Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



Frost at Midnight

by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Grades 8–11 · Common Core RL.8.4, RL.8.2, RL.8.6

Coleridge wrote “Frost at Midnight” in February 1798 at his cottage in Nether Stowey, Somerset. The baby beside him is his son Hartley. It is one of his “conversation poems”: blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter) that sounds like a person thinking aloud to a quiet listener. Notice how the poem moves from the present (the silent night), to the past (school), to the future (the child’s life), and back to the frost.

THE POEM

The Frost performs its secret ministry,
Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry
Came loud--and hark, again! loud as before.
The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
Have left me to that solitude, which suits
Abstruser musings: save that at my side
My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.
'Tis calm indeed! so calm that it disturbs
And vexes meditation with its strange
And extreme silentness. Sea, hill, and wood,
This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood,
With all the numberless goings-on of life,
Inaudible as dreams! the thin blue flame
Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;
Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
Making it a companionable form,
Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
By its own moods interprets, every where
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
And makes a toy of Thought.
But O! how oft,
How oft, at school, with most believing mind,
Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars,
To watch that fluttering stranger! and as oft
With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt
Of my sweet birth-place, and the old church-tower,
Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang
From morn to evening, all the hot Fair-day,
So sweetly, that they stirred and haunted me
With a wild pleasure, falling on mine ear
Most like articulate sounds of things to come!
So gazed I, till the soothing things, I dreamt,
Lulled me to sleep, and sleep prolonged my dreams!
And so I brooded all the following morn,
Awed by the stern preceptor's face, mine eye
Fixed with mock study on my swimming book:
Save if the door half opened, and I snatched
A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up,
For still I hoped to see the stranger's face,
Townsman, or aunt, or sister more beloved,
My play-mate when we both were clothed alike!

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

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

VOCABULARY

ministry — service or work, often holy

abstruser — deeper, harder to understand

inaudible — impossible to hear

film — thin ash on the fire grate, said to foretell a visitor (a "stranger")

presageful — full of signs of the future

preceptor — teacher

lore — knowledge, learning

pent — shut in, confined

cloisters — covered walkways of a school, church or monastery

eave-drops — drips of water from the edge of a roof

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The poem opens: “The Frost performs its secret ministry, / Unhelped by any wind.” What is the effect of this quiet, mysterious opening, and why does the speaker say the calm “disturbs” him?

2. Why does the “film” on the grate catch the speaker’s attention, and what memory does it lead him to?

3. Compare the speaker’s childhood with the one he imagines for his son. Find one phrase for each.

4. What is “that eternal language, which thy God / Utters”? What does the speaker believe nature will teach the child?

5. The poem ends with “the secret ministry of frost” again. Why return to the frost, and how has its meaning grown?

WRITING PROMPT

Write a short letter or poem to someone younger (a sibling, cousin, or future child) describing one place you hope they will grow up knowing, and why. Begin in a quiet present moment, the way Coleridge does.

Frost at Midnight — Answer Key

1. It sets a still, almost holy mood: frost works silently, like an invisible spirit. The silence is so "extreme" that it "vexes meditation"; his mind has nothing to rest on and starts to wander.
2. It is "the sole unquiet thing", and it moves like him, so it seems "a companionable form". Such films were called "strangers" (a sign of a visitor), which reminds him of school, staring at the grate hoping to see a "stranger's face" from home.
3. He was "reared / In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim," seeing "nought lovely but the sky and stars." His son "shalt wander like a breeze / By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags".
4. Nature itself: "The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible" through which God teaches. He believes nature will "mould / Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask": the child will learn to love and to wonder.
5. The poem comes full circle (circular structure). At first the frost is silent and unsettling; at the end it is part of God's gentle teaching, hanging "silent icicles, / Quietly shining to the quiet Moon." A blessing for the child in every season.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/frost-at-midnight-samuel-taylor-coleridge/