Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



The Nightingale

by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

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

Coleridge wrote "The Nightingale" in April 1798 and published it in Lyrical Ballads. It is one of his "conversation poems": blank verse addressed to companions (his "Friend" and "Sister," often read as William and Dorothy Wordsworth). The live text is 112 lines in five verse paragraphs. The quoted phrase "Most musical, most melancholy" comes from John Milton's "Il Penseroso"; Coleridge cites it in order to argue against the old idea that the nightingale's song is sad. Philomela, in myth, is the woman transformed into a nightingale. The poem ends as "It is a father's tale," with Coleridge's infant son (Hartley).

THE POEM

No cloud, no relique of the sunken day
Distinguishes the West, no long thin slip
Of sullen light, no obscure trembling hues.
Come, we will rest on this old mossy bridge!
You see the glimmer of the stream beneath,
But hear no murmuring: it flows silently,
O'er its soft bed of verdure. All is still,
A balmy night! and though the stars be dim,
Yet let us think upon the vernal showers
That gladden the green earth, and we shall find
A pleasure in the dimness of the stars.
And hark! the Nightingale begins its song,
'Most musical, most melancholy' bird!
A melancholy bird? Oh! idle thought!
In Nature there is nothing melancholy.
But some night-wandering man whose heart was pierced
With the remembrance of a grievous wrong,
Or slow distemper, or neglected love,
(And so, poor wretch! filled all things with himself,
And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale
Of his own sorrow) he, and such as he,
First named these notes a melancholy strain.
And many a poet echoes the conceit;
Poet who hath been building up the rhyme
When he had better far have stretched his limbs
Beside a brook in mossy forest-dell,
By sun or moon-light, to the influxes
Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements
Surrendering his whole spirit, of his song
And of his fame forgetful! so his fame
Should share in Nature's immortality,
A venerable thing! and so his song
Should make all Nature lovelier, and itself
Be loved like Nature! But 'twill not be so;
And youths and maidens most poetical,
Who lose the deepening twilights of the spring
In ball-rooms and hot theatres, they still
Full of meek sympathy must heave their sighs
O'er Philomela's pity-pleading strains.

My Friend, and thou, our Sister! we have learnt
A different lore: we may not thus profane
Nature's sweet voices, always full of love
And joyance! 'Tis the merry Nightingale
That crowds, and hurries, and precipitates
With fast thick warble his delicious notes,
As he were fearful that an April night
Would be too short for him to utter forth
His love-chant, and disburthen his full soul
Of all its music!

And I know a grove
Of large extent, hard by a castle huge,
Which the great lord inhabits not; and so
This grove is wild with tangling underwood,
And the trim walks are broken up, and grass,
Thin grass and king-cups grow within the paths.
But never elsewhere in one place I knew
So many nightingales; and far and near,
In wood and thicket, over the wide grove,
They answer and provoke each other's song,
With skirmish and capricious passagings,
And murmurs musical and swift jug jug,
And one low piping sound more sweet than all--
Stirring the air with such a harmony,
That should you close your eyes, you might almost
Forget it was not day! On moonlight bushes,
Whose dewy leaflets are but half-disclosed.
You may perchance behold them on the twigs,
Their bright, bright eyes, their eyes both bright and full,
Glistening, while many a glow-worm in the shade
Lights up her love-torch.

A most gentle Maid,
Who dwelleth in her hospitable home
Hard by the castle, and at latest eve
(Even like a Lady vowed and dedicate
To something more than Nature in the grove)
Glides through the pathways; she knows all their notes,
That gentle Maid! and oft, a moment's space,
What time the moon was lost behind a cloud,
Hath heard a pause of silence; till the moon
Emerging, hath awakened earth and sky
With one sensation, and those wakeful birds
Have all burst forth in choral minstrelsy,
As if some sudden gale had swept at once
A hundred airy harps! And she hath watched
Many a nightingale perch giddily
On blossomy twig still swinging from the breeze,
And to that motion tune his wanton song
Like tipsy Joy that reels with tossing head.

Farewell, O Warbler! till to-morrow eve,
And you, my friends! farewell, a short farewell!
We have been loitering long and pleasantly,
And now for our dear homes.--That strain again!
Full fain it would delay me! My dear babe,
Who, capable of no articulate sound,
Mars all things with his imitative lisp,
How he would place his hand beside his ear,
His little hand, the small forefinger up,
And bid us listen! And I deem it wise
To make him Nature's play-mate. He knows well
The evening-star; and once, when he awoke
In most distressful mood (some inward pain
Had made up that strange thing, an infant's dream--)
I hurried with him to our orchard-plot,
And he beheld the moon, and, hushed at once,
Suspends his sobs, and laughs most silently,
While his fair eyes, that swam with undropped tears,
Did glitter in the yellow moon-beam! Well!--
It is a father's tale: But if that Heaven
Should give me life, his childhood shall grow up
Familiar with these songs, that with the night
He may associate joy.--Once more, farewell,
Sweet Nightingale! once more, my friends! farewell.

VOCABULARY

relique — relic, a remaining trace (Coleridge's spelling)

verdure — fresh green plant life

vernal — of the spring

conceit — a fanciful idea, especially a worn poetic figure

Philomela — in myth, a princess transformed into a nightingale

disburthen — unburden, pour out (Coleridge's spelling)

king-cups — marsh marigolds

minstrelsy — music, especially sung or played as by minstrels

wanton — playful, unrestrained

loitering — lingering, staying pleasantly too long

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the opening night scene (the "old mossy bridge," the silent stream, the "dimness of the stars") prepare us for the nightingale's song? What mood does Coleridge build before the bird begins?

2. The speaker quotes the nightingale as "'Most musical, most melancholy' bird!" then calls that an "idle thought." According to him, who first named the song melancholy, and why is the idea a "conceit"?

3. How does he want us to hear the bird instead? Use "'Tis the merry Nightingale" and the description of its "fast thick warble" to explain the difference.

4. In the grove near the castle, what do the many nightingales do to and with one another, and how does the "gentle Maid" listen? What happens when the moon comes out from behind a cloud?

5. The last verse paragraph is "It is a father's tale." What does the babe do when he hears the birds and later sees the moon, and what does the speaker hope his child's childhood will associate with the night?

WRITING PROMPT

Write a short response in which you take a well-known idea about a bird, season, or sound (for example, that owls are wise, or that rain is sad) and argue, as Coleridge does, from close listening or looking that the real thing is different. End with one person—a friend or a child—you would like to share that sound with.

The Nightingale — Answer Key

1. “No cloud, no relique of the sunken day” is left; the stream “flows silently, / O’er its soft bed of verdure.” “All is still,” a “balmy night,” and though “the stars be dim,” thinking of “vernal showers” can still find “A pleasure in the dimness of the stars.” The mood is hushed, companionable, and gently happy—not gloomy—so the song enters a scene already primed for joy rather than grief.

2. He says “In Nature there is nothing melancholy.” The idea comes from “some night-wandering man whose heart was pierced” by wrong, “distemper,” or “neglected love,” who “filled all things with himself / And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale / Of his own sorrow.” “And many a poet echoes the conceit” instead of stretching “his limbs / Beside a brook” and “Surrendering his whole spirit.” Melancholy is projected onto the bird by unhappy or conventionally “poetical” listeners, not heard from nature itself.

3. “‘Tis the merry Nightingale / That crowds, and hurries, and precipitates / With fast thick warble his delicious notes, / As he were fearful that an April night / Would be too short for him to utter forth / His love-chant, and disburthen his full soul / Of all its music!” The song is overflowing, hurried, and full of love, not a slow lament.

4. “and far and near,” they “answer and provoke each other’s song, / With skirmish and capricious passagings, / And murmurs musical and swift jug jug, / And one low piping sound more sweet than all–.” The Maid “knows all their notes” and has “heard a pause of silence” when the moon was “lost behind a cloud”; when the moon emerges, “those wakeful birds / Have all burst forth in choral minstrelsy, / As if some sudden gale had swept at once / A hundred airy harps!” Listening is patient, knowledgeable, and answered by a sudden communal joy.

5. The babe, who “Mars all things with his imitative lisp,” would “place his hand beside his ear” and “bid us listen.” Once, in a “distressful mood,” the father “hurried with him to our orchard-plot,” and the child, seeing the moon, “hushed at once, / Suspends his sobs, and laughs most silently.” He says “I deem it wise / To make him Nature’s play-mate.” hoping “his childhood shall grow up / Familiar with these songs, that with the night / He may associate joy.” The argument against melancholy ends as a wish for the child’s education in joy.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/the-nightingale-samuel-taylor-coleridge/