In drear nighted December

POEM TEXT

In drear nighted December
Too happy, happy tree
Thy Branches ne'er remember
Their green felicity—
The north cannot undo them
With a sleety whistle through them
Nor frozen thawings glew them
From budding at the prime—

In drear nighted December
Too happy happy Brook
Thy bubblings ne'er remember
Apollo's Summer look
But with a sweet forgetting
They stay their crystal fretting
Never never petting
About the frozen time—

Ah! would 'twere so with many
A gentle girl and boy—
But were there ever any
Writh'd not of passed joy:
The feel of not to feel it
When there is none to heal it
Nor numbed sense to steel it
Was never said in rhyme—

SUMMARY

In the dark nights of December—oh, lucky tree—your branches don't remember what it was like to be happily green. The north wind can't spoil them with its icy breath, nor can the frost stop them from budding again when spring comes.

In the dark nights of December—oh, you lucky stream—your waters don't remember how the sun god gazed on them in the summer. Instead, in blissful ignorance, they hold still in crystalline patterns, never complaining about being frozen.

Oh, if only it were the same for many a sweet young woman or man. But has anyone ever *not* writhed in pain over a lost joy? The feeling of not feeling that joy, when there's no way to make it better and no way to numb your suffering, can't be put into words.

THEMES

MEMORY AND THE PAIN OF LOSS

The speaker of "In drear nighted December" looks with envy upon frozen winter trees and streams. The natural world might turn lifeless and cold in winter, the speaker reflects, but at least it doesn't *know* it—and neither does it remember the time it was warm and alive. People, by contrast, enjoy no such fortunate oblivion in their own "frozen time[s]" of grief and pain. Perhaps the worst part of suffering a loss, this poem suggests, is enduring tormenting memories of the happiness that's gone.

When winter comes and everything that was once lively seems to freeze to death, the natural world enjoys a "sweet forgetting." A tree's bare winter branches "ne'er remember / Their green felicity"; they have no memory of being happily leafy. Nor does a brook "pet[]" (or fuss) about being frozen solid. The trees and the waters simply sit there under the frost, unaware that anything was ever different.

Humanity, the speaker observes, doesn't enjoy that same privilege. Who in the world, the speaker asks, has ever "writh'd not of passed joy"? That is, who has ever escaped writhing in the pain of loss, remembering what they once had "when there is none to heal it," when nothing can bring back what's gone? Grief, for human beings, is unavoidable.

In this vision, loss in itself isn't the source of the worst suffering: *memory* is. The "feel of not to feel it"—the awareness that you've lost a joy, the memory of what that joy was like—is what's painful beyond words, this speaker feels; it was "never said in rhyme," not even in this very poem.

Perhaps the poem even hints that memory makes the pain of loss linger. While the ice can't stop the tree from "budding" again when the spring comes, grief doesn't "heal" so easily or punctually. Through memory, the ghosts of what you've lost can go on haunting you across the seasons of your life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

NATURE'S CONSTANCY VS. HUMANITY'S UNPREDICTABILITY

The speaker of Keats's poem regrets that the human heart doesn't work like the seasons do. While winter is an ancient symbol of grief and loss, and spring of hope and rebirth, that symbolism only works up to a point: human emotions

aren't so reliable as nature's cycles. Spring can be counted on to renew icy trees and frozen streams, but a grieving heart might never fully defrost.

The frozen trees and brooks of winter, the speaker observes, are "happy" (that is, lucky) not just because they don't know that they're frozen, but because their "frozen time" ends on a schedule. A leafless tree need only wait until spring and it's time for "budding" again to regain its "green felicity"; a stream's cheery "bubblings" will return as soon as the sun rolls round into the right place.

The movements of the human heart, alas, aren't so predictable. Certainly a person can endure an icy metaphorical winter of loss, grief, and suffering. But there's no telling when—or if—a spring of relief and renewed happiness will come. Sometimes, the speaker says, there is "none to heal it": some wounds never close. And even those wounds that can heal don't heal to a schedule. Time might help to soften grief, but one can't just point at a calendar and say, "At least I know I'll feel better by April!"

Nature, in other words, might provide some handy symbols for emotions—but the comparison only goes so far. The human heart is an ecosystem of its own, and its rhythms aren't steady, cyclical, and predictable as nature's are.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

In drear nighted December
Too happy, happy tree
Thy Branches ne'er remember
Their green felicity—

"In drear nighted December" begins in the darkest part of the year. It's not just winter, but December in particular, the month of the longest night—a "drear," gloomy, dark time indeed. Out of the midst of this darkness, the poem's speaker makes a wistful apostrophe to a leafless tree:

> Too happy, happy tree
> Thy Branches ne'er remember
> Their green felicity—

This tree, in other words, is much luckier than it knows. ("Happy" here means "fortunate" as much as "cheerful.") It might be frozen stiff—but that just doesn't bother it. Why? Because it has no memory. It can't recall the "green felicity"—the leafy joy—of summer. Losing its leaves thus makes no difference to these "branches"; whatever consciousness they had of their leaves fell away when the leaves did.

To the speaker, this "happy, happy" forgetfulness—and notice the yearning epizeuxis—sounds wonderful. But there's an implied juxtaposition here: clearly, the speaker enjoys no such lucky oblivion when they lose something. This will be a poem, not just about grief, but about the particular pain of having, losing, and *remembering*.

Winter is an ancient symbol for death, grief, and loss, and the speaker will draw on all those old ideas here. But rather than reaching for the good old pathetic fallacy, personifying nature and using an iced-over tree as a symbol for an iced-over heart, this poem's speaker will insist that the world's seasons and the heart's seasons don't work in at all the same way.

LINES 5-8

The north cannot undo them
With a sleety whistle through them
Nor frozen thawings glew them
From budding at the prime—

As the speaker continues their envious apostrophe to the unfeeling branches, the poem's rhymes change, and with them the speaker's tone. The first part of this stanza used a gentle, swaying ABAB rhyme scheme to describe the tree's unwitting good fortune. Listen to what happens now:

> The north cannot undo them
> With a sleety whistle through them
> Nor frozen thawings glew them
> From budding at the prime—

Those three rhymes in a row—and especially the epistrophe on the word "them"—feel intense, driven, and forceful, not soft and wistful as the introductory section did with its alternating, ABAB rhyme pattern. The D rhyme, meanwhile, hangs there in space, feeling incomplete and yearning; it'll have to wait for the next stanza to come along before it finds its match.

This change in sound mirrors the speaker's change in feeling. Where in the first four lines the speaker just sighed over the tree's sweet forgetfulness, here they describe everything that *doesn't* and *can't* happen to its branches. They can't be "undo[ne]" and destroyed by the "sleety whistle" of the north wind, and "frozen thawings"—melted and refrozen crusts of ice—can't hold them back from "budding" when the "prime" of the year, the spring, rolls around again. The tree can withstand the winter, and the winter won't be able to withstand the spring.

The intensified rhyme scheme here manages to feel defiant and despairing at the same time. It's wonderful, miraculous even, that trees can seem so totally dead in winter and come back in spring undisturbed. But if the speaker envies that power, then they know they don't possess it. A symbolic winter of loss and

grief *can* "undo" a person, *can* stop them from returning to the life they once had. And in that light, the rhymes hit like a fist pounded in frustration.

Uncharacteristically, then, this Romantic-era speaker doesn't look to nature for comfort or instruction (as a Wordsworth speaker immediately would). Instead, their observations of the winter tree distance them from nature. The speaker doesn't address the tree in order to personify it as a fellow sufferer in an icy world of pains and troubles, but to envy it for its imperturbability and its assured renewal—a kind of resilience humanity just doesn't have.

Even the meter in these lines suggests quiet helplessness. The poem is written in short, forceful lines of iambic trimeter—that is, lines of three iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. But many of the lines (and, notably, all the lines in that CCC triplet), use a feminine ending, an extra unstressed syllable at the end of the line:

> The north | cannot | undo them

Those falling endings wilt like frostbitten daffodils.

LINES 9-16

In drear nighted December
Too happy happy Brook
Thy bubblings ne'er remember
Apollo's Summer look
But with a sweet forgetting
They stay their crystal fretting
Never never petting
About the frozen time—

The second stanza starts with just the same language as the first:

> In drear nighted December
> Too happy happy Brook

This time, the speaker addresses a "Brook," a stream. The repetition of the first lines already suggests that this stanza will run in the same vein as the first—and so it does. Again, the speaker envies the brook's obliviousness: its frozen waters don't remember "Apollo's Summer look" when winter comes.

Here, the speaker refers to one of Keats's favorite gods in the classical pantheon: Apollo, the Greco-Roman god of the sun. The brook, in other words, doesn't miss the sun's "Summer look," words that might suggest both the way the sunlight "looks" down on the warming water and the way the sun *itself* looks in summer: bigger, nearer, more golden than the pale sun of winter.

But this allusion also gestures to things that might be missing in the symbolic drear December of the *human* soul: Apollo was also the god of poetry, prophecy, and medicine. Healing and inspiration, these lines hint, might both feel in short supply for a person in the depths of an emotional winter.

Like the trees, though, the brooks get to enjoy a "sweet forgetting":

> But with a sweet forgetting
> They stay their crystal fretting

Pause for a moment on the image of the "crystal fretting," words that paint a picture of summer waters and winter waters at once:

- That "fretting," or net-like patterning, could be both the crazed patterns of light on flowing water and the crystalline shapes of the ice that forms when the waters "stay," or hold still.
- More than that, it's a pun: the waters aren't doing any *fretting*, any worrying.
- In other words: the water is beautifully fretted whether that fretting moves or freezes, and either way, it's not bothered.

The waters sound almost like well-behaved children here:

> Never never petting
> About the frozen time—

The word "petting" here means whining or sulking; it's a word you'd use to tell a 19th-century teenager to stop fussing. Even the lightness of that language suggests that the dreariest of Decembers just doesn't matter to the brook—again, not just because it's particularly stoic, but because it doesn't *remember* what it was like when things were any different.

Notice, too, that the final rhyme word of this stanza—"time"—at last meets the dangling rhyme word "prime" from the first stanza. The final word of the poem will rhyme with these as well. That sets up a certain sense of expectation as readers head into the final stanza: how will the three parts of the poem come together with that last rhyme?

LINES 17-20

Ah! would 'twere so with many
A gentle girl and boy—
But were there ever any
Writh'd not of passed joy:

In the third and final stanza, a change comes. The speaker begins, not with another picture of "drear nighted December," but with a sigh:

> Ah! would 'twere so with many
> A gentle girl and boy—

At last, the speaker says what the poem has implied all along: icy pain just isn't the same for humanity as it is for the happy, happy tree and the happy, happy brook. The speaker says so with both regret and sympathy: they're clearly one of the gentle girls and boys who have suffered, though they wish it weren't so for anyone.

The words "a gentle girl and boy" here might ring a distant bell. Without directly quoting, the poem echoes a famous song in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, one of Keats's favorites. In this song, two singers at a graveside tell the dead:

> Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
> Nor the furious winter's rages;
> Thou thy worldly task hast done,
> Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages:
> Golden lads and girls all must,
> As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

Notice that Keats doesn't just allude to the older song's language, but to its images: the extremes of the seasons, there as here, suggest the extremes of feeling. This little distorted echo thus subtly hints that the only way those gentle girls and boys will ever gain nature's equanimity is in death. The only time you needn't fear the "furious winter's rages," literally or figuratively, is when you're safely under the ground—which you certainly will be, one day.

While those golden lads and girls live, though, they're not going to escape pain. As the speaker asks, with a grim rhetorical question that only underscores their certainty:

> But were there ever any
> Writh'd not of passed joy:

No one, in other words, has escaped writhing in pain over a lost joy. Or: not even a *lost* joy, but a "passed" joy, a joy that has come to its natural end, just as the seasons do. Terrible tragedy doesn't have to strike to make you writhe, the speaker suggests. Simply being alive and experiencing change means suffering—that is, if you have a memory.

LINES 21-24

The feel of not to feel it
When there is none to heal it
Nor numbed sense to steel it
Was never said in rhyme—

Now, the poem reaches its final triplet. The language here follows the same patterns it did in the first stanza: there are the same two-word rhymes, the same falling feminine endings. But there's a difference. Listen:

> The feel of not to feel it
> When there is none to heal it
> Nor numbed sense to steel it

In the first stanza, the speaker's epistrophe on "them" stood as firm as the frozen branches the word described. But every time the word "it" appears here, it refers to something different:

- In "The feel of not to feel it," the "it" refers to the "passed joy" of the previous line: this is the feeling of no longer feeling what you once felt.
- In "Where there is none to heal it," the "it" refers to the untreatable pain of loss—to the "feel of not to feel it" itself.
- In "Nor numbed sense to steel it," the "it" refers to the mourner's heart: no dulling of the senses can steel (or strengthen) it against the pain.

This changeable "it" makes the pain of loss feel slippery: it takes on a different shape every moment. There's no holding onto it, no getting to grips with it.

The antanaclasis in the "feel of not to feel it" deepens that sense of overwhelm:

- The first "feel" there is a noun: the *feeling*.
- The second is a verb: *to feel*.

Feelings, in other words, can be processes, verbs: actions that move and flow and change. But they can also be heavy, inert nouns, like *grief* landing with a thud. In "the feel of not to feel it," emotion, like light, is both a particle and a wave.

The image of feelings in motion gets at the role of time here. The pain of loss, this poem has suggested, comes from having a *memory*, being able to look back on the days when Apollo smiled and compare them to the frosty present. To understand (and suffer) over a "passed joy," you have to be able to look backward in time.

This is why, as this speaker has been saying all along, it's a happy, happy fate to be a tree or a brook compared to a human being. Trees and brooks live in the eternal present; humanity knows the past, and thus has to suffer loss and change.

Unlike nature, however, people might also get *permanently* frozen in place by their grief. While the trees only need wait until spring rolls around again to regain their "green felicity," human beings can't count on their feelings to change as predictably as the seasons do: there's no calendar to tell you when the ice in your heart might melt. Perhaps, in some cases, it never does. Nature can only be your teacher to a point, the poem thus suggests; its cycles and its responses aren't ours.

This predicament, the speaker concludes:

> Was never said in rhyme—

That final rhyme on "rhyme," joining hands with the closing

words of the stanzas before it, feels inevitable. But it also comes as a surprise. Isn't putting "the feel of not to feel it" into rhyme exactly what this poem has been doing?

Insisting that this little song can't even do what it's been trying to, Keats ends the poem on a helpless note. There's no describing the feeling of loss, this poem suggests—and this indescribable, inescapable, painful predicament is the human condition. This poem's simple music suggests a quiet, bewildered acceptance of a hard truth.

SYMBOLS

WINTER

This poem's "drear nighted" winter is a symbol of loss and pain. When the ice closes around the trees and streams, the speaker observes, they're lucky: within their frosty prisons, they can't remember what it was like *not* to be frozen stiff. When icy pain visits the human heart, on the other hand, people suffer both the chill of grief and the stab of memory, which reminds them that they once enjoyed warm, summery happiness.

But the speaker also implicitly questions this classic seasonal symbolism. Winter, after all, can be counted on to go away on a fairly regular schedule. Grief, however, hangs around; it might soften with time, but then again, it might not.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "In drear nighted December"
- **Lines 5-7:** "The north cannot undo them / With a sleety whistle through them / Nor frozen thawings glew them"
- **Line 9:** "In drear nighted December"
- **Line 14:** "They stay their crystal fretting"

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

In an apostrophe to a frozen tree, the speaker tells it that it's "too happy, happy"—that is, that it's *so* lucky. That's because its frozen "branches ne'er remember / Their green felicity": they can't recall what it was like to be lush with leaves. This apostrophe stresses the distinction between a *tree's* experience and a *person's*: when a person loses something, the speaker laments, they remember all too well what it was like to have it.

Poetically speaking, this apostrophe is pretty novel. Rather than conventionally personifying the tree—say, by presenting it shivering in the winter cold and thus making it into a fellow-sufferer, a symbol of human feeling—the speaker insists that a tree's experience is simply *different* from a person's (and enviably so). This speaker doesn't make the old Romantic move of turning to nature for consolation and wisdom. Rather, they reach out imaginatively to nature only to discover an alien "sweet forgetting" they only wish they could share.

An apostrophe to the "happy happy Brook" works similarly, making the brook seem remote and strange even as the speaker talks to it directly. As blithely unaware of winter as the tree is, the brook "never never pet[s]" (that is, fusses) about the "frozen time."

These apostrophes might invite readers to consider whether the tree and the brook feel anything at all, ever. If they don't feel pain in winter, do they feel joy when Apollo (the Greek sun god) shines his "Summer look" down upon them again? Or is their happiness, their good luck, simply in a uniformly "numbed sense," an inability to feel anything? To this dejected speaker, nature's numbness might sound like a pretty good deal compared to the pain of grief.

Rather than bringing nature consolingly closer to the speaker, then, the poem's apostrophes emphasize the distance between feeling humanity and insensible nature.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "Too happy, happy tree / Thy Branches ne'er remember / Their green felicity—"
- **Lines 10-12:** "Too happy happy Brook / Thy bubblings ne'er remember / Apollo's Summer look"

ALLUSION

This poem alludes to two of Keats's great inspirations: classical mythology and Shakespeare.

The first of these allusions comes in line 12, where the speaker envies the frozen stream because it can't remember "Apollo's Summer look." In other words, it can't recall what it was like when Apollo, the Greco-Roman god of the sun, smiled down on them. Besides the sun, Apollo was the god of poetry, inspiration, prophecy, and medicine—and was thus always a favorite with Keats (who trained as a doctor before devoting himself to poetry).

Perhaps this allusion hints that what's lacking in a *person's* "drear nighted December" of the soul isn't just joy, but a sense that inspiration and healing might be possible at all. The brook freezes without the sun; the person freezes without the symbolic light and warmth of meaning and hope.

The poem's second allusion is a subtler one. As the final stanza begins, the speaker laments:

> Ah! would 'twere so with many
> A gentle girl and boy—

The rhythms, sounds, and language of the highlighted line

distantly echo a famous song from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*. This song, sung at a funeral, describes the safety of the grave:

> Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
> Nor the furious winter's rages;
> Thou thy worldly task hast done,
> Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages:
> Golden lads and girls all must,
> As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

While Keats doesn't use a direct quotation here, it's safe to say that these lines were in his mind as he wrote. Not only did he love *Cymbeline*—a friend recalled him tearing up as he quoted a poignant passage—but the song's themes chime with this poem's. Telling the dead that they're safe from the "furious winter's rages" (among all sorts of other travails), the singers suggest that the real virtue of being dead is something a lot like the virtue of being a tree or a brook in this poem: being beyond the reach of suffering.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "Apollo's Summer look"
- **Line 18:** "A gentle girl and boy—"

JUXTAPOSITION

This poem is built around two juxtapositions: one between humanity and nature, the other between winter and summer.

The poem's speaker envies trees and streams for their "sweet forgetting": their capacity simply *not to know* when it's winter and they're frozen solid, and therefore not to care that they once enjoyed the leafy ease of summer. People have no such luck. The "feel of not to feel it," the speaker suggests—the awareness that you once felt something lovely, and now you don't—is a distinctly *human* agony, the blight of beings with memories.

The speaker explores this juxtaposition through another: the contrast between the "green felicity" of summer and the "frozen time" of "drear nighted December." The poem evokes the real-life seasons with images of the north wind's "sleety whistle" versus the fertile "budding" when the "prime" of the year rolls around again. But the speaker also draws on old, old symbolism here: summer and winter represent joy and sorrow, hope and despair, life and death.

Notice that the speaker doesn't just describe *winter* in this poem, but December in particular, of all the months the most "drear nighted." In the northern hemisphere, December is the darkest month and contains the shortest day of the year: the winter solstice. While the solstice itself is an ancient symbol of hope and rebirth—the sun starts creeping back after that long, dark night—the speaker's juxtaposition between nature and humanity reminds readers that, while spring reliably comes again in the outer world, there are no such guarantees around the seasons of the emotions.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

REPETITION

Repetitions give this poem the melancholy music of an old song—and the circularity of despair.

The first two stanzas begin with the same language: two identically-worded apostrophes, first to a tree and then to a brook:

> In drear nighted December
> Too happy, happy [...]

This refrain makes the poem feel like a song, perhaps in the vein of Shakespeare's similarly echoey "Fear no more the heat o' the sun" (which Keats delicately alludes to in the closing stanza). Like that older song, this poem deals with cyclical events—the changing seasons, the movement of life into death—in cyclical language.

But this poem also deals with things that cut across such cycles: memory and grief. The sorrowing speaker yearns for the "sweet forgetting" that the trees and streams enjoy in the winter. As the speaker puts it, with wistful epizeuxis, the natural world is "too happy, happy," luckier than it can know, to "never never" remember what it's lost.

The speaker's longing for such a peaceful oblivion reflects in the repetitions at the end of the first and third stanzas. The speaker first uses powerful epistrophe while describing the stately unconcern of the "happy, happy tree" and its frozen branches:

> The north cannot undo them
> With a sleety whistle through them
> Nor frozen thawings glew them

All those firm repeated "them"s mirror the branches' untroubled persistence.

The device returns at the end of the poem when the speaker describes how humanity, by contrast, suffers:

> The feel of not to feel it
> When there is none to heal it
> Nor numbed sense to steel it

The repeated "it" is a lot less firm than the repeated "them" was. The first "it" refers to a "passed joy"; the second "it" to the pain of loss itself; and the third "it," it seems, to the sufferer's heart. Though this epistrophe *sounds* just as forceful as the first

instance, it creates a very different mood: one of flailing, inescapable despair.

As the poem ends, look again at the poignant antanaclasis in line 21:

> The **feel** of not to **feel** it

The first "feel" means "feeling," as a noun; the second means "feel" as a verb. By using the same word to describe both a thing and an action, Keats gets at precisely how feeling feels. Like light, emotion can behave like both a wave and a particle: a process and a solid object. The "feel of not to feel it" thus lands, heavy and lumpen, on a grieving person's heart.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "In drear nighted December / Too happy, happy"
- **Line 5:** "them"
- **Line 6:** "them"
- **Line 7:** "them"
- **Lines 9-10:** "In drear nighted December / Too happy happy"
- **Line 15:** "Never never"
- **Line 21:** "feel," "feel," "it"
- **Line 22:** "it"
- **Line 23:** "it"

VOCABULARY

Drear nighted (Line 1, Line 9) - That is, dreary-nighted: having nights that are dark, cold, and gloomy.

Happy (Line 2, Line 10) - "Happy" here doesn't merely mean cheerful, but *lucky*.

Ne'er (Line 3, Line 11) - A contraction of "never."

Felicity (Line 4) - Happiness and good fortune.

Glew (Line 7) - A variant spelling of "glue." In other words, ice can't hold the tree's branches back forever—it'll melt one day.

At the prime (Line 8) - That is, in the spring, the "prime" of the year. (In French and Italian, the words for spring—*printemps* and *primavera*—both share roots with the word "prime," meaning "first.")

Apollo (Line 12) - The Greco-Roman god of the sun.

Fretting (Line 14) - Interlaced geometrical patterning. The word evokes both the way light on water can seem to form a net-like pattern and the way that ice forms frosty crystalline designs. It also suggests, punnily, that the brooks aren't *fretting*, or worrying, about being frozen.

Petting (Line 15) - Sulking, complaining.

Would 'twere so (Line 17) - That is, "would that it were so"—"I wish it were that way."

Writh'd (Line 20) - A contraction of "writhed"—that is, squirmed in pain.

Steel (Line 23) - Strengthen, toughen.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"In drear nighted December" uses a form of Keats's own invention:

- Each of the poem's three eight-line stanzas (or octaves) is written in short lines of iambic trimeter—lines of three iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "A gen- | tle girl | and boy."
  - Copious feminine endings make even these crisp, brief lines feel sad. The extra syllable at the end of "The feel | of not | to feel it," for instance, seems to hang its head.
- Each stanza uses an ABABCCCD rhyme scheme, a pattern of rhyme that splits each octave into a pair of four-line sections: the singsongy ABAB and the insistent CCCD.
  - This division captures the shape of the speaker's sorrow: sometimes soft and wistful, sometimes driving like a nail.

Combined with echoing repetitions, this form makes the poem sounds rather like a folk song, a universal tale of grief. Rather than making the traditional symbolic choice here, though—using the pathetic fallacy to suggest that nature grieves in winter just as people grieve their losses—this song drives a wedge between sad humanity and the unperturbed (if chilly) natural world.

METER

"In drear nighted December" is written in iambic trimeter. That means that each of its lines consists of three iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in line 2:

> Too hap- | py, hap- | py tree

But there's a wrinkle. Many lines—notably, the rhymed triplets that appear in each stanza—use what's known as a feminine ending. That means there's an extra unstressed syllable at the end of a line, as in line 21:

> The feel | of not | to feel it

That extra syllable creates a crestfallen, sinking rhythm,

evoking the speaker's defeated sense that emotional pain, unlike the winter, doesn't melt away so surely as ice does.

Notice that Keats often uses an old-fashioned poetic pronunciation of words that end in *-ed* here, giving them a full two syllables: "pass-ed," "numb-ed." If he doesn't want that extra syllable pronounced, he uses a contraction: "writh'd."

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of "In drear nighted December" runs as follows:

ABABCCCD

That movement from singsong, alternating ABAB passages into CCC triplets creates a mood of mingled melancholy and intensity: the speaker spends the first four lines of each stanza on a wistful sigh, then moves into an insistent statement of the way things are (or aren't) in this world.

While the A, B, and C rhymes vary across the poem, the final D rhyme stays the same throughout: "prime," "time," and "rhyme," the closing words of each stanza, all chime with each other, linking the stanzas and giving the poem's last word a feeling of sad inevitability.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a sorrowful, world-weary, and anonymous voice. Less a character in the poem than a remote observer, this speaker nevertheless seems to have seen enough of life to know how grief works. In this, the speaker resembles the young Keats himself, who—by the time he wrote this poem—had lost both of his parents, and would soon lose a beloved brother, too.

While plenty of Romantic speakers find consolation and divinity in the natural world (see Wordsworth's Immortality Ode for one important example), this poem's speaker can only look at the frozen trees and brooks with envy, longing for the "sweet forgetting" that lets them endure frost without suffering, wishing that feelings moved to as steady and predictable a rhythm as the seasons do.

Perhaps there's some unspoken comfort in the thought that everyone suffers together, though. The speaker doesn't focus narrowly on personal suffering, but describes humanity's shared plight: everyone must endure "the feel of not to feel it," one time or another.

SETTING

The poem is set (and was written) in "drear nighted December," the darkest, coldest part of the year. Looking around at an icy landscape, the speaker sees and feels it vividly, hearing the "sleety whistle" of the north wind and observing the "crystal fretting" that patterns the iced-over stream. But they also see the ghosts of summer's "green felicity" in this lifeless world, remembering the stream's "bubblings" even though the stream itself can't.

The setting isn't just a literal, particular December, but a symbolic drear night of the soul, a time of mourning over "passed joy" and keenly suffering "the feel of not to feel it." Trees don't remember being leafy when they're leafless, but, as the speaker laments, the human heart can rely on no such "sweet forgetting" when it's grieving.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Keats (1795-1821) is often seen as an archetypal Romantic poet: a dreamy, sensuous soul who died tragically young. But Keats was also a vigorous, funny writer, a working-class kid making inroads into a literary scene dominated by aristocratic figures like Lord Byron. He died obscure and poor, never knowing that he would become one of the world's best-loved poets. But he had a quiet faith in his own genius: in an early letter, he once declared, "I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death."

Keats was also among a notable crowd of English poets during his lifetime: he met or corresponded with most of his fellow Romantics. However, he never got too close to any of them. As a young writer, he was inspired by William Wordsworth, the granddaddy of English Romanticism—but was dismayed to find him pompous and conservative in person. ("Mr. Wordsworth," Wordsworth's wife Mary reprimanded the enthusiastic young Keats, "is never interrupted.") He had just one conversation with Samuel Taylor Coleridge (which seems to have felt more like a whirlwind than a friendly chat). And while Percy Shelley admired Keats's work, Keats never quite fell in with him and his elite clique; Byron, Shelley's close friend, was actively contemptuous of Keats. Keats's real circle was instead built from earthier London artists like Charles Lamb, Leigh Hunt, and Benjamin Haydon.

In spite of being something of an outsider in his time, Keats has indeed landed "among the English Poets" since his death. Ever since later Victorian writers like Tennyson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning resurrected his reputation, he's been one of the most beloved and influential of poets.

Keats dashed this deceptively simple poem off in December 1817—a period when lots of new and important ideas were brewing for him, including his famous idea of "Negative Capability":

> [...] at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean

> *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason [...]

Ending with what can't be said, this little poem itself—never published in Keats's lifetime—feels rather negatively capable.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Over the 25 years of his short life, John Keats saw more than his share of loss and pain. His mother and father both died while he was only a child, leaving him and his siblings in the care of their grandparents—who shortly also died. Thereafter, the four surviving Keats kids (one further brother died in infancy) grew up under the guardianship of the unsympathetic and grasping Mr. Abbey, a businessman who didn't have much time for John's poetic ambitions.

And this was only the beginning of Keats's troubles. When he wrote this poem in 1817, he couldn't know that he would soon have to nurse his beloved youngest brother Tom through a fatal case of tuberculosis, nor that his brother George would soon emigrate to America (a great and perilous distance in the 19th century). Nor could he know that he himself would contract tuberculosis and die only a few years later in 1821—a cruelly short time after he became engaged to his beloved Fanny Brawne, the literal girl next door, for whom he fell hard.

Keats approached his sufferings with preternatural wisdom and strength. In a letter he wrote to George in 1819, he described life and all its pains as a "Vale of Soul-Making":

> I will call the world a School instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read— I will call the human heart the horn Book used in that School— and I will call the Child able to read, the Soul made from that School and its hornbook. Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways!

In other words, while the young Keats laments the intractability of grief in this poem, a slightly older Keats reads such grief as a "necessary" part of life, an experience that gives the soul itself its form and identity. More than that, he felt, art that engaged truthfully with suffering had the power to transform pain into beauty.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/LYNhWMB1rvk)
- More on Keats — Learn more about Keats and his contemporaries via the Keats-Shelley Museum in Rome—housed in the apartment where Keats spent his last days. (https://keats-shelley.org/)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Keats's life and work via the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/john-keats)
- The Poem in Manuscript — See a copy of the poem written out by Keats's good friend John Reynolds. This version was once thought to be in Keats's own hand, since the friends' handwriting was similar. (https://ksh.roma.it/islandora/object/MANUSCRIPTS-BOX1%3A8)
- Keats's December — Learn more about the important December in particular when Keats wrote this poem: December 1817, when he was just about to make huge poetic and intellectual leaps. (https://johnkeats.uvic.ca/1817-12.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN KEATS POEMS

- Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art
- La Belle Dame sans Merci
- Ode on a Grecian Urn
- Ode on Indolence
- Ode on Melancholy
- Ode to a Nightingale
- Ode to Psyche
- On First Looking into Chapman's Homer
- On Seeing the Elgin Marbles
- On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again
- On the Grasshopper and Cricket
- On the Sea
- The Eve of St. Agnes
- This living hand, now warm and capable
- To Autumn
- When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be

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