

## = Frost at Midnight =

Frost at Midnight is a poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge , written in February 1798 . Part of the conversation poems , the poem discusses Coleridge 's childhood experience in a negative manner and emphasizes the need to be raised in the countryside . The poem expresses hope that Coleridge 's son , Hartley , would be able to experience a childhood that his father could not and become a true " child of nature " . The view of nature within the poem has a strong Christian element in that Coleridge believed that nature represents a physical presence of God 's word and that the poem is steeped in Coleridge 's understanding of Neoplatonism . Frost at Midnight has been well received by critics , and is seen as the best of the conversation poems .

## = = Background = =

Frost at Midnight was written in February 1798 when he described to Thomas Poole aspects of his childhood at Christ 's Hospital grammar school that are similar to the content of the poem . The rest comes from Coleridge 's experience with his friend , William Wordsworth . It was Wordsworth who provided Coleridge with a detailed description of the Lake District which served as a basis for Coleridge 's description of the place . The relationship between Coleridge and Wordsworth was a close friendship , and Coleridge helped rewrite many of Wordsworth 's poems during this time . Frost at Midnight was later connected to many of Wordsworth 's poems . The poem was published in a small work containing his other poems France : An Ode and Fears in Solitude .

The poem was intended to be added to Coleridge 's third edition of his collected poems , but a dispute with Charles Lloyd , a fellow writer , and Joseph Cottle , their mutual publisher , altered his plans . The poem was later collected in Sibylline Leaves , published in 1817 ( see 1817 in poetry ) . It was rewritten many times , and seven different versions were printed . Of these revisions , the 1798 edition differs from the others in the final six lines , which were removed in later versions . Of this removal , Coleridge explains in George Beaumont 's copy of the poems : " The last six lines I omit because they destroy the rondo , and return upon itself of the Poem . Poems of this kind & length ought to lie coiled with its tail round its head . "

## = = Poem = =

The image of soot in a grate in the early lines of the poem is a sign that a stranger would appear . The poem continues with a discussion of the narrator 's sleeping child :

Dear Babe , that sleepest cradled by my side ,  
Whose gentle breathings , heard in this deep calm ,  
Fill up the intersperséd vacancies  
And momentary pauses of the thought ! ( lines 44 ? 47 )

The narrator believes that his child will experience a better life than his own :

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 : ( lines 51 ? 58 )

The poem concluded with a message of hope for the narrator 's child :

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 nigh 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 . ( lines 65 ? 74 )

The original ending of the 1798 version of the poem described the narrator 's child and wife during winter :

Or whether the secret ministry of cold  
Shall hang them up in silent icicles ,  
Quietly shining to the quiet moon ,  
Like those , my babe ! which ere tomorrow 's warmth  
Have capp 'd their sharp keen points with pendulous drops ,  
Will catch thine eye , and with their novelty  
Suspend thy little soul ; then make thee shout ,  
And stretch and flutter from thy mother 's arms  
As thou wouldst fly for very eagerness . ( lines 72 ? 78 )

= = Themes = =

The narrator comes to an understanding of nature after being isolated and left to his thoughts . Nature becomes a comforter , but the narrator remembers his loneliness during childhood . During his final year at Christ 's Hospital , Coleridge completed a poem he titled " On Quitting School for College " for a school exercise . In the poem , he describes his time at the school as a pleasant experience . However , Frost at Midnight redefines the experience as one that deprived him of the countryside .

There is another quality to Coleridge 's retelling of his childhood experience : he adds supernatural descriptions to the common scenes of his youth . In particular , the church bells are able to make a promise of a better life . The Gothic elements of the poem connect it to many of his other works , including Ancient Mariner , " Ballad of the Dark Ladie " , Fears in Solitude , France : An Ode , The Nightingale , " Three Graves " , and " Wanderings of Cain " .

Within the poem , the narrator expresses his hope that his child , Hartley Coleridge , will experience a life connected to nature as represented by features typical of the Lake District , which Coleridge in common with other Lake Poets revered . This is similar to what Coleridge 's friend William Wordsworth does with the narrator of Tintern Abbey , a poem composed later that year . Many of the feelings of the narrator for his child are connected to Coleridge 's sonnet " To a Friend Who Asked , How I Felt When the Nurse Presented My Infant to Me " . The ideas about nature in This Lime @-@ Tree Bower are transformed into the basis for an education , and Hartley is to learn through nature in an innocent way . Unlike Wordsworth 's nature , Coleridge 's has a Christian presence and nature is a physical presence of God 's word . Coleridge 's understanding of God is Neoplatonic and emphasizes a need to experience the divine knowledge .

Like many of the conversation poems , Frost at Midnight touches on Coleridge 's idea of " One Life " , which connects mankind to nature and to God . Touching on themes that come up in The Eolian Harp , Religious Musings , and other poems , the poem produces the image of a life that the narrator 's child will experience in the countryside . The boy would become a " child of nature " and raised free of the constraints found in philosophical systems produced by those like William Godwin .

= = Critical response = =

Christopher Moody , in the Monthly Review of May 1799 , declared that the original six lines of the ending were " flat " , a view that Coleridge probably agreed with .

During the 20th century , Virginia Radley argues , " Although no conversation poem can rightly be said to stand equally with the poems of high imagination ... certainly " Frost at Midnight " and " This

Lime @-@ tree Bower ... " both have within them that quality of heart so essential to these latter poems . Because of this quality , and because of the striking effectiveness of their imagery , these poems can be said to be the true harbingers of Coleridge 's greatest poems " .

Richard Holmes declares that the poem " is one of the most intricately structured of all the Conversation Poems , performing a characteristic ' outward and return ' movement through time and space ... This curve of memory and prophesy gives the poem a rich emotional resonance ? sadness , poignancy , hope , joy ? held in exquisite tension " . Rosemary Ashton believes that the poem is " one of [ Coleridge 's ] most delightful conversation poems " . Adam Sisman believes that Frost at Midnight is " perhaps the most beautiful of Coleridge 's ' conversation poems ' " .