brandan. "*Frost at Midnight*." LitCharts LLC, July 1, 2019. Retrieved November 9, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/samuel-coleridge/frost-at-midnight.