Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



The Pains of Sleep

by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Grades 9–12 · Common Core RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.4, RL.9-10.5

Coleridge sent an early version of "The Pains of Sleep" to a friend in 1803, and it was printed in 1816 in the same volume as "Christabel" and "Kubla Khan." The live poem is 52 lines in three verse paragraphs, written almost entirely in rhymed couplets. It moves from a calm bedtime habit, to a night of dream torment, to the speaker's breakdown on the third night. It is an early, frank description of nightmare and guilt, written from experience.

THE POEM

Ere on my bed my limbs I lay,
It hath not been my use to pray
With moving lips or bended knees;
But silently, by slow degrees,
My spirit I to Love compose,
In humble trust mine eye-lids close,
With reverential resignation,
No wish conceived, no thought exprest,
Only a sense of supplication;
A sense o'er all my soul imprest
That I am weak, yet not unblest,
Since in me, round me, every where
Eternal Strength and Wisdom are.

But yester-night I prayed aloud
In anguish and in agony,
Up-starting from the fiendish crowd
Of shapes and thoughts that tortured me:
A lurid light, a trampling throng,
Sense of intolerable wrong,
And whom I scorned, those only strong!
Thirst of revenge, the powerless will
Still baffled, and yet burning still!
Desire with loathing strangely mixed
On wild or hateful objects fixed.
Fantastic passions! maddening brawl!
And shame and terror over all!
Deeds to be hid which were not hid,
Which all confused I could not know
Whether I suffered, or I did:
For all seemed guilt, remorse or woe,
My own or others still the same
Life-stifling fear, soul-stifling shame.

So two nights passed: the night's dismay
Saddened and stunned the coming day.
Sleep, the wide blessing, seemed to me
Distemper's worst calamity.
The third night, when my own loud scream
Had waked me from the fiendish dream,
O'ercome with sufferings strange and wild,
I wept as I had been a child;
And having thus by tears subdued
My anguish to a milder mood,
Such punishments, I said, were due
To natures deepliest stained with sin,--
For aye entempesting anew
The unfathomable hell within,
The horror of their deeds to view,
To know and loathe, yet wish and do!
Such griefs with such men well agree,
But wherefore, wherefore fall on me?
To be beloved is all I need,
And whom I love, I love indeed.

VOCABULARY

supplication — humble prayer or request

resignation — calm acceptance

imprest — impressed (an older spelling)

lurid — glaring in a harsh, unnatural way

distemper — illness, disorder of the body or mind

remorse — deep regret for wrongdoing

subdued — calmed, brought under control

deepliest — most deeply (Coleridge's form)

entempesting — stirring up as in a tempest

unfathomable — too deep to measure

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the first verse paragraph, how does the speaker describe his usual bedtime practice? What does he say he does not do ("With moving lips or bended knees"), and what does he do instead?

2. The second verse paragraph begins "But yester-night I prayed aloud / In anguish and in agony." What details show that his dreams were frightening? Which phrases describe feelings, and which describe things he sees?

3. The speaker says he could not tell "Whether I suffered, or I did." What does this suggest about the nature of the dream and why it was so troubling?

4. In the last verse paragraph, what does the speaker think about sleep after "two nights passed"? What does he first conclude about the people who might deserve such punishments?

5. The last four lines turn on the question "But wherefore, wherefore fall on me?" and the reply "To be beloved is all I need." Why is that reply unsatisfying, and what does it reveal about the speaker?

WRITING PROMPT

Write a short paragraph describing a night when something kept you from sleep (a worry, a bad dream, or a memory). Like Coleridge, begin with how you usually settle, describe what broke the habit, and end with the question you could not answer.

The Pains of Sleep — Answer Key

1. He says “it hath not been my use to pray / With moving lips or bended knees; / But silently, by slow degrees, / My spirit I to Love compose, / In humble trust mine eye-lids close.” There is “No wish conceived, no thought exprest, / Only a sense of supplication” that “I am weak, yet not unblest, / Since in me, round me, every where / Eternal Strength and Wisdom are.” It is quiet trust rather than spoken prayer.

2. He sees “A lurid light, a trampling throng,” “Fantastic passions! maddening brawl!” “Deeds to be hid which were not hid,” and feels “Thirst of revenge, the powerless will / Still baffled, and yet burning still,” “Sense of intolerable wrong,” “Desire with loathing strangely mixed,” and “Life-stifling fear, soul-stifling shame.” The dream mixes images (light, crowd) with emotions (shame, terror, revenge).

3. “Which all confused I could not know / Whether I suffered, or I did: / For all seemed guilt, remorse or woe.” In the dream he cannot tell if he is the victim or the wrongdoer, so all of it feels like guilt. This confusion of victim and doer is part of what makes the torment moral as well as physical.

4. “Sleep, the wide blessing, seemed to me / Distemper’s worst calamity.” After the third night’s “loud scream,” he “wept as I had been a child” and decided “Such punishments, I said, were due / To natures deepliest stained with sin,” people who relive “The horror of their deeds to view, / To know and loathe, yet wish and do!”

5. “Such griefs with such men well agree, / But wherefore, wherefore fall on me?” is followed by “To be beloved is all I need, / And whom I love, I love indeed.” The ending is unsatisfying because it does not answer his question. He offers love as a defense instead of an explanation, which suggests he is unsure whether his guilt is deserved and leaves the poem hanging between self-defense and fear.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/the-pains-of-sleep-samuel-taylor-coleridge/