Dejection: An Ode

POEM TEXT

Late, late yestreen I saw the new Moon,
With the old Moon in her arms;
And I fear, I fear, my Master dear!
We shall have a deadly storm.
(Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence)

1

Well! If the Bard was weather-wise, who made
The grand old ballad of Sir Patrick Spence,
This night, so tranquil now, will not go hence
Unroused by winds, that ply a busier trade
Than those which mould yon cloud in lazy flakes,
Or the dull sobbing draft, that moans and rakes
Upon the strings of this Æolian lute,
Which better far were mute.
For lo! the New-moon winter-bright!
And overspread with phantom light,
(With swimming phantom light o'erspread
But rimmed and circled by a silver thread)
I see the old Moon in her lap, foretelling
The coming on of rain and squally blast.
And oh! that even now the gust were swelling,
And the slant night-shower driving loud and fast!
Those sounds which oft have raised me, whilst they awed,
And sent my soul abroad,
Might now perhaps their wonted impulse give,
Might startle this dull pain, and make it move and live!

2

A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,
A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,
In word, or sigh, or tear—
O Lady! in this wan and heartless mood,
To other thoughts by yonder throstle woo'd,
All this long eve, so balmy and serene,
Have I been gazing on the western sky,
And its peculiar tint of yellow green:
And still I gaze—and with how blank an eye!
And those thin clouds above, in flakes and bars,
That give away their motion to the stars;
Those stars, that glide behind them or between,
Now sparkling, now bedimmed, but always seen:
Yon crescent Moon, as fixed as if it grew
In its own cloudless, starless lake of blue;
I see them all so excellently fair,
I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!

3

My genial spirits fail;
And what can these avail
To lift the smothering weight from off my breast?
It were a vain endeavour,
Though I should gaze for ever
On that green light that lingers in the west:
I may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.

4

O Lady! we receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does nature live:
Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!
And would we aught behold, of higher worth,
Than that inanimate cold world allowed
To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd,
Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
Enveloping the Earth—
And from the soul itself must there be sent
A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
Of all sweet sounds the life and element!

5

O pure of heart! thou need'st not ask of me
What this strong music in the soul may be!
What, and wherein it doth exist,
This light, this glory, this fair luminous mist,
This beautiful and beauty-making power.
Joy, virtuous Lady! Joy that ne'er was given,
Save to the pure, and in their purest hour,
Life, and Life's effluence, cloud at once and shower,
Joy, Lady! is the spirit and the power,
Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower

A new Earth and new Heaven,
Undreamt of by the sensual and the proud—
Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud—
We in ourselves rejoice!
And thence flows all that charms or ear or sight,
All melodies the echoes of that voice,
All colours a suffusion from that light.

6

There was a time when, though my path was rough,
This joy within me dallied with distress,
And all misfortunes were but as the stuff
Whence Fancy made me dreams of happiness:
For hope grew round me, like the twining vine,
And fruits, and foliage, not my own, seemed mine.
But now afflictions bow me down to earth:
Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth,
But oh! each visitation
Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,
My shaping spirit of Imagination.
For not to think of what I needs must feel,
But to be still and patient, all I can;
And haply by abstruse research to steal
From my own nature all the natural man—
This was my sole resource, my only plan:
Till that which suits a part infects the whole,
And now is almost grown the habit of my soul.

7

Hence, viper thoughts, that coil around my mind,
Reality's dark dream!
I turn from you, and listen to the wind,
Which long has raved unnoticed. What a scream
Of agony by torture lengthened out
That lute sent forth! Thou Wind, that rav'st without,
Bare crag, or mountain-tairn, or blasted tree,
Or pine-grove whither woodman never clomb,
Or lonely house, long held the witches' home,
Methinks were fitter instruments for thee,
Mad Lutanist! who in this month of showers,
Of dark brown gardens, and of peeping flowers,
Mak'st Devils' yule, with worse than wintry song,
The blossoms, buds, and timorous leaves among.
Thou Actor, perfect in all tragic sounds!
Thou mighty Poet, e'en to frenzy bold!
What tell'st thou now about?
'Tis of the rushing of a host in rout,
With groans of trampled men, with smarting wounds—
At once they groan with pain, and shudder with the cold!
But hush! there is a pause of deepest silence!
And all that noise, as of a rushing crowd,
With groans, and tremulous shudderings—all is over—
It tells another tale, with sounds less deep and loud!
A tale of less affright,
And tempered with delight,
As Otway's self had framed the tender lay,—
'Tis of a little child
Upon a lonesome wild,
Nor far from home, but she hath lost her way:
And now moans low in bitter grief and fear,
And now screams loud, and hopes to make her mother hear.

8

'Tis midnight, but small thoughts have I of sleep:
Full seldom may my friend such vigils keep!
Visit her, gentle Sleep! with wings of healing,
And may this storm be but a mountain-birth,
May all the stars hang bright above her dwelling,
Silent as though they watched the sleeping Earth!
With light heart may she rise,
Gay fancy, cheerful eyes,
Joy lift her spirit, joy attune her voice;
To her may all things live, from pole to pole,
Their life the eddying of her living soul!
O simple spirit, guided from above,
Dear Lady! friend devoutest of my choice,
Thus mayest thou ever, evermore rejoice.

SUMMARY

Well then! If the ancient poet who wrote the fabulous old song about Sir Patrick Spence knew as much about weather as he seems to have, this evening—so calm at the moment—won't pass undisturbed by rougher winds than the ones that are slowly reshaping that cloud on the horizon, or the ones that seem to be crying as they play this wind-harp (though it would be much better if it stayed silent). Because, look! There's the new moon, wintery, ice-white, and covered over in a kind of ghostly light. (Yes, it's covered in ghostly light, but also has a

thin thread of silver surrounding it.) And I see the old moon sitting in the new moon's lap, a sure sign that there's a storm coming. And, oh, I wish that the storm were gathering already, and the night rain was falling hard and loud. The sounds of such storms—which have often startled me from my seat, awing me and making my spirit go on strange journeys—might just do what they often do, and might break through my numb, deadening suffering and give it some kind of life.

I feel a numb despair, empty, dark, and dismal—a smothered, tiring, emotionless despair, which I can't even seem to make go away by talking about it, or by crying. Oh, my dear Lady! In this sickly, drained mood, I've been drawn away to other thoughts by the song of that little bird; this whole warm, calm evening long, I've been looking toward the sky in the west, which warns of a storm with its strange yellowish-green color. I'm still looking at that sky—but it's as if I'm not even seeing it. And look at those wispy clouds, in shreds and long rows—the ones that, as they move, make it look as if the stars are moving instead, gliding past in the background, sometimes shining and sometimes muted, but always visible. And look at the crescent moon, which seems to be growing right out of a pool of pure blue sky. I see all of these gorgeous sights—but I *only* see their beauty, I can't *feel* it.

My cheerfulness fails me; why would I ever have thought that beautiful sights alone could possibly lift this heavy, deadening pain from my heart? It would be useless for me to try to feel differently than I do; even if I stared forever at that strange green sunset light, I know I could never find, in the mere look of things, the vibrant feelings and animation I'm longing for: those have to come from inside.

Oh, my dear Lady! We only get what we give; only through our own feelings does the natural world seem alive and animated with meaning. It's our own minds that make nature look beautiful as a bride or terrible as a corpse. And if we want to see anything better and more meaningful than what the lifeless, chilly world gives to most of the poor suckers who live out isolated, worry-blighted lives, our own souls have to send out a kind of light, a glorious and holy light, a beautiful glowing cloud that wraps around the whole world. The soul has to create the sweetness and power of all sounds itself: every beautiful sound is animated by the soul.

Oh, you good-hearted Lady! You of all people don't have to ask me what that music of the soul is—or where it comes from, this shining, beautiful, misty light, which is both beautiful itself and the source of all beauty. It's joy, noble Lady—joy that only the spiritually pure, in their very purest moments, receive. Joy is life itself, and something that flows from life: it's like both a cloud and the rain that falls from that cloud. Joy is the energy which, when we marry ourselves to nature, we receive as a wedding gift: it creates a whole new world and a whole new heaven, one that people too caught up in greed or ego can't even dream of. Joy is the lovely voice we hear in beautiful sounds, joy is the shining cloud that envelops the earth—and joy comes from inside us! Everything that delights our ears or our eyes comes from that joy: every sweet melody we hear is just an echo of joy's voice, and every gorgeous color is just joy's light gently shining out into the world.

There was once a time when, even though I had plenty of struggles, the joy I felt made my unhappiness into a game. All my bad luck was just material out of which I could build happy daydreams. Back then, I had hope, which grew around me as closely as a vine, and which made me feel as if I already possessed all the fruits and flowers of my future happiness. But now, my sufferings weigh me down to the ground. I wouldn't care if they simply made me unhappy. But, oh, it's so much worse: every attack of the dejection I'm suffering now takes away the power nature gave me the day I was born: the world-shaping, meaning-making Imagination. You see, trying not to think about the feelings I can't help but have, and trying instead to be quiet and patient as much as possible, smothering my own natural feelings in obscure studies: this was the only thing I could think of to do, my only plan for dealing with my pain. But now, the numbness that I've been trying to force on one part of my feelings has infected *all* my feelings, like a disease; now, numbness has almost become my soul's usual state.

Get out of here, snaky, strangling thoughts—reality's awful nightmare! I turn away from you and instead listen to the wind, which has been howling away like a crazy person in the background without my noticing. What a tormented, drawn-out scream the wind-harp makes, as if it were being tortured! You, Wind, ranting and raving outside: barren rocks, or mountain lakes, or wind-bent trees, or pinewoods that no one has ever climbed to, or isolated houses that people say witches live in—any of those would be more suitable instruments for you than my wind-harp, you crazed lute-player! In this rainy month, when all the gardens are muddy and brown and little flowers are just starting to bloom, you, Wind, seem to be throwing a perverse, demonic Christmas party, howling worse than you would even in winter among the little sprouting plants. You actor, giving a perfect tragic performance! You powerful poet, caught up in a creative frenzy! What are you talking about now? You seem to be telling the story of a defeated army, whose soldiers moan and nurse painful wounds, now crying out and now shaking with cold. But, shush! The wind has stopped for a moment, leaving a deep silence, and that terrible noise like a fleeing crowd, full of cries and fearful shaking—it's all over now. Now, the storm is telling a different story, more quietly. It's a less frightening story, and one that's softened by a little bit of pleasure, as if it were one of the poet Otway's gentle songs. It's the story of a little kid lost in a desolate wilderness. She's not too far from home, but she can't find her way. Now, she moans with sadness and terror—and now, she screams, hoping her mother will hear her.

It's midnight now, but there's no chance I'm going to sleep any

time soon. I hope my dear Lady won't go through these kinds of long, sleepless nights often! Visit her, kindly Sleep, on your healing wings. And may this mountain storm give birth to something new—or turn out to be a whole lot of fuss about nothing. May all the stars sparkle over my Lady's house, quiet as though they were watching over the earth as it sleeps. May my Lady wake up lighthearted, full of happy daydreams and with cheer in her eyes. May Joy raise her spirits, and may Joy give her voice its sound. May the whole world, from the north pole to the south, seem vibrantly alive to her—and may her life mingle with the world's life, so the two flow together like a stream! Oh, my pure, sweet spirit, guided by God: my dear Lady, my most fervently chosen friend, may you feel joy always and forever.

THEMES

DESPAIR AND EMOTIONAL NUMBNESS

As the unhappy speaker of "Dejection: An Ode" looks out his window at a spectacular night sky, he knows that something is missing. In the depths of his "dejection" (a kind of bone-deep suffering that the poem hints has emerged from an unrequited love), he can't seem to feel a thing about the awe-inspiring beauty before him. The real difference between a life of "worth" and a life of empty despair, he observes, isn't about having good feelings versus having bad feelings. It's about having the ability to feel *at all*. "Dejection" leaves this speaker completely out of touch with the world, unable to respond to what he sees right before his eyes.

The "pain" the speaker is suffering as he writes isn't any kind of sharp, urgent agony. Rather, it's "a grief without a pang" (that is, without a stab of pain)—a dreary, colorless experience of flat nothingness. The speaker can't even break through his numbness with a "sigh" or a "tear": there's absolutely no relief from this kind of suffering, precisely because it stops him from really feeling *anything*, even true sorrow. A more straightforwardly acute pain, the speaker implies, would be far preferable to this nothingness.

Not only is the speaker's "dejection" dull and unbreakable, but it also cuts him off from the whole world. Gazing out the window into a spectacular, stormy evening sky, the speaker is perfectly capable of noting all its qualities in vivid detail, right down to the "peculiar tint of yellow green" in the west where the sun has just set. But his numbness means that he can only "see, not feel" the strange beauty of the scene. His dejection works like an isolation chamber: he's trapped inside himself, unable to connect to the world.

Worse still, the speaker blames himself for losing this connection. It's by trying "not to think of what I needs must feel"—that is, to damp down painful emotions, like his impossible love for the "Lady" to whom this poem is addressed—that he's gotten himself into this state, he believes. That one patch of enforced numbness has "infect[ed]" his whole "soul" like a terrible disease. There's no way, the poem suggests, to cut off just a part of one's feelings; a dejected emptiness has a nasty way of spreading and growing.

The experience of "dejection," the poem suggests, is terrible not because it's excruciating, but because it's isolating, numbing, deadening, insidious—and seemingly impenetrable. Lost in a wasteland of dull misery, the poem's speaker can only try his best to remember what "Joy" felt like and to hold out a sliver of hope that, like the screams of a "little child" wandering through a storm, his cries for help might eventually be answered.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 15-20
- Lines 21-38
- Lines 39-41
- Lines 82-93
- Lines 94-95

JOY AND IMAGINATION

Joy, to the speaker of "Dejection," is what makes an "inanimate cold world" into something of "higher worth." In other words, joy is what makes life worth living. But joy isn't something that the outside world bestows like a gift. Rather, the speaker insists, joy is something that comes from within—and more specifically from the *imagination*: the creative power to invest the world with one's own sense of meaning and beauty. Joy, this poem ultimately suggests, moves from the *inside out*, not the *outside in*.

Reflecting on what's missing in his current "deject[ed]" state, the speaker concludes that it's not anything to do with the outside world. As he looks out at a wild and glorious storm, he realizes that it takes an inner "beautiful and beauty-making power" to make even the most astonishing sights seem to come to life.

That "power," he declares, is his "shaping spirit of Imagination": the ability to use his imagination to *connect* his own feelings and "passions" to what he sees around him (perhaps through writing poetry, for instance). Simply being able to see a reflection of his own inner life in the outside world is the most essential form of this power—an ability that "nature," the speaker believes, "gave [him] at [his] birth." This capacity is the exact opposite of numbing "dejection," which cuts him off from feeling and experience.

The imagination is what produces "Joy," this speaker explains—and "Joy" is far deeper than just a good mood. Rather, it's a "fair luminous cloud," an inner light that emerges from the "soul itself" and "envelop[s] the earth." To feel joy is to feel as if

one has, in some sense, *absorbed* the world with one's imagination, making it part of one's own "life": "in our life alone," the speaker observes, "does Nature live." Without this relationship, in which the speaker's imagination imbues the outside world with feeling, everything just looks "blank."

Thus, when the speaker imagines the storm as a "Poet" and a "Lutanist" towards the end of the poem, there's a sense that he might not be quite so dejected as he was at the beginning. By seeing the storm as an artist—in fact, as a poet just like himself—he seems to be finding his way back into an imaginative (and thus joyful) relationship to the world again.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 47-58
- Lines 59-75
- Lines 76-86
- Lines 134-139

HUMANITY'S RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE

Nature, in this poem as in many Romantic poems, is a sublime force: awe-inspiring, beautiful, and terrible all at once. But "Dejection" argues that nature's might isn't, well, completely natural; rather, nature draws much of its power from the way that people *perceive* it. It takes a human perspective, this poem suggests, to give nature its character and force.

The speaker spends much of his time in this poem watching a storm rolling in and charting his changing reactions to it. At first, he's able to "see" the strange loveliness of the eerie, green-tinged dusk sky, but not to "feel" it. Even a truly spectacular display of natural beauty has no power in itself to pull him out of his funk. Much as he'd love the "outward forms" of the "inanimate cold world" to "startle [his] dull pain and make it live," they don't have that ability on their own.

But toward the end of the poem, the speaker begins to get into the swing of things, imagining the stormwind that has now broken over the countryside as a frenzied artist, a screaming voice, a rampaging army, and, most poignantly, a lost "little child" crying out for help. These personifications show him investing the outer world with *his own* buried feelings and experiences, from fear to rage to manic creativity to forlorn loneliness. It's only because he's able to experience the storm as an expression of feeling that he can really appreciate its power; without that kind of human connection, the poem suggests, nature remains "blank."

Humanity and nature thus have a strange, reciprocal relationship: nature isn't sublime in a vacuum! It takes a receptive human mind to transform natural power into beauty and meaning. As the speaker puts it, "in our life alone does nature live": nature takes its color and character from the way that people see it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20
- Lines 27-38
- Lines 42-46
- Lines 47-49
- Lines 67-70
- Lines 80-81
- Lines 96-125

HEARTBREAK AND LONGING

"Dejection" presents itself as a rather abstract, philosophical poem about the relationship between people's inner selves and the outside world. But just under the surface, it's also about a particular and agonizing love. The speaker addresses the poem to a nameless "Lady" he can't let himself think about too much, because "what he needs must feel" for her is so painful. In other words, his unrequited love for her has become a terrible burden. But that same love also seems to give him a sense of meaning and companionship. Unrequited love, this poem suggests, is an experience so overwhelming it can shape a heartbroken lover's whole worldview.

The speaker directs all his reflections on his "dejection" and "Joy" to a "Lady" whom he clearly thinks the world of. He sees her as "pure of heart," "virtuous," and, generally speaking, an ideal confidant. She doesn't need to "ask of [him]" what joy is like, he declares: in his eyes, she might as well be the very embodiment of that precious feeling. Alone in his numb sorrow, he nevertheless seems to feel as if she's right there with him—a "friend" who can understand him.

But, of course, she's not really there, and there are hints that the speaker's feelings for her are part of what made him this dejected in the first place. Trying "not to think of what [he] needs must feel"—that is, trying his best not to focus on his longing for his beloved, perhaps because she can't or won't love him back—seems to have shut *all* the speaker's feelings down. That effort has backfired, leaving him unable to feel much of anything; instead, he suffers a dull "grief without a pang."

The speaker's experience of impossible or unrequited love thus both *causes* and *mirrors* his suffering. Because he can't let himself indulge his feelings for his "Lady," he becomes cut off from the world—and being cut off from the world, the poem suggests, itself feels a lot like a kind of broken relationship!

However, the speaker's deep respect, admiration, and love for his "Lady" remains intact through all this struggle. When he closes the poem by praying that she'll never go through anything like his own dreadful "dejection," it's clear that his love

for her endures, no matter how hard he tries to bury it. He "must" feel for her, even when he can't feel much else.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 25-28
- Lines 47-48
- Lines 59-70
- Lines 87-93
- Lines 126-139

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Well! If the Bard was weather-wise, who made
The grand old ballad of Sir Patrick Spence,
This night, so tranquil now, will not go hence
Unroused by winds, that ply a busier trade
Than those which mould yon cloud in lazy flakes,

"Dejection" begins with a cry. "Well!" the speaker starts, and as the poem develops, it's hard to tell whether his outburst is excited, resigned, thoughtful, or some strange combination of all those feelings.

But one thing the speaker's informal "Well!" makes clear is that this will be an intimate poem. Grand epics don't start with an everyday "Well!": they kick off with a "Sing, o Muse" or a "Hwaet!" Already, readers can feel that this ode will bring them right up close to the speaker and his inner life.

Here at the beginning, the speaker is indeed doing something pretty everyday: looking out his window at a "tranquil" night, an evening stirred by breezes that, sculptor-like, "mould" the clouds into "lazy flakes." But all that calm, this speaker believes, is only the prelude to a storm—a personified wind who, the speaker says with a touch of ominous understatement, "pl[ies] a busier trade" than gentle cloud-moulding.

He guesses that a storm is coming, not because he's reading a barometer, but because he's familiar with a "grand old ballad": the ancient Scottish tale of Sir Patrick Spence, an unfortunate (and incompetent) sea captain. Lines from that ballad form the poem's epigraph—lines in which a sailor warns Sir Patrick of disaster. The sight of the "new Moon" holding the "old Moon in her arms," the sailor says, threatens a "deadly storm."

The speaker of "Dejection," it seems, is a person who lives more in the world of old songs than the world of weather reports. And perhaps he's also a person who sees nature as a dangerous, magical place. The eerie image of the new moon cradling the old is easier to imagine as a personification than a description of a natural phenomenon: it might take readers a moment to grasp that what the speaker is *literally* seeing above him is a crescent moon that still shows the outlines of the full moon.

In just a few lines, then, the reader knows this much:

- This will be a poem told from the intimate, up-close perspective of its speaker.
- That speaker is a person who sees the natural world in terms of stories and visions, imbuing nature with a personality.
- And, if the old anonymous "Bard" who wrote "Sir Patrick Spence" was indeed "weather-wise," there's a storm coming.

LINES 6-8

Or the dull sobbing draft, that moans and rakes
Upon the strings of this Æolian lute,
Which better far were mute.

In these next lines, the speaker turns his attention from the world outside to the room where he sits. A "draft" seems to be creeping in, making the "Æolian lute" on his windowsill sing an eerie song.

An Æolian lute, sometimes also known as an Eolian harp, is an instrument designed to be played, not by a person, but by the wind. (Its name alludes to Æolus, a classical wind god.) Such wind-harps weren't just popular parlor toys in the 19th century, they were a common symbol for poets, who sometimes saw themselves less as powerful creators than as passive instruments for the forces of inspiration to play on. The word "inspiration" itself originally meant "being filled with breath or air": the idea that the air might be a creative force is a very old one.

These allusions make it seem pretty likely that this speaker is none other than Coleridge himself: that is, a poet, someone who might feel he has something in common with that "lute." (Coleridge's other poem on the "Eolian Harp" makes that seem even likelier.) If he's a poetic wind-harp, then he's at the mercy of the inspiring air; either the wind will make him "sing," or it won't.

And right now, the wind seems to be in a mood. It isn't just a breeze anymore; it's a "dull sobbing draft," "moan[ing]" as it "rakes" the lute's strings. Sure, the lute might be making music—but in this speaker's eyes, it would be much "better" if it stayed "mute" and silent, if these are the sounds it's going to make.

In other words, the coming storm doesn't just suggest trouble in the outside world. All the personification of the wind here hints that there's something going wrong *inside* this speaker: he, like the lute, can only make tragic "moans" as the symbolic winds of feeling and inspiration "play" him.

LINES 9-14

For lo! the New-moon winter-bright!

And overspread with phantom light,
(With swimming phantom light o'erspread
But rimmed and circled by a silver thread)
I see the old Moon in her lap, foretelling
The coming on of rain and squally blast.

At last, the speaker turns his eyes up to the "New-moon" he hinted at in the first lines and now finds himself almost hypnotized by its strange glow. Listen to his voice here:

For lo! the New-moon winter-bright!
And overspread with phantom light,
(With swimming phantom light o'erspread
But rimmed and circled by a silver thread)

That swift chiasmus makes these lines feel almost like a double-take, as if the speaker is so struck by the moon that he needs to take another, closer look: *No, it's not just phantom light, it's* swimming *phantom light*.

The imagery in these lines walks a peculiar line between precise nature-writer description and something more fantastical. A "winter-bright" sliver of crescent moon is just plain vivid, conjuring an ice-white moon in cold, crisp air. But that moon also seems, not to be shining itself, but to be "overspread with phantom light"—that is, covered over with a kind of ghostly glow. And that "silver thread" around it at once evokes the halo one sometimes sees around the moon on a frosty night, and a piece of shimmering embroidery. On the one hand, the speaker is being exact here; on the other, his clear-eyed vision of the world is tempered with magic and art.

That balance becomes even clearer when he looks up again to see the "old Moon" in the lap of the "New-moon," just as the sailor described in the ballad of Sir Patrick Spence. This personification links the speaker both to a world in which even the moon is alive and to a "grand old" artistic tradition. At the same time, it provides what will turn out to be an accurate weather forecast, predicting the "coming on of rain and squally blast."

LINES 15-20

And oh! that even now the gust were swelling,
And the slant night-shower driving loud and fast!
Those sounds which oft have raised me, whilst they awed,
And sent my soul abroad,
Might now perhaps their wonted impulse give,
Might startle this dull pain, and make it move and live!

The thought that "rain and squally blast"—that is, rain and stormwinds—might be on their way doesn't seem to faze this speaker. In fact, he longs for the storm to break and for the rain to come down so hard that it falls "slant," at a sharp angle.

Listen to the sound of his language here:

And oh! that even now the gust were swelling,
And the slant night-shower driving loud and fast!

All that sibilance and consonance mimics the rush and rattle of a ferocious "night-shower."

The sounds of storms, the speaker remembers, have often stirred and inspired him in the past, sending his "soul abroad" on strange journeys. And that's precisely what he hopes the coming storm might do now. This "tranquil" night is all well and good, but it's too peaceful to do what the speaker needs it to do: "startle this dull pain, and make it move and live."

In other words, just as the previous lines about the Aeolian lute hinted, this speaker is suffering. But his pain is neither a stormy, tempestuous agony, nor a "tranquil," quiet grief. It's something worse: a heavy, inert, "dull" feeling, all the worse for being deadening.

Take a look at the way he phrases these hopes:

Might now perhaps their wonted impulse give,
Might startle this dull pain, and make it move and live!

Here, the speaker turns from vague hopes the storm will give him their "wonted impulse"—that is, the same surge of feelings they usually give him—to a more specific wish that the storm might crack his suffering. The anaphora here makes it sound as if he barely dares voice those hopes. He starts by wishing for stormy business as usual, and then repeats his first words, as if in a whisper, to ask for what he really wants: any kind of movement in his numbing "dull pain."

LINES 21-24

A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,
A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,
In word, or sigh, or tear—

The first stanza of the poem has seen the speaker gazing into the night, hoping a coming storm might make him feel something—even if the feeling is pain. In this stanza, he begins with a look inward.

The poor speaker is suffering from a "grief" that feels all the worse because it won't quite come to the surface in a "pang" (that is, a stab of pain). Instead, it's a dark, dull, dreary, and seemingly endless *flatness*—an "unimpassioned grief" for which he can find "no natural outlet." In other words, he can't even cry to relieve his feelings, nor can he speak about them. He's trapped in a terrible and inexpressible sorrow.

The way he describes this experience suggests just how frightened and "stifled" he feels. Look at his imagery here:

A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,

A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,

The words "void, dark, and drear" might be used to describe an empty, gloomy, barren landscape. But the words "stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned" are ones you'd use to describe a person—perhaps the speaker himself, and perhaps his "grief" personified. The speaker's unhappiness here seems to feel both like the world around him and the world inside him; everywhere he turns, the same terrible numbness looks flatly back at him.

Even the poem's meter here shows just how choked and frozen the speaker feels. Like most odes, this poem doesn't use any steady pattern of meter; rather, it varies its rhythms to fit its speaker's tone and subject. The speaker begins this stanza in iambic pentameter—lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. But listen to what happens as he comes to the end of this passage:

Which finds | no nat- | ural out- | let, no | relief,
In word, | or sigh, | or tear—

That last line is in iambic trimeter, a line of only three iambs. And each word in that line is a single monosyllable, falling as hard as a dropped stone. It's as if the sheer weight of his inexpressible suffering knocks the speaker out of his rhythm; he stops abruptly, with an end-stopped dash that feels like a choked silence.

LINES 25-30

O Lady! in this wan and heartless mood,
To other thoughts by yonder throstle woo'd,
All this long eve, so balmy and serene,
Have I been gazing on the western sky,
And its peculiar tint of yellow green:
And still I gaze—and with how blank an eye!

The speaker has just described his "dejection"—an experience that a modern-day reader might imagine as similar to depression, though Coleridge wouldn't have thought in those clinical terms. The speaker's inner and outer world feel equally flat, bleak, dark, and dreary, and he can't even cry about it: he's miserably numb. Now, he seems to reach out for help, making an apostrophe to an anonymous "Lady" who's about to become an important figure in this poem.

Alas, as in all apostrophes, that "Lady" isn't really there and can't respond; the speaker is speaking to her only in his imagination. But the speaker seems to feel that, if she *were* there, she'd completely understand the "wan" (that is, dim, faint, and feeble) mood he describes.

He's also a little bit reluctant to spell out his feelings for her, only *hinting* that he's in love. But when he says that it was "yonder throstle" (in other words, that songbird over there) that "woo'd" him to "other thoughts," it doesn't take a code-cracker to guess what those "other thoughts" might have been. It's as if he's saying, *oh, you know, I was sitting here listening to the thrush singing and just happened to think of you...*

Now, he seems almost to be writing a letter to this "Lady," describing how he's spent this long, strange evening. (And in fact, the first draft of this poem was titled "Letter to Sara Hutchison"—a letter-poem for a "Lady" with whom Coleridge had a complex and painful relationship.) Clearly, he respects and values her a great deal; as readers will see, he's about to trust her with an outpouring of both deep feeling and complex philosophy.

Once again, the speaker's observations of the outer world say a great deal about his *inner* world and his personality. Look at the imagery here:

All this long eve, so balmy and serene,
Have I been gazing on the western sky,
And its peculiar tint of yellow green:

Here, on a "balmy and serene" (that is, warm and peaceful) evening, the speaker has been looking towards the sunset and observing an ominous, stormy "tint of yellow green" there. All this outward calm, it seems, isn't going to last long, and perhaps the speaker's inner stillness isn't either.

That "peculiar tint of yellow green" also marks the speaker out as a person who's paying careful attention to what's right in front of him. He isn't describing any old generic calm before a storm; he's painting a picture of a very specific, "peculiar" night, an evening upon which he's making careful note of *exactly* the color of the sky. This speaker, these lines suggest, is—at his best—an alert, sensitive, responsive observer.

That makes this line feel even more painful:

And still I gaze—and with how blank an eye!

The speaker may be able to observe the natural world in fresh, lively detail. But his own "eye" feels "blank": it's as if everything he notices so carefully here just can't make a real impression on him. His sight is functioning perfectly, but it can't seem to link up with his feelings.

And at this point, readers might begin to suspect that the speaker's feelings for this "Lady"—whom he brings up seemingly out of nowhere, as if he can't hold himself back any longer—might have more than a little to do with this split between the speaker's eye and his heart.

LINES 31-36

And those thin clouds above, in flakes and bars,
That give away their motion to the stars;
Those stars, that glide behind them or between,
Now sparkling, now bedimmed, but always seen:

Yon crescent Moon, as fixed as if it grew
In its own cloudless, starless lake of blue;

The speaker goes on gazing up at the heavens, recording what he sees in careful detail. Just as in his description of the "western sky" and its "peculiar shade of yellow green," he's interested in one night in particular here: not a generically beautiful starry sky, but an evening with its own character, an evening that will only come around once.

As the speaker looks on, he notices not just the quality of the clouds, which are drifting in fine "flakes and bars," but the way they seem to interact with the stars:

- To imagine this scene, readers might try to remember a time they were seated in a train, waiting for it to pull away from the platform. If the train next to yours starts moving, it can create the illusion that it's actually *your* train that's rolling.
- And that's what the clouds do to the stars here: they "give away their motion" so that it's the stars that appear to "glide behind them or between," ducking in and out of cloudy veils.

The imagery here suggests a feeling of sped-up time; it's as if the speaker were a time-lapse camera, sitting perfectly still for hours to watch the night sky roll past.

But this imagery also evokes a sky that's full of feeling and personality. Those personified clouds "give away their motion" to the stars, like a gift, and the stars "glide" past like elegant ladies.

These images might also suggest the speaker's own longings. As the stars duck behind the clouds and out again, they're changeable—"now sparkling, now bedimmed"—but they're "always seen," always there, even if their appearance changes. Perhaps he's hoping against hope that his own ability to feel is similar: "bedimmed," but not gone.

LINES 35-38

Yon crescent Moon, as fixed as if it grew
In its own cloudless, starless lake of blue;
I see them all so excellently fair,
I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!

At last, the speaker looks back at the "crescent Moon" that has already played such an important role in his imagination. Now it's transformed from an eerie lady holding the "Old Moon" in her lap to a kind of island of calm: a "fixed," firm point that seems to grow right out of a "cloudless, starless lake of blue," untroubled by those moody, ever-moving clouds and stars.

Readers who are familiar with *Romeo and Juliet* might reflect that this is a pretty unusual way to think about the "inconstant moon," which is an ancient symbol of changeability and fickleness (among many other things!). In seeing a "crescent Moon"—itself just one phase in an ever-changing cycle—as somehow "fixed," the speaker again suggests that there's something *distinct* about this night: the moon might change later, but on this one evening, it's a crescent. And it's this "peculiar" evening that concerns the speaker.

In other words: these descriptions all suggest that the speaker is reaching out desperately for what's *right in front of him*. He isn't just saying "gosh, night skies are pretty"—not just using the stars and the moon and the clouds as generic images of natural beauty. Rather, he wants to be able to reach out and grab exactly the sky that's in front of him—to embrace what's "peculiar" about the world, feeling the idiosyncratic loveliness of each moment.

But that's exactly what he can't do. After this stanza's long passage of intensely observed imagery, the speaker closes with these devastating lines:

I see them all so excellently fair,
I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!

The anaphora here makes the speaker's predicament plain: by repeating "I see," he makes it clear that to see and to "feel" are two very different experiences. He can describe this one strange, lovely night sky in detail all he wants—but just seeing it and describing it isn't enough. Without "feel[ing]," all this loveliness might as well be "blank."

These closing lines feel like a cry of desperation, but also like a confession. Remember, in the speaker's mind, that "Lady" is listening.

LINES 39-44

My genial spirits fail;
And what can these avail
To lift the smothering weight from off my breast?
It were a vain endeavour,
Though I should gaze for ever
On that green light that lingers in the west:

The poem's first two stanzas have given a vivid, impressionistic, and intimate picture of the world around and inside the speaker, depicting a stunning night sky numbed to nothing by the speaker's "dejection." In the short, emphatic third stanza, the speaker steps back, developing his specific experience into a philosophy.

His "genial spirits"—that is, cheerful, hopeful moods—have "fail[ed]," the speaker says flatly: observing that he can "see," but not "feel," the beauty of the world around him seems to have been the final straw for him. He knows now that he could never find what he's looking for just by staring into the night sky; the *sight* of beauty alone can't "lift the smothering weight" of dejection. The metaphor suggests the speaker feels almost squashed flat by his misery, but perhaps also weighed down creatively, unable to soar on the "wings of poesy," as one of

Coleridge's contemporaries put it.

He goes on: it would be a "vain endeavour," or a fruitless task, to try to cure his dejection by looking out at the world; even if he "gaze[d] for ever" at the "peculiar shade of yellow green" that captured his attention earlier on, nothing would happen. (And the image of the speaker staring at the last gleam of sunset light that "lingers in the west" itself suggests a kind of desperation for the sun's symbolic warmth, hope, and courage.)

In other words: the speaker's meticulous eye and intellectual appreciation for beauty have no power on their own. And neither does the beauty of nature. If the speaker's dejection is going to lift, it won't be because he can observe that the world is beautiful, or because the world's beauty itself can reach out to him and cheer him up. He can't use his willpower to escape dejection; nor can he expect nature to make him feel anything. Natural beauty on its own, in his experience, doesn't have that power.

Before digging into the last two lines of stanza 3, take a moment to look back at the structure of these six lines. They use a regular rhyme scheme: AAB CCB. They use the same meter, too, moving from two intense, punchy lines of iambic trimeter (three da-DUMs in a row, remember) to a longer, more thoughtful line of iambic pentameter (five da-DUMs in a row).

Those formal choices make the first part of this stanza feel like a bold statement—and like the beginning of an argument. The speaker's language, rhymes, and rhythms all seem to say, "Here is what I know, without a doubt, about my grief." In the stanza's closing lines, he'll make a conclusive philosophical statement about the nature of feeling.

LINES 45-46

I may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.

At last, the speaker sums up the argument of his third stanza with unflinching certainty. Essentially, he's saying that it doesn't matter that nature is beautiful, and it doesn't matter that he can see, in great detail, just how beautiful it is. That's because merely *observing* the beauty of the world's "outward forms" can't shake the "unimpassioned grief" of his dejection. The "passion and the life" the speaker seeks don't just exist somewhere in the outside world, waiting for him to find them if only he looks hard enough. They only come from the inside.

That "passion" and "life" spring from inner "fountains"—a metaphor that suggests that the speaker is missing something as necessary and life-giving as water. But it also suggests that part of what he needs is a kind of *flow*. A fountain brings water out into the air from inside the earth; the speaker, too, needs "the passion and the life" to flow *out* from inside him *into* the world for the world to have any meaning.

And take special note of the speaker's use of the definite article here: he's not looking for any old "passion" and "life," but "the passion and the life"—known, familiar forces, unlike any others.

All of this suggests that the speaker has a very clear picture of what his problem is. He can't feel anything because those familiar "fountains" aren't running within him: there's nothing moving from inside him to the outside world. He can certainly take *in* nature's beauty through his observant "eye," but so long as nothing comes *out* in return, he can't connect with the world, or with his own emotions.

He's not just seeking some kind of "genial," cheery communion with the loveliness of nature, either. The word "passions" originally meant, not just strong feelings, but *suffering*. (The word "compassion," for instance, originally meant "suffering with someone.") As the speaker hinted above, the problem isn't that he's suffering; it's that what he's suffering is "a grief without a pang," a grief that doesn't even allow him to *feel* his own pain. What he wants isn't happiness; what he wants is the ability to feel at all.

These first three stanzas suggest, then, that there's a relationship between the ability to feel connected to the world, and the ability to feel one's own feelings. Dejection robs the speaker of both.

LINES 47-49

O Lady! we receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does nature live:
Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!

As the fourth stanza begins, the speaker starts to dig deeper and deeper into a philosophical argument. He's still addressing his reflections to his "Lady"—but now, it feels less as if he's telling her about his own personal struggles, and more as if he's reflecting on the nature of life itself, inviting her to look out at the world along with him. Perhaps he's even in retreat a little: finding no solace in the night sky, he turns inward to his own thoughts.

His central idea here is that it's that flowing inner "fountain" of "life" and "passion" that gives the outside world all of its power, energy, and beauty. "We receive," the speaker argues, "but what we give": people find nothing in the natural world that they didn't, in some way, put there themselves.

To help his readers to feel that point even more vividly, the speaker begins to personify nature:

- Nature "live[s]," the speaker says, through "our life"—that is, through human energy and perceptions.
- What's more, humanity *dresses* nature: "Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!" In other words, the way one looks at the natural world is what makes it seem beautiful as a bride or ghastly as a corpse.

Again: whatever makes the world feel alive and fresh has to flow out from inside people—but here, it also seems to be a relationship. And that flow, that relationship, isn't something people can will to happen. As this speaker well knows, one can't just choose how to experience the world. If he could *make* himself "feel" something about the strange and lovely night around him, rather than just numbly "see[ing]" its beauty, he'd have done so long ago.

At this point, readers might think back to that symbolic "Æolian lute" back in the first stanza. That instrument can only sing if the wind plays it. And the speaker, similarly, can't "sing" on his own. He can't will himself to feel, or to see nature in her "wedding garment" rather than her "shroud." If nature depends on human perception for its life and beauty, that doesn't give people power over nature: they're still at the mercy of some mysterious inspiring force themselves.

LINES 50-52

And would we aught behold, of higher worth,
Than that inanimate cold world allowed
To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd,

As the stanza continues, the speaker mixes his philosophy with social commentary. It's not just he who experiences dejection, he suggests, but the bulk of humanity. The "poor loveless ever-anxious crowd," he imagines, spends most of its life cut off from the experience of connection with the outside world that he so longs for now.

It's worth taking a moment to consider the adjectives in that description:

- If this "crowd" is "loveless," there's again a sense of a missing relationship: an inability to let a love for the personified "nature" of the previous lines flow out. Perhaps the speaker believes that those "fountains" of feeling he mentioned at the end of stanza 3 are dried up in most people.
- And perhaps that's because the crowd is "ever-anxious," scurrying around in a constant state of worry, dealing with their day-to-day lives.
- It's a "poor" life indeed for the mass of humankind, then—an adjective that suggests both the speaker's pity and the crowd's emotional poverty.

In other words, the speaker's dejection might be making him miserable—but it's also a fairly common state of affairs. In his view, not just everyone goes around experiencing the kind of communion with the world that he's looking for; most people, in fact, live their whole lives in "ever-anxious" blindness, experiencing only the "inanimate cold world" of a life without deep feeling and connection, never experiencing "aught of higher worth"—that is, anything more valuable.

LINES 53-58

Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
Enveloping the Earth—
And from the soul itself must there be sent
A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
Of all sweet sounds the life and element!

Those who hope to perceive "aught of higher worth"—that is, anything of greater value—than the "inanimate cold world" has to offer on its own, the poem goes on, thus have to experience something special:

> Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth
> A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
> Enveloping the Earth—

This surge of imagery turns from the flow of "fountains" to a paradoxical *cloud* of *light*—light made solid and tangible at the same time as it's airy and floating. And if this cloud is a "glory," it's not just shining, but holy, like a saint's golden halo. This "fair luminous cloud," the speaker suggests, doesn't just light up the outside world, but enfolds the "Earth" itself in a shining embrace.

These images aren't merely beautiful. They're also a pointed allusion to the Immortality Ode, an earlier poem by Coleridge's friend and collaborator William Wordsworth.

In that poem, Wordsworth mournfully puzzled over why the world no longer looks as miraculously lovely to him as it did when he was a child. He concludes that it's because people inevitably get accustomed to the world as they grow up, and can no longer perceive the inherent splendor of nature so easily. He described newborn souls arriving on earth "trailing clouds of glory"—clouds that come from Heaven itself and reveal divine beauty, but that slowly evaporate as people get older.

By borrowing the cloud imagery here, Coleridge at once honors Wordsworth's poetry and argues against his philosophy. *No, no*, he seems to say: *those "clouds of glory" are very real, but they don't trail behind us, they flow from inside us.*

Where Wordsworth's poem suggested that a fading connection with the outside world is the inevitable result of habit, age, and routine, Coleridge's poem argues that the ability to perceive "glory" in its fullness never vanishes forever. But it isn't just there for the taking, and it can't be forced. It has to spontaneously "issue forth," emerge, from the soul itself.

The speaker concludes this philosophical stanza with a third metaphor. The "glory" that animates the natural world is not just a fountain and a "luminous cloud," it's a "sweet and potent voice"—perhaps singing, perhaps speaking, but definitely given "birth" by the soul itself.

And this *inner* voice is the "life and element" of all other "sweet sounds" that there are. That is, it gives all the world's lovely sounds their identity, but it's also their "element"—a word that could mean both the stuff they're made out of and the substance they move through (the way that air is a bird's element, or water a fish's).

There's a complicated relationship here between what's *inner* and what's *outer*. The "passion" that flows from the soul both *fills* outside things, and *surrounds* them.

LINES 59-63

O pure of heart! thou need'st not ask of me
What this strong music in the soul may be!
What, and wherein it doth exist,
This light, this glory, this fair luminous mist,
This beautiful and beauty-making power.

At the beginning of the fifth stanza, the speaker turns back to the listening "Lady," addressing her as one who is "pure of heart." It's because of her innate purity that she "need'st not ask" the speaker what exactly the "fair luminous mist" he's been describing actually *is*. Something about her, the speaker implies, means she *must* understand the force that allows the soul to commune with the outside world.

These lines pay the Lady a compliment, but they also serve a rhetorical purpose. The Lady might indeed know just what the speaker is talking about—but to the reader, it's still a mystery.

Perhaps it's even a rather unexpected idea. The speaker has already carefully describing the nature of this outpouring of the soul, finding a wealth of metaphors—light, water, music—to help imagine its flow, its texture, and its actions. It might come as a surprise to readers that the speaker has an even *more* specific sense of what this force "may be."

This passage thus works like a drumroll, preparing readers for a deeper understanding of the "strong music in the soul" whose actions the speaker has been describing. The speaker's many repetitions of language from the previous stanza—"this light, this glory, this fair luminous mist," for instance—strengthen the sense that this very force is about to be somehow unveiled.

Whatever this force is, it's a "beautiful and beauty-making power"—a moment of polyptoton that stresses the idea that this force both *creates* all loveliness and is lovely *in and of itself*. Perhaps readers will think back here to the idea that this "light" is also both the inner "life" and the outer "element" of "all sweet sounds": there seems to be something endlessly lovely and endlessly creative about this force.

LINES 64-66

Joy, virtuous Lady! Joy that ne'er was given,
Save to the pure, and in their purest hour,
Life, and Life's effluence, cloud at once and shower,

After that dramatic buildup, the speaker finally reveals the identity of the "fair luminous cloud" that flows out from the soul to "envelop[] the earth": its name, he reveals with an exuberant cry, is "Joy, virtuous Lady!"

These three simple words overflow with meaning. The word "Joy" can work in a number of different ways here:

- On the simplest level, the speaker is revealing to his Lady that "Joy" is the name of the "light" he's been describing.
- But he could also be *expressing* joy, as if he were saying, "Oh joy!"—or encouraging his Lady to rejoice with him.
- He could *also* be describing "Joy" itself as a personified "virtuous Lady"—and if that's true, he might be suggesting that the Lady he's addressing practically *embodies* the "Joy" he's been describing.

All these rich possibilities are there at once under that first layer of meaning. And this sense of complementary meanings feeding into each other like streams is about to become important. For this "Joy," the speaker explains, is:

Life, and Life's effluence, cloud at once and shower,

In other words, it's the spirit of life itself, but also what flows *out* of life ("effluence" here refers to something that flows from life); it's both a "luminous cloud" and a sweet rainfall that issues from that cloud. This spirit of joy is endlessly generative: when it's flowing out from the soul, it seems both to fill, to surround, and to *create* the world, the simultaneous "life and element" of all beauty.

But here, too, the speaker begins to hint at why people don't just feel this life-giving joy all the time. Again, it's not something people can *try* to feel, but something that gets "given" to them like a gift—but only to "the pure, and in their purest hour." That's a pretty high standard of purity!

It's not clear yet exactly what this purity *is*, in the speaker's eyes. Perhaps it's a kind of virtue, or a kind of innocence. Or perhaps it's some other mysterious quality altogether. Whatever it is, the speaker believes his Lady has it in spades: it's because she's "pure of heart," remember, that he expects she already instinctively understands joy.

Saying joy's name for the first time seems to give the dejected speaker at least a breath of joy himself. Here, the flexible, emotive ode form really shines. Because there's no standard rhyme scheme to follow, the poem can use four exuberant end rhymes in a row: "hour," "shower," "power," and "dower." The unified rhymes here evoke joy's blissful fusion of soul and world.

LINES 67-69

Joy, Lady! is the spirit and the power,

Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower
A new Earth and new Heaven,

The speaker has spent the last few lines introducing "Joy" by name, explaining that it is "Life, and Life's effluence" at once: that is, it's both the essential *substance* of the soul and something that *emerges* from the soul.

But it seems like joy is hard to grasp. Perhaps that's why the speaker keeps introducing new metaphors for it. So far, the speaker's metaphors for joy have themselves been things one can't easily grab hold of: clouds, lights, music, water. There's something both beautiful and effervescent about joy, it seems; it flows and changes like a song or a stream or a mist.

The metaphor the speaker chooses now, though, is something more tangible and more permanent. Joy, he suggests, becomes the spouse of a personified Nature. And joy's "dower," its wedding present, is nothing less than "a new Earth and new Heaven."

In other words, what happens when joy flows out from the soul and into the world is like a loving marriage. And that marriage produces a *new* world, a co-creation of Joy and Nature. Perhaps that "dower" might even be imagined as a child—a new life born of the union of two separate beings.

Joy isn't just a pleasant feeling people get when they experience the world's beauty, in other words. It's the experience of feeling passionately *united* with the world, imbuing it with one's own feelings and one's own meaning until it seems full of a whole new life.

It isn't just the "Earth" that's reborn this way, but "Heaven" itself. The experience of joy, the speaker suggests, gives people a new spiritual perspective. There's something holy about joy; remember, it's not just a "light," but a halo-like "glory."

It's worth pausing here to really imagine what that might mean, and what that might look like. Like that "virtuous Lady," readers might well have a feeling for what the speaker is talking about here: a memory, maybe, of an hour or two when the whole world suddenly seemed to shine with meaning and beauty and even to sing. What the speaker is doing now is no less than developing a poetic philosophy of such hours, born of deep feeling and deep thought.

Remember, too, that this philosophy is growing out of the midst of a terrible "dejection." Even as the speaker feelingly describes joy, he can't quite reach it himself. Philosophizing about joy, alas, is not the same thing as experiencing it.

LINES 70-72

Undreamt of by the sensual and the proud—
Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud—
We in ourselves rejoice!

As he wraps up his metaphor of "Joy" as "Nature's" spouse, the speaker finally starts to hint at what he means when he says that joy comes only to the "pure of heart." The reborn world that appears when joy marries nature, he says, is "undreamt of by the sensual and the proud." That is, those who are too narrowly attached to material pleasures like food, money, or sex, and those who are too egotistical, can't even begin to imagine what it's like to experience this kind of joy.

That might sound rather stuffy and moralistic. But take another look. Being "pure of heart," here, seems less to mean being prissily *good*, and more to mean being *undistracted*. Getting too caught up in where one's next dose of pleasure is going to come from, or being too concerned with one's own ego, both seem to be beside the point here. Joy isn't just about pleasure or about self-satisfaction, though it is a deep delight, and does involve the self.

In fact, joy *needs* the self: "We in ourselves rejoice!" the speaker cries. This is another of those meaning-rich lines:

- It might mean that people rejoice *inside* themselves;
- And it might mean that people take joy *in* themselves, in their own existence.

Both of these readings again suggest that the world contains no joy that people don't put there: "we receive but what we give." In this image, nature isn't just joy's spouse, but joy's *mirror*, reflecting joy back at the person whose soul can let it flow out. The joy that people see in the outer world is a reflection of their inner world; it's always really "in ourselves" that we "rejoice," then.

And something about being "sensual" and "proud" interrupts this free-flowing, loving reflection. Perhaps, in the speaker's eyes, these are the errors that the "poor loveless ever-anxious crowd" makes every day: being so concerned with snuffling around for pleasures or with maintaining their images in *others*' eyes that they can't see what's right in front of their noses.

This might carry readers back to the speaker's meticulous descriptions of the night sky, whose beauty he can "see," but "not feel." The kind of joyful communion with the world the speaker lacks is, to his way of thinking, something that only comes when one's inner mirror is rubbed clean.

LINES 73-75

And thence flows all that charms or ear or sight,
All melodies the echoes of that voice,
All colours a suffusion from that light.

Stanza 5 has been a rich, complex, mysterious, and profound expression of the speaker's philosophy. It ends with his assured summation of joy's creative power. Everything in the entire world that people perceive as beautiful, he concludes, is the work of that marriage between joy and nature. Without joy, there is no beauty: only an "inanimate cold world."

His language in these lines sounds almost like a religious credo,

a declaration of faith. Listen to his anaphora here:

> And thence flows **all** that charms or ear or sight,
> **All** melodies the echoes of that voice,
> **All** colours a suffusion from that light.

All those "all"s insist on joy's total power: *yes, **all** these beauties come only from joy*, the speaker seems to be saying. The repetition also creates a sense of overflowing abundance, inviting readers to *envision* "all colours" and "all melodies" at once in a torrent of beauty.

Notice, too, that the speaker quietly revisits two of his central metaphors here: sound and light. In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that all the world's *literal* melodies and lights, music and colors, are just "echoes" and "suffusion[s]" (or gentle outspreadings) of the joy that produces them.

The soul's joy, to this speaker, is thus a kind of ultimate reality: in a sense, it creates the world.

LINES 76-81

There was a time when, though my path was rough,
This joy within me dallied with distress,
And all misfortunes were but as the stuff
Whence Fancy made me dreams of happiness:
For hope grew round me, like the twining vine,
And fruits, and foliage, not my own, seemed mine.

The speaker has been on a soaring philosophical excursion for the past two stanzas. Now, he comes back to earth, connecting his philosophy of joy to his own experience.

He begins with another allusion to William Wordsworth's Immortality Ode:

> **There was a time** when, though my path was rough,
> This joy within me dallied with distress,

Wordsworth's poem begins with exactly the same words, but looks much further back in time, all the way to "early childhood." Coleridge's speaker instead remembers life as a young adult. Here again, he seems to be providing a different take on one of the same questions Wordsworth dealt with: how do people's experiences of the world change as they get older?

Back in his younger days, the speaker says, he had easy access to his joy: it "dallied with distress" as if unhappiness were just a toy to play with. All his "misfortunes" became the material for his "Fancy" to turn into "dreams of happiness." That is, any piece of bad luck just gave him something to daydream about; he'd imagine that these difficult times were just about to turn into wonderful ones.

Here, it's worth pausing to define "Fancy," which had a specific technical meaning for Coleridge. To him, it was a kind of lesser, weaker version of "Imagination" (more on what "Imagination" meant to Coleridge in a minute):

- Fancy, in Coleridge's eyes, was the capacity to play with and recombine images from the outside world, as one does in a daydream.
    - For instance, it would be the work of fancy to take a piece of bad luck—a leaky roof, let's say—and envision that, when one clambers up there to fix it, one will find a treasure under the eaves.
- Fancy thus plays with the world the way a kid plays with building blocks. It takes "leaky roof," adds "treasure," and voila—a story!

If the speaker's "Fancy" could merrily build "dreams of happiness" out of his troubles during his earlier life, it's only because he had "hope" then. Take a look at his metaphors here:

> For hope grew round me, **like the twining vine,**
> And **fruits, and foliage, not my own, seemed mine.**

The simile of hope as a "twining vine" suggests that hope is a hardy, tenacious, and ever-growing thing—and also indirectly depicts the speaker himself as a sturdy structure that such vines could grow up, a tree or a building. There's a sense of vigor and stability in this vision of hope.

What's more, having this hope made the speaker feel as if he'd already harvested all the "fruits" and "foliage" his fancy told him his future might hold. But a few cautionary words here—"not my own"—remind the reader that it's never wise to count one's fruits before they're gathered.

These lines paint a picture of a carefree young man, certain everything will work out okay. They also hint at the speaker's older, sadder, wiser perspective on his younger self.

LINES 82-86

But now afflictions bow me down to earth:
Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth,
But oh! each visitation
Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,
My shaping spirit of Imagination.

The carefree days when he believed everything would work out all right for him, the speaker goes on, are well and truly over now. His afflictions "bow him down to earth," a metaphor that recalls the "smothering weight" of grief he felt back in stanza 3. If he was once a sturdy tree or a building for the "twining vine" of hope to grow around, now he's a stump, a ruin. In his dejection, he feels his misfortunes as burdens too heavy to carry. Without hope, his "fancy" has no power over his circumstances.

But that's not what really bothers him. Here's what's truly unbearable about his situation:

> But oh! each visitation
> Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,
> My shaping spirit of Imagination.

That is, every time he's "visit[ed]" by dejection, he loses his powers of imagination—powers that he feels are his birthright, an essential part of who he's always been.

And here's where the distinction between "Fancy" and "Imagination" becomes critical. Remember, in Coleridge's terms, "Fancy" is a kind of playful, daydreamy way of putting different parts of the outside world together in new combinations. Imagination is something altogether more serious: it's a "shaping spirit," a power to actually *form* and *change* the world, rather than just sticking different bits of it to each other.

If this idea reminds readers of the "new Earth and new Heaven" that "Joy" created back in stanza 5, that's very much the point. Imagination and joy seem to be related powers: they pour something of the speaker into the world and make that world seem completely reborn, a new life made from the fusion of the outer and inner.

But again, the creative powers of "Joy" and "Imagination" aren't things the speaker can force. He's like that "Æolian lute," at the mercy of the winds of feeling—and right now, those winds just aren't blowing for him.

Now, at last, he'll explain why he thinks that might be.

LINES 87-93

> *For not to think of what I needs must feel,*
> *But to be still and patient, all I can;*
> *And haply by abstruse research to steal*
> *From my own nature all the natural man—*
> *This was my sole resource, my only plan:*
> *Till that which suits a part infects the whole,*
> *And now is almost grown the habit of my soul.*

"Imagination" and "Joy" might come and go like the winds, but the speaker has a pretty clear idea of how he ended up crushed under the weight of dejection. He's been done in, he believes, by his efforts "not to think of what [he] needs must feel"—to try to pay no attention to some urgent emotion. By trying to cut off this one part of his feelings, he's "infect[ed]" his whole inner life with a numbness that spreads like gangrene.

The speaker doesn't say exactly what it is that he "needs must feel" but can't bear to think of. But by now, the reader likely has a pretty good guess: it must be something to do with the Lady the speaker has been apostrophizing to all along, that absent Lady who seems so much at the center of his thoughts. Something—perhaps *her* feelings, perhaps circumstances, perhaps both—means that the speaker can't even allow himself to "think" about how deeply he "feels" for her.

In other words, he's tried to create a split inside himself between his thoughts and his feelings. And divisions are the opposite of what "Imagination" and "Joy" seek to create: union, communion, and a new wholeness.

There's no way, the speaker suggests, to cut off *just one* part of your feelings without consequences; it's like trying to carve a chunk out of your own heart and then go about your business as usual.

Still, he tried his best. His "plan," he says, was to use "abstruse research" (that is, obscure studies) to distract himself, living so much in his mind that he could ignore everything that makes him a "natural man"—desire, just for instance, and love. The complex philosophy he's presented in the past few stanzas suggests that he certainly has the intellective power to lose himself in the abstrusest of researches. But his intellect still can't save him from his feelings.

Listen to his repetitions here:

> And haply by abstruse research to steal
> From my own nature all the natural man—
> This was my sole resource, my only plan:

The polyptoton of "nature" and "natural" stresses just how absurd it is to imagine that a person could strip all that's *natural* out of their own *nature*. And the insistent parallelism gives his voice an edge of wild desperation. "My sole resource" and "my only plan" are two ways of saying essentially the same thing—but the speaker moves from the more elevated and formal "sole resource" to the small, humble "only plan," as if the lofty intentions have been squashed right out of him.

The speaker seems to know now that trying to ignore or suppress his feelings was always a doomed experiment. But it was the "only" thing he could think to do.

LINES 94-99

> *Hence, viper thoughts, that coil around my mind,*
> *Reality's dark dream!*
> *I turn from you, and listen to the wind,*
> *Which long has raved unnoticed. What a scream*
> *Of agony by torture lengthened out*
> *That lute sent forth!*

Having diagnosed himself—and in particular, his efforts to suppress his own feelings—as the cause of his miserable dejection, the speaker seems suddenly too agonized to look inward any longer. He bats his thoughts away like attacking snakes:

> Hence, viper thoughts, that coil around my mind,
> Reality's dark dream!

These metaphors suggest that the speaker finds something both deadly and *unreal* in his dejected thinking. His thoughts

are not "Reality" themselves, but "Reality's dark dream." Perhaps this is how a world without the creative, connective powers of "Joy" and "Imagination" feels to him: his mind working miserably away on its own can only create terrifying unrealities, nothing whole and alive.

So he "turns from" his thoughts and looks *outward* again, where he observes the storm that he (and the "grand old ballad of Sir Patrick Spence") rightly predicted was coming. He's been so caught up in the "coils" of those "viper thoughts" that he hasn't even noticed the wind "rav[ing]" like a madman.

Perhaps it's the sounds of those stormwinds playing his "Æolian lute" that have actually startled him back to attention. He marvels:

> [...] What a scream
> Of agony by torture lengthened out
> That lute sent forth! [...]

Once again, there's the sense he's not just talking about the lute, here. That symbolic instrument seems to be expressing exactly what he's been struggling to convey: the tormented "agony" he can't help but feel over his impossible love.

There's the sense in these lines that part of what the speaker "needs must feel" isn't just his love itself, but his *pain* over that love. (Remember, "passion" can mean "strong feeling," "desire," and "pain," all at once.) The wind-harp acts in his place, screaming where he can't.

LINES 99-104

Thou Wind, that rav'st without,
Bare crag, or mountain-tairn, or blasted tree,
Or pine-grove whither woodman never clomb,
Or lonely house, long held the witches' home,
Methinks were fitter instruments for thee,
Mad Lutanist!

The speaker fixes his attention on the storm winds now, and even addresses them in a fresh apostrophe, telling them that they seem more appropriate for all sorts of wild and lonely scenes than for his own humble home and garden.

Listen to the specific imagery the speaker uses here:

> Bare crag, or mountain-tairn, or blasted tree,
> Or pine-grove whither woodman never clomb,
> Or lonely house, long held the witches' home,
> Methinks were fitter instruments for thee,
> Mad Lutanist! [...]

All the landscapes the speaker imagines as fitting homes for the wild wind outside his house are either lonely, battered, haunted, or all three. If readers read this wind as a symbol of emotion (as the poem seems to encourage), then it's the emotion of someone whose "afflictions" weigh heavy.

Unable to feel his feelings himself, then, the speaker seems to project them out onto the storm. He even sees it as a "Mad Lutanist," an artist of a kind, as it plays the wind-harp in the window.

These lines also hint, though, that the speaker might be creeping back toward feeling some kind of connection with the world. The eerie landscape he depicts here suggests, if not "Imagination," then at least "Fancy," roaming the world to bring these images of dejection and loneliness together.

LINES 104-107

who in this month of showers,
Of dark brown gardens, and of peeping flowers,
Mak'st Devils' yule, with worse than wintry song,
The blossoms, buds, and timorous leaves among.

The "Mad Lutanist" of the stormwinds, the speaker observes, has chosen an odd place to turn up so dramatically—the speaker's own little home, not a "bare crag" or a lonely "pine-grove." But it's also chosen an odd *time*. Perhaps surprisingly, the speaker now reveals that this poem doesn't take place in a wild winter, but in a chilly spring. The winds seem to be celebrating a "Devils' yule," a kind of perverse anti-Christmas, right as the flowers are starting to bloom.

Listen to the way alliteration and assonance conjure the scene here:

> Mad Lutanist! who in this month of showers,
> Of dark brown gardens, and of peeping flowers,
> Mak'st Devils' yule, with worse than wintry song,
> The blossoms, buds, and timorous leaves among.

The rich long /ow/ sound of those "dark brown gardens" with their "showers" and "flowers," and the nice plump /b/ of the "blossoms" and "buds," get blown right through by the windy /w/ of "with worse than wintry."

It's as if the speaker is expressing a kind of quiet indignation here. Why on earth should a wind even worse than winter's come to disrupt the coming beauties of early spring? How much "worse" it is for spring to feel like winter than for *winter* to feel like winter. Again, there's a sense that he's seeing something of his own predicament in the outside world: delicate springy life being blasted by a devilish chill.

LINES 108-113

Thou Actor, perfect in all tragic sounds!
Thou mighty Poet, e'en to frenzy bold!
What tell'st thou now about?
'Tis of the rushing of a host in rout,
With groans of trampled men, with smarting wounds—
At once they groan with pain, and shudder with the cold!

The speaker has already imagined the wind as an insane (and even demonic) "Lutanist." Now, he addresses it as a tragic "Actor" and a "mighty Poet" whipped into a "frenzy." Here, he might be subtly alluding to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which Shakespeare's Duke Theseus famously describes "the lunatic, the lover, and the poet" as a group of people who see the world differently than most. The "poet's eye," in particular, Shakespeare depicts rolling wildly "in a fine frenzy," moved to a kind of beautiful lunacy by poetic inspiration.

Again, the speaker seems to be reading crazed *creativity* in the storm winds. The storm might be giving the new buds and leaves of the young spring a beating—but they're not purely destructive. They're also building something new by telling stories.

The speaker seems to lean closer to listen to what they have to say:

> What tell'st thou now about?
> 'Tis of the rushing of a host in rout,

In other words, the rushing winds seem to tell the tale of a defeated army, fleeing for its life. Again, there's some obvious relevance to the speaker's own buried feelings of loss and pain here.

And the longer the speaker listens, the more he seems to sympathize with the imagined army. Take a look at his imagery here:

> With groans of trampled men, with smarting wounds—
> At once they groan with pain, and shudder with the cold!

Hearing repeated "groans," feeling the "shudder[ing]" and "smarting" (or stinging) of freezing and injured men, the speaker here seems to feel full-body empathy with the army he's just invented—or rather, the army he credits the wind with inventing.

LINES 114-117

But hush! there is a pause of deepest silence!
And all that noise, as of a rushing crowd,
With groans, and tremulous shudderings—all is over—
It tells another tale, with sounds less deep and loud!

As the speaker hears the storm tell a terrible tale of defeated armies, it's clear that something is starting to shift for him: his daydreamy fancy, if not his full creative imagination, is certainly at work once more. And that becomes even clearer when the storm itself begins to change:

> But hush! there is a pause of deepest silence!
> And all that noise, as of a rushing crowd,
> With groans, and tremulous shudderings—all is over—

This break in the storm, this sudden quiet, becomes *meaningful* to the speaker, telling him something new. The army-like "rushing" of acute pain—its intensity conjured by the polyptoton on the "groans" and "shudders" of the previous lines—is over, and there's room for a different kind of feeling to enter. "All is over."

Remember, back in the first stanza, the speaker hoped against hope that the storm might give him a "wonted impulse" (that is, a familiar kind of stimulation) and make his "dull pain" come alive. Something very much like that seems to have happened here: the speaker is now caught up in the outside world, seeing a mirror of the pain he can't feel, and letting himself be moved by the reflection, however slowly.

And what's more, the storm seems to have done its work through *art*. Personifying the storm as a "Lutanist," an "Actor," and a "mighty Poet," the speaker has quietly made the point that art is one expression of joy and imagination, a way of building a new world by bringing what's inside and what's outside together. Even the speaker's literal position—in his house, looking out—thus feels symbolically significant here.

Now, the speaker listens carefully as the storm quiets down to "tell[] another tale, with sounds less deep and loud."

LINES 118-125

A tale of less affright,
And tempered with delight,
As Otway's self had framed the tender lay,—
'Tis of a little child
Upon a lonesome wild,
Nor far from home, but she hath lost her way:
And now moans low in bitter grief and fear,
And now screams loud, and hopes to make her mother hear.

As the storm quiets down, the speaker hears it tell a new story: a much less fearful one, and one that's "tempered with delight." In finding some imaginative connection with the storm, he's allowed a spasm of pain to pass through him—and now he might have the tiniest glimmer of hope again.

He also continues to relate the work of the storm to the work of artists. Here, he imagines that the story the storm tells now could be a "tender lay" (that is, a gentle song) by "Otway" himself. Otway was a 17th-century writer whose work was indeed full of pathos—and he himself met a pretty pathetic end, dying young and impoverished. Perhaps this allusion hints at a camaraderie between suffering poets.

But this reference also seems to come out of nowhere; Otway was never an allusion at the tip of anyone's tongue the way that, for instance, Shakespeare is. And the story that the speaker goes on to tell has a lot more in common with another of

Wordsworth's poems, "Lucy Gray," than with anything Otway wrote. (In fact, in an earlier draft of this poem, Coleridge wrote "William's self," not "Otway's.") This tale also bears some resemblance to a story from Coleridge's own childhood: as a small boy, he once ran away from home and spent a never-forgotten night lost in the countryside.

In other words, there's something a little teasing about this allusion, as if the poem is suddenly trying to veil just how personal it is. And perhaps that's because the image here is so much more vulnerable than the grand tale of a defeated army:

> 'Tis of a little child
> Upon a lonesome wild,
> Nor far from home, but she hath lost her way:

In this gentler phase of the storm, the speaker now hears the plaintive cries of a lost little girl. Perhaps there's something especially touching about the idea that she's "not far from home": just as this child might be within a stone's throw of her own house, but unable to find her way there alone, the speaker can "see" beauty but not "feel" it.

And the speaker's imagery makes it clear his "fancy," his daydreamy imagination, is at work:

> And now moans low in bitter grief and fear,
> And now screams loud, and hopes to make her
> mother hear.

In these lines, readers can easily hear the way the wind rises and falls as a storm dies down.

Working together, the images of the storm and the lost little child make it clear that the speaker is *starting* to move toward feeling again—but he's certainly not all the way to the full overflow of joy and imagination that he longs for. He's still at arm's length from these images, observing that the storm is *like* a little child, and indirectly that he is *like* that little child too.

One might almost say that the difference between fancy and imagination here is the difference between simile and metaphor. Fancy can get the speaker to the point of admitting: *This storm is LIKE me.* But it takes imagination to say: *This storm IS me.*

Still, even getting this close to connection gives the speaker a faint taste of "delight"—a hope that he won't be lost in the dark forever.

LINES 126-131

> *'Tis midnight, but small thoughts have I of sleep:*
> *Full seldom may my friend such vigils keep!*
> *Visit her, gentle Sleep! with wings of healing,*
> *And may this storm be but a mountain-birth,*
> *May all the stars hang bright above her dwelling,*
> *Silent as though they watched the sleeping Earth!*

In the past stanza, the speaker has reached out into the stormy night, grasping for an imaginative connection—and found a taste of relief, if not a full cathartic rush of feeling. Now, as the final stanza begins, he seems to set these efforts aside in exhaustion, and turns back to thoughts of his Lady again:

> 'Tis midnight, but small thoughts have I of sleep:
> Full seldom may my friend such vigils keep!

Notice, though, that he's no longer addressing her directly. He seems wearily conscious, now, that she's really not there.

Instead, he begins a different apostrophe, speaking to the personified figure of "gentle Sleep" and begging this angelic being to take good care of his Lady, even if it doesn't seem like it's going to visit *him* tonight.

Some of his prayers for her seem rather like his prayers for himself in disguise. For instance, when he asks that "this storm be but a mountain-birth," he seems to hope that something solid and grand as a mountain might emerge from what he's experienced this evening: a great poem, for instance.

It's also possible that he's poking a little gentle fun at himself here. That "mountain-birth" might allude to a classical proverb that goes: "The mountains are in labor; a ridiculous mouse will be born." Or, in other words: "This is a whole lot of fuss about nothing."

But there's also some genuine, tender beauty in the speaker's prayers here. Listen to the music of these lines:

> May all the stars hang bright above her dwelling,
> Silent as though they watched the sleeping Earth!

The weaving sibilance and consonance here bring the hush of /s/ sounds, the glitter of /t/ sounds, and the gentle lull of /l/ sounds together in a musical tapestry that evokes just what it describes: a silent, starry night.

And the personification of the stars might also take readers back to that enchanted sky at the beginning of the poem. Back then, the moon was an ominous lady foretelling a storm; now, the stars look down on the earth like a mother watching her baby in its cradle.

LINES 132-136

> *With light heart may she rise,*
> *Gay fancy, cheerful eyes,*
> *Joy lift her spirit, joy attune her voice;*
> *To her may all things live, from pole to pole,*
> *Their life the eddying of her living soul!*

As the speaker continues his prayer for his far-away Lady, he combines the humblest, down-to-earth wishes with the most exalted spiritual hopes.

Listen to his changing parallelism in the first lines of this passage:

> With light heart may she rise,
> Gay fancy, cheerful eyes,

There's something simple and sweet about the way the speaker puts his first three wishes together here. All phrased similarly, a "light heart," "cheerful eyes," and "gay fancy" (that is, a capacity for carefree dreaming) feel like the bread and butter of a happy life, the basic ingredients for contented days.

But listen to what comes next:

> Joy lift her spirit, joy attune her voice;

Echoing the anaphora that appeared when the speaker first introduced "Joy" to the poem back in stanza five, the language here creates gathering, exuberant energy. It also reminds readers that, to the speaker, Joy is the power that gives *everything* its life and beauty, from the "spirit" to the "voice," the soul to its outer expression.

His final prayers for his lady are the most exalted of all:

> To her may all things live, from pole to pole,
> Their life the eddying of her living soul!

In other words, the speaker prays that his Lady will be full of such Joy that her own soul feels married to the whole world, just as the poem described back in lines 68-69.

Everything the speaker has said about Joy and Imagination before, in fact, prepares readers for these lines. Even the word "eddying" (that is, rippling like a stream) reminds readers that Joy, in the speaker's vision, is *fluid*—a cloud, a song, a light, a fountain. The speaker is praying that his Lady will have no less than an eternal, blissful communion with the world, a life of creative and joyful meaning.

He's also praying that she'll never go through what he's been through: a divorce from that meaning, so that he's able to "see" it—and even write whole poems describing it—without being able to "feel" it.

LINES 137-139

> *O simple spirit, guided from above,*
> *Dear Lady! friend devoutest of my choice,*
> *Thus mayest thou ever, evermore rejoice.*

"Dejection" has traveled from the depths of despair to the heights of joy. But it ends firmly on the ground, with a gesture from one human being to another.

For most of this stanza, the speaker has been praying for his Lady, but no longer speaking directly to her. As the reader has gathered, he's been struggling all along with how on earth to manage his feelings for her—feelings he can't, for one reason or another, satisfy. Trying *not* to deal with those feelings, he believes, is a big part of what left him dejected in the first place.

But in wishing so fervently for this Lady to feel joy, the speaker seems to come to a point where he can bear to make an apostrophe to her again. Listen to these closing lines:

> O simple spirit, guided from above,
> Dear Lady! friend devoutest of my choice,
> Thus mayest thou ever, evermore rejoice.

The speaker's language here is indeed "devout[]": he's speaking of his Lady in intensely spiritual terms, as well as human ones. She's his "friend," but she's also a holy soul "guided from above."

This might remind readers of the lines back in stanza 5 when the speaker cried, "Joy, virtuous Lady!" Back then, there was a sense that the speaker saw his Lady, not just as a confidant and beloved, but as an embodiment of joy herself.

And joy, as the poem has pointed out, works an awful lot like marriage is supposed to; the speaker even uses precisely that image when he imagines that Joy "wed[s] Nature," and thus gives birth to "a new Earth and new Heaven."

In other words: *love* is also at stake here. Notably, the speaker never uses the word "love" in the poem; he only ever mentions its absence in the "loveless crowd." But it's clear that Joy and Imagination have a lot to do with love: look at the world in a mood of Joy, the poem suggests, and you'll see the world gazing lovingly back at you, *mirroring* you.

The speaker's love for his Lady, the poem suggests, has been a source of joy for him: he has seen, in her, all the beauty of the world, and all the beauty his *own* soul can summon. But in these closing lines, he knows that she's a separate person, too, not just a vessel for his own feelings—a person whose soul must "rejoice" in the world in its own way.

These lines are thus both a gesture of deep love and a farewell. This Lady may not ever feel the inner marriage with the speaker that the speaker has made with her. But nonetheless, he wishes her all the joy in the world.

SYMBOLS

THE STORM

The stormwinds that rattle this poem are a symbol for emotion—especially painful emotion.

Towards the end of the poem, the storm that's been threatening finally breaks. In it, the speaker hears not the power of nature, but distinctly human sorrows: the "groans" of a defeated army and the "screams" of a "little child" lost in the wilderness. These images suggest that the speaker is taking this

storm pretty personally, seeing it as a symbolic outward expression of his own feelings of defeat and abandonment. Emotion, the poem's storm symbolism suggests, works upon hapless people like rough winds work on an "Aeolian lute."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-8:** " This night, so tranquil now, will not go hence / Unroused by winds, that ply a busier trade / Than those which mould yon cloud in lazy flakes, / Or the dull sobbing draft, that moans and rakes / Upon the strings of this Æolian lute, / Which better far were mute."
- **Lines 13-16:** "I see the old Moon in her lap, foretelling / The coming on of rain and squally blast. / And oh! that even now the gust were swelling, / And the slant night-shower driving loud and fast!"
- **Lines 96-125:** "I turn from you, and listen to the wind, / Which long has raved unnoticed. What a scream / Of agony by torture lengthened out / That lute sent forth! Thou Wind, that rav'st without, / Bare crag, or mountain-tairn, or blasted tree, / Or pine-grove whither woodman never clomb, / Or lonely house, long held the witches' home, / Methinks were fitter instruments for thee, / Mad Lutanist! who in this month of showers, / Of dark brown gardens, and of peeping flowers, / Mak'st Devils' yule, with worse than wintry song, / The blossoms, buds, and timorous leaves among. / Thou Actor, perfect in all tragic sounds! / Thou mighty Poet, e'en to frenzy bold! / What tell'st thou now about? / 'Tis of the rushing of a host in rout, / With groans of trampled men, with smarting wounds— / At once they groan with pain, and shudder with the cold! / But hush! there is a pause of deepest silence! / And all that noise, as of a rushing crowd, / With groans, and tremulous shudderings—all is over— / It tells another tale, with sounds less deep and loud! / A tale of less affright, / And tempered with delight, / As Otway's self had framed the tender lay,— / 'Tis of a little child / Upon a lonesome wild, / Nor far from home, but she hath lost her way: / And now moans low in bitter grief and fear, / And now screams loud, and hopes to make her mother hear."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

The allusions in "Dejection" connect this poem both to old tradition and to the speaker's relationships.

Coleridge's first allusions refer to the poem's epigraph, which consists of lines taken from the "grand old ballad of Sir Patrick Spence":

- This anonymous poem tells the tale of a Scottish lord who gets sent to sea in spite of his woefully limited seafaring experience. He and all his crew swiftly drown in a terrible storm, and the ballad closes with an image of all the forlorn ladies who'll stand on the shore for a long, long time, hoping for their lovers to come home.
- In alluding to this ballad, the speaker invites the reader to imagine him as a drowning sailor, someone who's out of his depth in stormy waters.
- But perhaps he's *also* one of those ladies, longing for someone who will never return. The ballad's timeless sorrow seems to sum up all of the speaker's struggles: thrown around by his feelings, he's also heartsick for an unreachable "Lady" of his own.

The "Æolian lute" that the speaker keeps returning to, meanwhile, refers to Aeolus, a classical god of the winds; wind-harps named for this god were a common parlor toy in the 18th and 19th centuries. The speaker seems to relate to this lute, seeing himself as similarly at the mercy of the "winds" of feeling.

But the poem's most important allusions are to the work of William Wordsworth, Coleridge's close friend and frequent collaborator. In fact, this whole poem is a response to Wordsworth's great "Intimations of Immortality" ode:

- In that poem, Wordsworth argued that people lose contact with the innate "glory" of the natural world as they grow up: children, he writes, see the world as magical and sacred, where adults get used to the world and thus only get fleeting glimpses of its holiness.
- Coleridge wrote this poem in reply to the first few stanzas of that one, countering that whatever glory nature has flows from the human "Imagination" outward, not the other way around.

In making its reply, this poem sometimes directly quotes the Immortality Ode:

- For instance, the beginning of stanza 6 starts with the same words as stanza 1 of Wordsworth's poem: "There was a time."
- And, sometimes, "Dejection" makes less direct allusions, borrowing imagery instead: the "luminous cloud" of joy this poem's speaker returns and returns to is a cousin of the "clouds of glory" that Wordsworth imagined the human soul "trailing" behind it on its journey to Earth.
- These allusions make it clear that Coleridge is honoring his friend even as he disagrees with him.

The poem's final allusion might also have more to do with Wordsworth than it would first appear. When the speaker

imagines the winds telling the story of a lost "little child," he suggests that story sounds like the work of "Otway," a 17th-century poet and playwright. But that story sounds an awful lot more like the plot of another of Wordsworth's poems, "Lucy Gray," than anything Otway ever wrote.

The poem's allusions thus make it clear that Coleridge is dealing with matters both timeless and deeply personal.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Before Line 1:** "Late, late yestreen I saw the new Moon, / With the old Moon in her arms; / And I fear, I fear, my Master dear! / We shall have a deadly storm. / (Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence)"
- **Lines 1-2:** "Well! If the Bard was weather-wise, who made / The grand old ballad of Sir Patrick Spence,"
- **Line 7:** "this Æolian lute"
- **Lines 53-54:** " Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth / A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud"
- **Line 62:** "This light, this glory, this fair luminous mist,"
- **Line 71:** "Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud—"
- **Lines 76-79:** "There was a time when, though my path was rough, / This joy within me dallied with distress, / And all misfortunes were but as the stuff / Whence Fancy made me dreams of happiness:"
- **Line 120:** "As Otway's self had framed the tender lay,—"
- **Lines 121-125:** " 'Tis of a little child / Upon a lonesome wild, / Nor far from home, but she hath lost her way: / And now moans low in bitter grief and fear, / And now screams loud, and hopes to make her mother hear."

APOSTROPHE

Apostrophes, or direct addresses to people who can't possibly respond, are a huge part of what makes "Dejection" so poignant. The speaker directs his whole poem to a faraway "Lady"—but, as his other apostrophes make clear, he might as well be writing to the "Wind."

Sitting alone in his home, watching a storm roll in, the unhappy speaker keeps addressing a "Lady" whose company he longs for. He sees her as "pure of heart" and "virtuous," an all-around paragon of goodness. And perhaps it's because he loves and trusts her that he feels comfortable exploring his "dejection" at such length. This poem feels at once confessional and philosophical, and the speaker's apostrophes to his Lady suggest that he sees her as a sympathetic and intelligent listener. But, alas, she's not really there—and that's a big part of what seems to have caused the speaker's dejection in the first place.

All alone, the speaker also talks to any number of personified forces, from the wind (which he addresses as a "Mad Lutanist," a "Poet," and an "Actor") to "gentle Sleep" (which he begs to watch over his Lady). He even tells his own "viper thoughts" to go away and stop bothering him. Delivering apostrophes to inanimate objects is an old poetic tradition (and one that Coleridge's fellow Romantics got a lot of mileage from). But here, the speaker seems to be making a deeper philosophical point: the whole world, he argues, is animated—or not!—by the imagination.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 25:** "O Lady!"
- **Line 47:** "O Lady! we receive but what we give,"
- **Lines 59-60:** "O pure of heart! thou need'st not ask of me / What this strong music in the soul may be!"
- **Lines 64-67:** " Joy, virtuous Lady! Joy that ne'er was given, / Save to the pure, and in their purest hour, / Life, and Life's effluence, cloud at once and shower, / Joy, Lady! is the spirit and the power,"
- **Lines 94-96:** "Hence, viper thoughts, that coil around my mind, / Reality's dark dream! / I turn from you,"
- **Lines 99-110:** "Thou Wind, that rav'st without, / Bare crag, or mountain-tairn, or blasted tree, / Or pine-grove whither woodman never clomb, / Or lonely house, long held the witches' home, / Methinks were fitter instruments for thee, / Mad Lutanist! who in this month of showers, / Of dark brown gardens, and of peeping flowers, / Mak'st Devils' yule, with worse than wintry song, / The blossoms, buds, and timorous leaves among. / Thou Actor, perfect in all tragic sounds! / Thou mighty Poet, e'en to frenzy bold! / What tell'st thou now about?"
- **Line 128:** "Visit her, gentle Sleep! with wings of healing,"
- **Lines 138-139:** "Dear Lady! friend devoutest of my choice, / Thus mayest thou ever, evermore rejoice."

IMAGERY

The poem's rich imagery reveals, somewhat ironically, just how disconnected the speaker is from the world around him—and how deeply he is able to feel things in happier times.

Take a look at this passage of imagery from the second stanza:

> And those thin clouds above, in flakes and bars,
> That give away their motion to the stars;
> Those stars, that glide behind them or between,
> Now sparkling, now bedimmed, but always seen:

This is a meticulously observed description of a particular natural phenomenon: the kind of sky where the clouds move in one mass, making the stars behind them seem to be moving instead. (Readers might have noticed a similar effect on train platforms: when the train next to yours pulls out of the station, it can create the illusion that it's *your* train that's moving.)

This is the kind of thing that one would only notice if one had

stopped to pay careful attention. And that's clearly what this speaker is doing: he's been sitting gazing at this sky for so long that he's been able to track the stars as they move from "sparkling" to "bedimmed" behind the thin scrim of clouds.

Even more specific is the speaker's observation of the "peculiar tint of yellow green" in the "western sky" where the sun has set: that strange shade, like the "silver thread" the speaker observes around the moon, warns of a stormy night.

In short, there's nothing generically pretty about this sky. The speaker isn't describing any old starry night, but a very particular and "peculiar" evening, seen through attentive eyes.

That makes the conclusion of this passage even more painful:

> I see them all so excellently fair,
> I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!

The speaker's vivid, specific imagery makes his inability to *feel* anything about the beauty he sees feel like a truly terrible plight. If he can observe all this night's loveliness in such detail, but not really feel anything about it, he must be "dejected" indeed.

Later on, the speaker's imagery also paints a picture of a much different experience of life:

> Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth
> A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
> Enveloping the Earth—

Again, his mind has turned to clouds—but this time they're metaphorical, and glorious. This is the speaker's description of "Joy," the "beautiful and beauty-making power" that makes life worth living; his imagery here makes joy seem, not just like a feeling, but like a kind of tangible light, literally illuminating and coloring the world.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-12:** "Unroused by winds, that ply a busier trade / Than those which mould yon cloud in lazy flakes, / Or the dull sobbing draft, that moans and rakes / Upon the strings of this Æolian lute, / Which better far were mute. / For lo! the New-moon winter-bright! / And overspread with phantom light, / (With swimming phantom light o'erspread / But rimmed and circled by a silver thread)"
- **Lines 15-16:** "And oh! that even now the gust were swelling, / And the slant night-shower driving loud and fast!"
- **Lines 27-36:** " All this long eve, so balmy and serene, / Have I been gazing on the western sky, / And its peculiar tint of yellow green: / And still I gaze—and with how blank an eye! / And those thin clouds above, in flakes and bars, / That give away their motion to the stars; / Those stars, that glide behind them or between, / Now sparkling, now bedimmed, but always seen: / Yon crescent Moon, as fixed as if it grew / In its own cloudless, starless lake of blue;"
- **Lines 40-41:** " And what can these avail / To lift the smothering weight from off my breast?"
- **Line 44:** "On that green light that lingers in the west:"
- **Lines 53-55:** " Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth / A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud / Enveloping the Earth—"
- **Lines 56-58:** "And from the soul itself must there be sent / A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth, / Of all sweet sounds the life and element!"
- **Line 82:** "But now afflictions bow me down to earth:"
- **Lines 97-107:** "What a scream / Of agony by torture lengthened out / That lute sent forth! Thou Wind, that rav'st without, / Bare crag, or mountain-tairn, or blasted tree, / Or pine-grove whither woodman never clomb, / Or lonely house, long held the witches' home, / Methinks were fitter instruments for thee, / Mad Lutanist! who in this month of showers, / Of dark brown gardens, and of peeping flowers, / Mak'st Devils' yule, with worse than wintry song, / The blossoms, buds, and timorous leaves among."
- **Lines 112-117:** " With groans of trampled men, with smarting wounds— / At once they groan with pain, and shudder with the cold! / But hush! there is a pause of deepest silence! / And all that noise, as of a rushing crowd, / With groans, and tremulous shudderings—all is over— / It tells another tale, with sounds less deep and loud!"
- **Lines 124-125:** "And now moans low in bitter grief and fear, / And now screams loud, and hopes to make her mother hear."
- **Lines 130-131:** "May all the stars hang bright above her dwelling, / Silent as though they watched the sleeping Earth!"

SIMILE

"Dejection" uses only a couple of similes, but these create vivid moments of feeling.

The first of those similes appears in line 80, in which the speaker wistfully remembers his younger days. Then, he recalls, "hope grew round me like the twining vine," making even his "misfortunes" feel like mere preludes to a shining future.

- This curious simile invites readers to imagine hope as a lively, graceful plant—but also to envision the speaker himself as a tree or an old building, a sturdy structure for that vine of hope to grow upon.
- There's both freshness and stability in this image of the speaker's optimistic earlier life, both of which

now seem to be swept away.

The poem's next simile appears when the speaker is applying his imagination to the storm outside. In line 115, he's just finished envisioning the winds as a defeated army, howling and fleeing: their "noise" is, to the speaker, "as of a rushing crowd."

- This simile might take readers back to line 52, when the speaker imagined another "crowd": the "poor loveless ever-anxious crowd" that, in his view, makes up most of humanity.
- Perhaps, in imagining the winds as a frightened and beaten-down army, he's also thinking of all the people in the world who live without "Joy."

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 80:** "For hope grew round me, like the twining vine,"
- **Line 115:** "And all that noise, as of a rushing crowd,"

METAPHOR

Metaphors ground the speaker's philosophy in vivid images, making abstract ideas tangible.

Some of the poem's most important metaphors help to embody "Joy." The speaker depicts this lovely "passion" (or strong feeling) as water gushing from an inner "fountain," as a "fair luminous cloud," as a glorious "light," and as a "sweet and potent voice"—different images with some surprising things in common.

One important quality that all these metaphorical things share is their ability to *flow*: whatever shape it takes, joy streams out to "envelop[] the Earth," filling the air like music or like mist. Presenting joy as a diffuse, moving, glowing substance, the speaker makes an emotion into something sensual.

But the speaker's metaphors aren't always so joyful. He also uses figurative language to try to explain just how painful some of his emotions are. His miserable thoughts, for instance, can feel both like a "smothering weight" and a venomous "viper" that "coil[s] around [his] mind."

- In the first of these metaphors, "dejection" feels like being crushed under a big heavy inert object;
- In the second, it's like being actively attacked by a terrible snake.
- These different metaphors get at the complex horror of the speaker's unhappiness: his dejection is deadening and terrifying at exactly the same time.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "rimmed and circled by a silver thread"
- **Lines 40-41:** "And what can these avail / To lift the smothering weight from off my breast"
- **Line 46:** "The passion and the life, whose fountains are within"
- **Line 49:** "Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!"
- **Lines 53-55:** " Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth / A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud / Enveloping the Earth—"
- **Lines 56-58:** "And from the soul itself must there be sent / A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth, / Of all sweet sounds the life and element!"
- **Lines 60-62:** "What this strong music in the soul may be! / What, and wherein it doth exist, / This light, this glory, this fair luminous mist,"
- **Line 66:** "Life, and Life's effluence, cloud at once and shower,"
- **Lines 68-69:** "Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower / A new Earth and new Heaven,"
- **Line 76:** "There was a time when, though my path was rough,"
- **Line 81:** "And fruits, and foliage, not my own, seemed mine."
- **Line 86:** " My shaping spirit of Imagination."
- **Line 92:** "Till that which suits a part infects the whole,"
- **Lines 94-95:** "Hence, viper thoughts, that coil around my mind, / Reality's dark dream!"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification makes this poem's world feel filled with life. It also underlines the speaker's ideas about how the "shaping spirit of Imagination" is what *makes* the world come to life.

The whole world around this speaker seems to breathe. In the first stanza, for example, the speaker describes the "night," the "winds," and the "Moon" as though they were people:

- The night, the speaker predicts, is about to be bothered by winds whose "trade" it is to cause uproar—unlike the gentle, sculptor-like breezes currently "mould[ing]" clouds into new shapes.
- The "New-moon," meanwhile, is holding the "old Moon in her lap" like a child, an image that Coleridge borrows from the "grand old ballad of Sir Patrick Spence": this seemingly gentle Moon in fact warns of a coming storm.

All of this personification suggests that the speaker is filling the outside world with his own imaginative inner life—or trying to, at least. For him, much of life's meaning comes from his "shaping spirit of Imagination," his capacity to invest the outside world with feeling. Perhaps envisioning the landscape as somehow human is one way for him to reach toward that kind of "Imagination," even if he feels that power is mostly

"suspend[ed]" for him now.

It's meaningful, then, that he also describes his connection with "Nature" as a kind of marriage. One must "wed" Nature, he says, to receive the "dower" (or wedding present) of joy. In other words, people can't just sit around waiting for a personified Nature to give them joy and delight; they have to enter a *relationship* with Nature, sharing themselves with her so that she'll share herself with them. Or, as the speaker eloquently puts it:

> O Lady! we receive but what we give,
> And in our life alone does nature live:

In these lines, personification becomes the bedrock of one of the speaker's major philosophical points.

But there are also plenty of places where personification serves humbler, sadder purposes. When the speaker describes the howling stormwinds as a "mighty Poet" who tells the tale of a defeated army and a lost, terrified little child, it's clear that this wind has, at the very least, an awful lot in common with the speaker himself. And so do its sad stories of defeat and abandonment.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-8:** " The grand old ballad of Sir Patrick Spence, / This night, so tranquil now, will not go hence / Unroused by winds, that ply a busier trade / Than those which mould yon cloud in lazy flakes, / Or the dull sobbing draft, that moans and rakes / Upon the strings of this Æolian lute, / Which better far were mute."
- **Lines 13-14:** "I see the old Moon in her lap, foretelling / The coming on of rain and squally blast."
- **Lines 48-49:** "And in our life alone does nature live: / Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!"
- **Lines 68-69:** "Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower / A new Earth and new Heaven,"
- **Lines 78-79:** "And all misfortunes were but as the stuff / Whence Fancy made me dreams of happiness:"
- **Line 85:** "what nature gave me at my birth,"
- **Line 95:** " Reality's dark dream!"
- **Lines 97-110:** "What a scream / Of agony by torture lengthened out / That lute sent forth! Thou Wind, that rav'st without, / Bare crag, or mountain-tairn, or blasted tree, / Or pine-grove whither woodman never clomb, / Or lonely house, long held the witches' home, / Methinks were fitter instruments for thee, / Mad Lutanist! who in this month of showers, / Of dark brown gardens, and of peeping flowers, / Mak'st Devils' yule, with worse than wintry song, / The blossoms, buds, and timorous leaves among. / Thou Actor, perfect in all tragic sounds! / Thou mighty Poet, e'en to frenzy bold! / What tell'st thou now about?"
- **Line 117:** " It tells another tale, with sounds less deep and loud!"
- **Line 128:** "Visit her, gentle Sleep! with wings of healing,"
- **Lines 130-131:** "May all the stars hang bright above her dwelling, / Silent as though they watched the sleeping Earth!"

REPETITION

Various flavors of repetition make the speaker's voice sound alternately reflective, tormented, and elated.

For instance, take a look at the diacope in the speaker's observations of the moon:

> For lo! the New-moon winter-bright!
> And overspread with phantom light,
> (With swimming phantom light o'erspread
> But rimmed and circled by a silver thread)

The speaker's return to the image of a moon "overspread with phantom light" evokes his careful attention to this ghostly vision. The second time these words appear, the speaker adds the adjective "swimming," making it seem as if he's still gazing at the moon, catching new details. This repetition doesn't just give readers an image of what the speaker sees, but an image of the speaker as a thoughtful, dreamy fellow.

But he's also suffering. Listen to his diacope here:

> A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,
> A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,

Again, the speaker returns to a central idea—"grief"—but layers different adjectives over it, as if grasping for the right words to convey the exact nature of his misery.

Later on, polyptoton helps the speaker to develop the poem's big philosophical argument:

> O Lady! we receive but what we give,
> And in our life alone does nature live:

The variation on the word "life" here makes it clear that nature's life and humanity's life aren't really different things: people, this speaker believes, have to imbue the world with their own feelings in order for nature to feel beautiful or meaningful.

And that brings readers to some of the poem's most exuberant repetitions. The experience of feeling connected to the world, the speaker says, is nothing less than "Joy" itself—a word he sings out over and over across the second half of the poem:

> Joy, virtuous Lady! Joy that ne'er was given,

Save to the pure, and in their purest hour,
Life, and Life's effluence, cloud at once and shower,
Joy, Lady! is the spirit and the power,

Returning to "Joy," the speaker himself sounds joyful—an effect that's especially poignant considering how much "grief" the reader knows he's enduring. As he comes back over and over, not just to the word "joy," but to the metaphor that envisions joy as a "fair luminous cloud," his repetitions suggest just how much he longs to experience that joy again.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "overspread with phantom light"
- **Line 11:** "phantom light o'erspread"
- **Line 21:** "grief"
- **Line 22:** "grief"
- **Lines 32-33:** "the stars; / Those stars,"
- **Line 48:** "life," "live"
- **Line 54:** "A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud"
- **Line 57:** "sweet"
- **Line 58:** "sweet"
- **Line 62:** "This light, this glory, this fair luminous mist,"
- **Line 64:** "Joy," "Joy"
- **Line 67:** "Joy"
- **Line 71:** "Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud—"
- **Line 90:** "nature," "natural"
- **Line 134:** "Joy," "joy"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism (and especially the more specific device anaphora) helps to shape the speaker's developing thoughts and to give readers a sense of the way he searches for meaning in the midst of awful suffering.

Sometimes, the speaker repeats sentence structures as if he's trying to clarify what he means—perhaps to himself, perhaps to the "Lady" he's writing to. For instance, take a look at lines 17-20:

Those sounds which oft have raised me, whilst they awed,
And sent my soul abroad,
Might now perhaps their wonted impulse give,
Might startle this dull pain, and make it move and live!

That second line that starts with "might" feels like an explanation of the first. But it also gives readers a sense of the speaker's feelings here. It's as if he feels superstitious about spelling his hopes out, at first; readers might almost hear that second "might" in a whisper.

A few lines later, anaphora plays an even bigger dramatic role. The speaker has just finished giving a meticulous description of the stars, the moon, and the clouds, and concludes:

I see them all so excellently fair,
I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!

That repeated "I see" makes the speaker's plight clear: he can *see* beauty, but he can't *feel* it—and beauty that one can't feel, he implies, is pretty empty and meaningless.

Toward the end of the poem, meanwhile, the speaker's parallelism sounds like a gentle prayer:

With light heart may she rise,
Gay fancy, cheerful eyes,
Joy lift her spirit, joy attune her voice;

This accumulation of similar lines makes it feel as if the speaker is trying to imagine the happiest possible existence for his beloved "Lady"—a life full of every pleasure, great and small, that he himself can't reach in his dejection. Perhaps he finds some comfort in hoping that she might find such happiness, even if he can't.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** "Might"
- **Line 20:** "Might"
- **Line 29:** "And"
- **Line 30:** "And"
- **Line 31:** "And"
- **Lines 37-38:** "I see them all so excellently fair, / I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!"
- **Line 49:** "Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!"
- **Lines 57-58:** "of its own birth, / Of all sweet sounds the life and element!"
- **Line 64:** "Joy, virtuous Lady! Joy that ne'er was given,"
- **Line 67:** "Joy, Lady!"
- **Line 71:** "Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud—"
- **Lines 74-75:** "All melodies the echoes of that voice, / All colours a suffusion from that light."
- **Lines 108-109:** "Thou Actor, perfect in all tragic sounds! / Thou mighty Poet, e'en to frenzy bold!"
- **Lines 124-125:** "And now moans low in bitter grief and fear, / And now screams loud, and hopes to make her mother hear."
- **Lines 129-130:** "And may this storm be but a mountain-birth, / May all the stars hang bright above her dwelling,"
- **Line 134:** "Joy lift her spirit, joy attune her voice;"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration gives this poem drama and music.

For example, listen to the thudding sounds in this description of the speaker's terrible "dejection":

> A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,
> A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,

Each of those dull /d/ sounds lands with a thump, like a dropped sack of flour. And each of them is underscored by harsh, raspy consonant /r/ sounds, making this dejection sound as unpleasant as it feels.

Later, when the speaker describes "Joy"—the opposite of dejection—alliteration has a much different effect:

> Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth
> A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
> Enveloping the Earth—

Here, light, lilting /l/ sounds and gentle /e/ sounds mimic the "luminous cloud" of joy that these lines describe.

And listen to the overflow of soft sibilant alliteration at the very end of the poem:

> 'Tis midnight, but small thoughts have I of sleep:
> Full seldom may my friend such vigils keep!
> Visit her, gentle Sleep! with wings of healing,
> And may this storm be but a mountain-birth,
> May all the stars hang bright above her dwelling,
> Silent as though they watched the sleeping Earth!

This rush of /s/ sounds gives this passage a hushed, whispery feeling, as if the speaker, like the stars, is watching silently over his sleeping beloved.

(Note that we've only marked some of the poem's alliteration—there's lots more to listen for!)

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Well," "was," "weather-wise"
- **Line 3:** "night," "now," "not"
- **Line 6:** "dull," "draft"
- **Line 18:** "sent," "soul"
- **Line 20:** "make," "move"
- **Line 21:** "dark," "drear"
- **Line 22:** "drowsy"
- **Line 23:** "no natural"
- **Line 26:** "thoughts," "throstle"
- **Line 33:** "behind," "between"
- **Line 34:** "bedimmed"
- **Line 44:** "light," "lingers"
- **Line 45:** "win"
- **Line 46:** "within"
- **Line 54:** "light," "luminous"
- **Line 55:** "Enveloping," "Earth"
- **Line 56:** "soul," "sent"
- **Line 57:** "sweet"
- **Line 58:** "sweet sounds"
- **Line 126:** "small," "sleep"
- **Line 127:** "seldom"
- **Line 128:** "Sleep"
- **Line 129:** "storm"
- **Line 130:** "stars"
- **Line 131:** "Silent," "sleeping"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, gives the poem some haunting music.

For instance, listen to the sounds in lines 9-12, in which the speaker gazes at the moon:

> For lo! the New-moon winter-bright!
> And overspread with phantom light,
> (With swimming phantom light o'erspread
> But rimmed and circled by a silver thread)

The flat /o/ and long /oo/ of lines 9-10 create echoey, rounded sounds that evoke both the moon itself and the emptiness of the night. And the short /ih/ sounds of "swimming," "rimmed," and "silver" feel delicate as the strange "thread" of light that surrounds that ghostly moon. All these sounds together, alongside some mesmerized repetitions, make the speaker sound almost spellbound.

(Note that we've only highlighted some examples of assonance in the first two stanzas here—there's plenty more to find.)

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "lazy flakes"
- **Line 9:** "New-moon"
- **Line 11:** "With," "swimming"
- **Line 12:** "rimmed," "silver"
- **Line 16:** "night," "driving"
- **Line 20:** "pain," "make"
- **Line 27:** "eve," "serene"
- **Line 28:** "I," "sky"
- **Line 33:** "glide behind"
- **Line 38:** "see," "feel"

VOCABULARY

Yestreen (Before Line 1) - Yesterday evening.

Bard (Line 1) - Poet, singer, balladeer.

Weather-wise (Line 1) - That is, wise about the weather—understanding how to read the sky to predict storms.

Tranquil (Line 3) - Peaceful, quiet, undisturbed.

Hence (Line 3) - Away from here.

Unroused (Line 4) - Untroubled, unbothered.

Ply a busier trade (Line 4) - That is, "do a more active kind of work."

Mould (Line 5) - To shape or model a substance, like a sculptor models clay.

Yon (Line 5, Line 35) - A way of pointing out a specific object at a distance; "yon" essentially means "that one over there."

Æolian lute (Line 7) - A kind of stringed musical instrument built for the wind to play: left in an open window or on a breezy hill, it makes an eerie music.

Mute (Line 8) - Soundless, voiceless, silent.

Lo! (Line 9) - An exclamation, meaning something along the lines of "Behold! Look at that!"

O'erspread (Line 10, Line 11) - A contraction of "overspread," meaning "covered."

Phantom (Line 10, Line 11) - Ghostly.

Foretelling (Line 13) - Predicting.

Squally blast (Line 14) - Stormy winds.

Slant night-shower (Line 16) - That is, night-time rain, falling so hard and fast that it looks "slant," or diagonal.

Oft (Line 17) - Often, frequently.

Whilst (Line 17) - While.

Abroad (Line 18) - Far afield, wandering, far from home.

Wonted (Line 19) - Usual, habitual.

Pang (Line 21) - A pain, especially a sudden or startling pain.

Void, dark, and drear (Line 21) - That is, empty, dark, and dismal.

Stifled (Line 22) - Smothered, muted.

Unimpassioned (Line 22) - Without strong feelings.

Wan and heartless (Line 25) - That is, sickly and dispirited, without energy.

Yonder (Line 26) - A way of pointing out a specific thing: "that one over there."

Throstle (Line 26) - Another word for a thrush, a kind of bird noted for its beautiful song.

Woo'd (Line 26) - Tempted, seduced, coaxed. Here, the speaker means his thoughts have been lured away by the song of the "throstle."

Balmy (Line 27) - Warm and gentle. This word is almost always used to describe good weather.

Bedimmed (Line 34) - Darkened.

Fair (Line 37) - Beautiful.

Genial (Line 39) - Cheery, friendly.

What can these avail (Line 40) - In other words, "what can these do?" or "what power do these have?"

Breast (Line 41) - Chest—here used to suggest the speaker's heart, his feelings.

It were a vain endeavour (Line 42) - In other words, "it would be an impossible task."

Garment (Line 49) - Clothing.

Shroud (Line 49) - The cloth used to wrap a dead body.

Aught (Line 50) - Anything.

Inanimate (Line 51) - Motionless, lifeless.

Issue forth (Line 53) - Emerge, come out.

Glory (Line 54, Line 62) - A shining light (with connotations of holiness, joy, and celebration).

Luminous (Line 54) - Shining, glowing.

Enveloping (Line 55) - Surrounding, wrapping up.

Potent (Line 57) - Powerful, strong, effective.

Element (Line 58) - Here, this word can mean either "the substance something lives in" (the way that a fish's "element" is water) or something's most basic, "elementary" substance.

Thou (Line 59, Line 99, Line 108, Line 109, Line 110, Line 139) - An old-fashioned, affectionate way of saying "you."

Need'st (Line 59) - In other words, "you don't need to ask." "Need'st" is a contraction of "needest," which just means "need."

Wherein (Line 61) - In what; where.

Doth (Line 61) - An old-fashioned way of saying "does."

Virtuous (Line 64) - Morally good.

Ne'er (Line 64) - A contraction of "never."

Effluence (Line 66) - A substance that flows out.

Dower (Line 68) - A wedding present.

Undreamt of (Line 70) - Unimagined by, past the wildest dreams of.

Sensual (Line 70) - In this context, the word means "people who are too caught up in bodily pleasures or needs"—people, in other words, who have lost sight of the spiritual.

Thence (Line 73) - From there.

All that charms or ear or sight (Line 73) - In other words, "everything that enchants either one's ears or one's eyes."

Suffusion (Line 75) - A gradual spreading-out.

Dallied with distress (Line 77) - That is, "toyed with unhappiness." In other words, the speaker used to be able to

treat sorrow and pain as a mere temporary game.

Misfortunes (Line 78) - Pieces of bad luck.

Whence (Line 79) - From which.

Fancy (Line 79) - Playful daydreaming. (Coleridge famously wrote about the distinction between this kind of "Fancy" and its distant cousin, the more powerful and serious "Imagination.")

Foliage (Line 81) - Plant life.

Afflictions (Line 82) - Sufferings.

Mirth (Line 83) - Joy, happiness, laughter.

Visitation (Line 84) - That is, each attack or bout of "dejection." Here, it's as if the speaker's unhappiness were a kind of spirit making unwanted visits to him.

Suspends (Line 85) - Stops, arrests, holds back.

Shaping spirit of Imagination (Line 86) - That is, the imaginative power to make meaning out of what one sees, giving the otherwise essentially meaningless physical world life and vitality. Coleridge developed a complex philosophical theory about what this kind of imagination is and entails.

Needs must (Line 87) - Have to, must.

Haply (Line 89) - Maybe, possibly.

Abstruse research (Line 89) - That is, obscure and difficult studies.

Natural man (Line 90) - This means something like "all the instinctive, physical parts of human nature."

Sole (Line 91) - Only.

Viper (Line 94) - A venomous snake.

Raved (Line 97, Line 99) - Madly babbled or cried out.

Mountain-tairn (Line 100) - A lake in the mountains.

Blasted (Line 100) - Battered and misshapen by storms.

Pine-grove whither woodman never clomb (Line 101) - That is, clusters of pine trees into which not even people who make their livings from the forest never climbed high enough to reach.

Methinks (Line 103) - I think.

Lutanist (Line 104) - A lute-player (here a personification of the storm winds, playing on the "Æolian lute" the speaker keeps in his window).

Mak'st Devils' yule (Line 106) - That is, throws a kind of perverse, Satanic winter party. "Yule" was another term for Christmas.

Timorous (Line 107) - Shy, trembling.

E'en to frenzy bold (Line 109) - That is, so powerful as to be almost crazed. Here, the speaker personifies the wind as a poet so caught up in visions that they've nearly lost their mind.

Tell'st (Line 110) - A contraction of "tellest," which just means "tells."

'Tis (Line 111, Line 121, Line 126) - An old-fashioned contraction of "it is."

A host in rout (Line 111) - A defeated army.

Smarting (Line 112) - Stinging, painful.

Tremulous (Line 116) - Shaking, nervous.

Affright (Line 118) - Fearfulness.

Tempered (Line 119) - Mingled, balanced out.

As Otway's self had framed the tender lay (Line 120) - In other words, "as if the poet and playwright Otway himself had written the sweet, gentle song." In other words, the calmer winds now sound beautiful as poetry.

A lonesome wild (Line 122) - A forlorn, lonely wilderness.

Vigils (Line 127) - Rituals in which one stays up all night to pray or pay careful attention to something. One might hold a "vigil" at a deathbed, for instance.

May this storm be but a mountain-birth (Line 129) - In other words, "may this storm only help the mountains to give birth to something new." This may also be an allusion to a classical proverb that appeared in the work of the Roman poet Horace: "The mountains are in labor; a ridiculous mouse will be born." (That's another way of saying "this is a whole lot of fuss about nothing.")

Dwelling (Line 130) - Home.

Gay fancy (Line 133) - Cheerful daydreams.

Attune (Line 134) - Tune, give character to.

From pole to pole (Line 135) - That is, from one end of the earth to the other.

Eddying (Line 136) - Movement, rippling. This word is most often used to describe the ripples in a brook or river, and suggests that the speaker wants his beloved Lady's soul to move freely, lightly, and fluidly through the world.

Friend devoutest of my choice (Line 138) - That is, "my very dearest chosen friend." The term "devoutest" suggests that the speaker feels an almost religious devotion to this "Lady."

Mayest (Line 139) - An old-fashioned way of saying "may."

Ever, evermore (Line 139) - That is, in essence, "always and forever."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Dejection: An Ode" is, as its title suggests, an ode—a lyrical exploration of a particular subject. This ode wanders far and wide from its stated theme, however: this poem isn't *just* about "Dejection," a kind of depressive numbness, but also about its

opposite, "Joy," an all-embracing communion with the world.

The poem is broken into eight irregular stanzas, each exploring a new development in the speaker's thoughts. Like most odes, this one doesn't stick to a particular stanza form or length. It also doesn't use any predictable meter or rhyme scheme. Instead, it shapes itself to fit the speaker's thoughts. Some stanzas are long and meandering; others are short and sweet.

But this shapeshifting ode does model itself on another great poem: William Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." Coleridge wrote "Dejection" in response to the first few stanzas of Wordsworth's poem and often alludes to its language and its themes. Coleridge deeply admired Wordsworth, but didn't always agree with him. Where Wordsworth argues that people lose their ability to perceive nature's inherent "glory" as they grow up, Coleridge counters that, in fact, nature's "glory" is in large part a creation of the human imagination, and flows from the inside out, not the outside in.

METER

Like most odes, "Dejection" doesn't use a predictable meter. The poem is *mostly* iambic: that is, it uses iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm.

But whenever the speaker fancies, the poem switches between lines of iambic pentameter (five iambs in a row) and lines of iambic trimeter (three iambs in a row). Sometimes it even throws in a line of iambic hexameter (*six* iambs, also known as an alexandrine), for flavor!

Here's a typical example of the poem's metrical games, quoted from the beginning of the third stanza:

> My gen- | ial spir- | its fail;
> And what | can these | avail
> To lift | the smoth- | ering weight | from off | my breast?

The speaker starts with two lines of iambic trimeter—lines that feel blunt and heavy as the dull suffering the speaker describes. Then, he launches into a longer, more fluid line of iambic pentameter.

Such longer lines often trace the speaker's more reflective, philosophical thoughts on his situation, as in lines 45-46:

> I may | not hope | from out- | ward forms | to win
> The pass- | ion and | the life, | whose foun- | tains are | within.

Here, the speaker pairs a line of iambic pentameter with a drawn-out alexandrine, drawing particular attention to this declaration of one of the poem's central ideas.

Iambic rhythms like these are common in English-language poetry; English naturally falls into an iambic pattern a lot of the time, and a steady iambic pulse can feel hypnotic as a heartbeat. But this poem, like a lot of iambic poetry, also sometimes breaks its rhythm for emphasis. Take a look at lines 71-72, for instance:

> Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud—
> We in ourselves rejoice!

These lines don't use any standard pattern of feet. But both lines start with a trochee, the opposite foot to an iamb, with a DUM-da rhythm—a choice that means the words "Joy" and "We" sing out. The strong spondee—DUM-DUM—of "sweet voice" is similarly emphatic and, well, joyful.

Overall, then, the poem's meter is flexible, expressive—and as emotive as the speaker is dejected.

RHYME SCHEME

"Dejection" plays with its rhyme scheme in the same ways it plays with its meter, varying patterns of rhyme for emotional and musical effect.

For just one example, take a look at the rhyme scheme in the fourth stanza, which runs like this:

AABCBBCBCDCD

Examined closely, this rhyme scheme almost works like the outline of an essay!

The two A rhymes work like a thesis statement:

> O Lady! we receive but what we give,
> And in our life alone does nature live:

Then, the speaker develops his point across the lines with B and C rhymes, declaring that experiencing any life of "higher worth" than meaningless struggle and anxiety requires that the "soul itself must issue forth" the glorious light of joy. Finally, he introduces a second supporting point by weaving a D rhyme in: sweet singing, he adds, is another metaphor for this joy.

The rhymes here thus help to trace the development of the speaker's thoughts—and just plain sound lovely. This poem of deep feeling is also a poem of profound philosophical insight, and the music of these lines suggests that thought and feeling, for this speaker, might be pretty closely knitted together.

SPEAKER

This poem's speaker is almost certainly Samuel Taylor Coleridge himself. Not only does the speaker express Coleridge's philosophical convictions about the creative work of the "Imagination," he suffers from Coleridge's own "dejection"—and his heartbreak.

The first draft of this poem was called "Letter to Sara

Hutchison," and spoke directly to the woman with whom Coleridge was deep in unrequited love. "Dejection" was a revised version intended for publication. Less personal and less revealing, it's addressed to an anonymous "Lady" rather than "Sara"—but it's still very much Coleridge's own story.

Whether or not the reader knows this background, they might well guess that this poem's speaker is a suffering poet. The speaker's sense of the power of the imagination (and his habit of seeing his own feelings reflected in tempests and wind-harps) mark him out as a visionary and passionate soul.

SETTING

The poem is certainly inspired by Coleridge's own home in the Lake District, a beautiful part of Northern England renowned as the cradle of English Romantic poetry. The speaker, sheltering indoors from a gathering storm, never says much about the room around him; he pays far more attention to the strange lights, sparkling stars, and raging winds of the world outside his window. But his mention of an "Æolian lute"—a wind-harp, a common parlor toy in the 19th century—suggests that he's sitting in his own living room or study, somewhere peaceful, perhaps lit and warmed by a fire.

Of course, these comfortable surroundings can't give the speaker any real consolation; his thoughts are far away, and he's looking out the window into the world, not inward at his home. Cut off by his "dejection," he at first feels far away from everything; then, when the storm breaks, he almost seems to be part of the wind and rain himself.

The speaker's disconnect from his own immediate surroundings is all part of this poem's evocation of numb, isolated dejection—but also its wild Romantic visions. The imagination, this poem's setting suggests, can both plant people more firmly where they stand, and carry them far away.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) was one of the most brilliant, inspired, and tormented of the English Romantic poets. A big personality and bigger talker, Coleridge privately suffered from self-doubt, bone-deep loneliness, and (eventually) opium addiction. For a time, he found balance and friendship with the more grounded and temperate William Wordsworth; the inspired collaboration between these two poets would produce *Lyrical Ballads*, a book often credited as the founding text of English Romanticism.

In *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge and Wordsworth took on two sides of the Romantic coin. Wordsworth's poetry focused on everyday country life and the wisdom of the natural world; Coleridge's work was wild and magical, populated by strange spirits. Both of these attitudes were deeply Romantic in their way: the Romantic poets believed both that poetry should be plainspoken and down-to-earth, and that it should also explore the outer reaches of the imagination.

This poem, written several years after *Lyrical Ballads* appeared in 1798, is also a kind of conversation with Wordsworth. "Dejection" is Coleridge's response (and rejoinder) to Wordsworth's famous "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." In that ode, Wordsworth argues that people lose touch with nature's inherent power and glory as they grow up; here, Coleridge uses a similar form to reply that whatever glory nature has must rather come from "within."

First published in *The Morning Post*, a London newspaper, "Dejection" eventually appeared in Coleridge's 1817 collection *Sibylline Leaves*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This poem draws on a complex and agonizing episode in Coleridge's own life. Always a man of speedy (and often ill-judged) enthusiasms, Coleridge rushed into marriage as a young man, choosing for his bride his friend Robert Southey's sister-in-law, Sara Fricker. The idea was that the Southeys and the Coleridges would emigrate to America together and start an idealistic egalitarian community they called a "Pantisocracy." But these plans fell through almost immediately, leaving the Coleridges trapped in a deeply unhappy marriage. The two would eventually separate—a rare and scandalous choice in their time.

Poor Coleridge didn't learn much from this debacle. Instead, he played out a similar pattern again, this time with a *different* friend's sister-in-law: another Sara, Sara Hutchison, sister of William Wordsworth's wife Mary. Coleridge worshiped the Wordsworths, and it's possible that a longing to be part of their happy family inspired a good deal of his passion for this second Sara, for whom he would write his famous "Asra" poems (see what he did there?).

Sara Hutchinson didn't return Coleridge's feelings—and even if she had, it would have been 19th-century social suicide to pursue a relationship with a still-married man. But along with the rest of Wordsworth's family, she cared deeply about Coleridge and remained his good friend, a situation that gave Coleridge both comfort and enduring pain.

"Dejection" is the second, considerably toned-down draft of a poem Coleridge wrote for Sara. The first version, "Letter to Sara Hutchison," is much more explicit about the identity of that mysterious "Lady"—and about Coleridge's agonized longing for her. The more measured, reflective "Dejection" was Coleridge's way of transforming his pain into philosophy.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence — Listen to the folk song Coleridge alludes to in the first lines of the poem. The words of this old ballad are more than a little relevant to the story Coleridge tells! (https://youtu.be/_mwk-Wj2r0I)
- A Reading of the Poem — Listen to the actor Sir Ralph Richardson reading the poem aloud. (https://youtu.be/KUm0MeDnyRM)
- Coleridge's Legacy — Read biographer Richard Holmes's overview of Coleridge's poetic career. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jan/27/samuel-taylor-coleridge-richard-holmes)
- Coleridge and "Asra" — Learn more about "Asra," the beloved "Lady" to whom Coleridge addresses this poem. (https://wordsworth.org.uk/blog/2017/11/01/sara-hutchinson/)
- A Coleridge Biography — Visit the British Library's website to learn more about Coleridge's life and work. (https://www.bl.uk/people/samuel-taylor-coleridge)
- The Asra Poems — Read a collection of Coleridge's "Asra" poems—including the intimate, tormented "Letter to Sara Hutchinson," the first version of "Dejection: An Ode." (http://182.160.97.198:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/1353/5.%20Asra%20Poems%20.pdf?sequence=7)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE POEMS

- Frost at Midnight
- Kubla Khan
- The Eolian Harp

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