



Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born in Devon in 1772. His father, a clergyman, moved his family to London when Coleridge was young, and it was there that Coleridge attended school (as he would later recall in poems such as “Frost at Midnight”). He later attended Cambridge but left without completing his studies. During the politically charged atmosphere of the late eighteenth century—the French Revolution had sent shockwaves through Europe, and England and France were at war—Coleridge made a name for himself both as a political radical and as an important young poet; along with his friends Robert Southey and William Wordsworth, he became one of the most important writers in England. Collaborating with Wordsworth on the revolutionary *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, Coleridge helped to inaugurate the Romantic era in England; as Wordsworth explained it in the 1802 preface to the third edition of the work, the idea of poetry underlying *Lyrical Ballads* turned the established conventions of poetry upside down: Privileging natural speech over poetic ornament, simply stated themes over elaborate symbolism, emotion over abstract thought, and the experience of natural beauty over urban sophistication, the book paved the way for two generations of poets, and stands as one of the milestones of European literature.

While Coleridge made important contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*, it was much more Wordsworth’s project than Coleridge’s; thus, while it is possible to understand Wordsworth’s poetic output in light of his preface to the 1802 edition of the volume, the preface’s ideas should not be used to analyze Coleridge’s work. Insofar as Wordsworth was the poet of nature, the purity of childhood, and memory, Coleridge became the poet of imagination, exploring the relationships between nature and the mind as it exists as a separate entity. Poems such as “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and “Kubla Khan” demonstrate Coleridge’s talent for concocting bizarre, unsettling stories full of fantastic imagery and magic; in poems such as “Frost at Midnight” and “Dejection: An Ode,” he muses explicitly on the nature of the mind as it interacts with the creative source of nature.

Coleridge married in 1795 and spent much of the next decade living near and traveling with Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy. In 1799, Coleridge met Sara Hutchinson, with whom he fell deeply in love, forming an attachment that was to last many years. Coleridge became an opium addict (it is thought that “Kubla Khan” originated from an opium dream) and, in 1816, moved in with the surgeon James Gillman in order to preserve his health. During the years he lived with Gillman, Coleridge composed many of his important non-fiction works, including the highly regarded *Biographia Literaria*. However, although he continued to write until his death in 1834, Romanticism was always a movement about youth, and today Coleridge is remembered primarily for the poems he wrote while still in his twenties.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s place in the canon of English poetry rests on a comparatively small body of achievement: a few poems from the late 1790s and early 1800s and his participation in the revolutionary publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1797. Unlike Wordsworth, his work cannot be understood through the lens of the 1802 preface to the second edition of that book; though it does resemble Wordsworth’s in its idealization of nature and its emphasis on human joy, Coleridge’s poems often favor musical effects over the plainness of common speech. The intentional archaisms of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and the hypnotic drone of “Kubla Khan” do not imitate common speech, creating instead a more strikingly stylized effect.

Further, Coleridge’s poems complicate the phenomena Wordsworth takes for granted: the simple unity between the child and nature and the adult’s reconnection with nature through memories of childhood; in poems such as “Frost at Midnight,” Coleridge indicates the fragility of the child’s innocence by relating his own urban childhood. In poems such as “Dejection: An Ode” and “Nightingale,” he stresses the division between his own mind and the beauty of the natural world. Finally, Coleridge often privileges weird tales and bizarre imagery over the commonplace, rustic simplicities Wordsworth advocates; the

“thousand thousand slimy things” that crawl upon the rotting sea in the “Rime” would be out of place in a Wordsworth poem.

If Wordsworth represents the central pillar of early Romanticism, Coleridge is nevertheless an important structural support. His emphasis on the imagination, its independence from the outside world and its creation of fantastic pictures such as those found in the “Rime,” exerted a profound influence on later writers such as Shelley; his depiction of feelings of alienation and numbness helped to define more sharply the Romantics’ idealized contrast between the emptiness of the city—where such feelings are experienced—and the joys of nature. The heightened understanding of these feelings also helped to shape the stereotype of the suffering Romantic genius, often further characterized by drug addiction: this figure of the idealist, brilliant yet tragically unable to attain his own ideals, is a major pose for Coleridge in his poetry.

His portrayal of the mind as it moves, whether in silence (“Frost at Midnight”) or in frenzy (“Kubla Khan”) also helped to define the intimate emotionalism of Romanticism; while much of poetry is constituted of emotion recollected in tranquility, the origin of Coleridge’s poems often seems to be emotion recollected in emotion. But (unlike Wordsworth, it could be argued) Coleridge maintains not only an emotional intensity but also a legitimate intellectual presence throughout his oeuvre and applies constant philosophical pressure to his ideas. In his later years, Coleridge worked a great deal on metaphysics and politics, and a philosophical consciousness infuses much of his verse—particularly poems such as “The Nightingale” and “Dejection: An Ode,” in which the relationship between mind and nature is defined via the specific rejection of fallacious versions of it. The mind, to Coleridge, cannot take its feeling from nature and cannot falsely imbue nature with its own feeling; rather, the mind must be so suffused with its own joy that it opens up to the real, independent, “immortal” joy of nature.

## Themes

### The Transformative Power of the Imagination

Coleridge believed that a strong, active imagination could become a vehicle for transcending unpleasant circumstances. Many of his poems are powered exclusively by imaginative flights, wherein the **speaker** temporarily abandons his immediate surroundings, exchanging them for an entirely new and completely fabricated experience. Using the imagination in this way is both empowering and surprising because it encourages a total and complete disrespect for the confines of time and place. These mental and emotional jumps are often well rewarded. Perhaps Coleridge’s most famous use of imagination occurs in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” (1797), in which the speaker employs a keen poetic mind that allows him to take part in a journey that he cannot physically make. When he “returns” to the bower, after having imagined himself on a fantastic stroll through the countryside, the speaker discovers, as a reward, plenty of things to enjoy from inside the bower itself, including the leaves, the trees, and the shadows. The power of imagination transforms the prison into a perfectly pleasant spot.

### The Interplay of Philosophy, Piety, and Poetry

Coleridge used his poetry to explore conflicting issues in philosophy and religious piety. Some critics argue that Coleridge’s interest in philosophy was simply his attempt to understand the imaginative and intellectual impulses that fueled his poetry. To support the claim that his imaginative and intellectual forces were, in fact, organic and derived from the natural world, Coleridge linked them to God, spirituality, and worship. In his work, however, poetry, philosophy, and piety clashed, creating friction and disorder for Coleridge, both on and off the page. In “The Eolian Harp” (1795), Coleridge struggles to reconcile the three forces. Here, the speaker’s philosophical tendencies, particularly the belief that an “intellectual breeze” (47) brushes by and inhabits all living things with consciousness, collide with those of his orthodox wife, who disapproves of his unconventional ideas and urges him to Christ. While his



wife lies untroubled, the speaker agonizes over his spiritual conflict, caught between Christianity and a unique, individual spirituality that equates nature with God. The poem ends by discounting the pantheist spirit, and the speaker concludes by privileging God and Christ over nature and praising them for having healed him from the spiritual wounds inflicted by these unorthodox views.

### Nature and the Development of the Individual

Coleridge, Wordsworth, and other romantic poets praised the unencumbered, imaginative soul of youth, finding images in nature with which to describe it. According to their formulation, experiencing nature was an integral part of the development of a complete soul and sense of personhood. The death of his father forced Coleridge to attend school in London, far away from the rural idylls of his youth, and he lamented the missed opportunities of his sheltered, city-bound adolescence in many poems, including “Frost at Midnight” (1798). Here, the speaker sits quietly by a fire, musing on his life, while his infant son sleeps nearby. He recalls his boarding school days, during which he would both daydream and lull himself to sleep by remembering his home far away from the city, and he tells his son that he shall never be removed from nature, the way the speaker once was. Unlike the speaker, the son shall experience the seasons and shall learn about God by discovering the beauty and bounty of the natural world. The son shall be given the opportunity to develop a relationship with God and with nature, an opportunity denied to both the speaker and Coleridge himself. For Coleridge, nature had the capacity to teach joy, love, freedom, and piety, crucial characteristics for a worthy, developed individual.

### Motifs

#### Conversation Poems

Coleridge wanted to mimic the patterns and cadences of everyday speech in his poetry. Many of his poems openly address a single figure—the speaker’s wife, son, friend, and so on—who listens silently to the simple, straightforward language of the speaker. Unlike the descriptive, long, digressive poems of Coleridge’s classicist predecessors, Coleridge’s so-called conversation poems are short, self-contained, and often without a discernable poetic form. Colloquial, spontaneous, and friendly, Coleridge’s conversation poetry is also highly personal, frequently incorporating events and details of his domestic life in an effort to widen the scope of possible poetic content. Although he sometimes wrote in **blank verse**, unrhymed **iambic pentameter**, he adapted this metrical form to suit a more colloquial rhythm. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge believed that everyday language and speech rhythms would help broaden poetry’s audience to include the middle and lower classes, who might have felt excluded or put off by the form and content of neoclassicists, such as Alexander Pope, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and John Dryden.

#### Delight in the Natural World

Like the other romantics, Coleridge worshiped nature and recognized poetry’s capacity to describe the beauty of the natural world. Nearly all of Coleridge’s poems express a respect for and delight in natural beauty. Close observation, great attention to detail, and precise descriptions of color aptly demonstrate Coleridge’s respect and delight. Some poems, such as “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” “Youth and Age” (1834), and “Frost at Midnight,” mourn the speakers’ physical isolation from the outside world. Others, including “The Eolian Harp,” use images of nature to explore philosophical and analytical ideas. Still other poems, including “The Nightingale” (ca. 1798), simply praise nature’s beauty. Even poems that don’t directly deal with nature, including “Kubla Khan” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” derive some symbols and images from nature. Nevertheless, Coleridge guarded against the **pathetic fallacy**, or the attribution of human feeling to the natural world. To Coleridge, nature contained an innate, constant joyousness wholly separate from the ups and downs of human experience.

### Prayer



Although Coleridge's prose reveals more of his religious philosophizing than his poetry, God, Christianity, and the act of prayer appear in some form in nearly all of his poems. The son of an Anglican vicar, Coleridge vacillated from supporting to criticizing Christian tenets and the Church of England. Despite his criticisms, Coleridge remained defiantly supportive of prayer, praising it in his notebooks and repeatedly referencing it in his poems. He once told the novelist Thomas de Quincey that prayer demanded such close attention that it was the one of the hardest actions of which human hearts were capable. The conclusion to Part 1 of *Christabel* portrays Christabel in prayer, "a lovely sight to see" (279). In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the mariner is stripped of his ability to speak as part of his extreme punishment and, consequently, left incapable of praying. "The Pains of Sleep" (1803) contrasts the speaker at restful prayer, in which he prays silently, with the speaker at passionate prayer, in which he battles imaginary demons to pray aloud. In the sad poem, "Epitaph" (1833), Coleridge composes an epitaph for himself, which urges people to pray for him after he dies. Rather than recommend a manner or method of prayer, Coleridge's poems reflect a wide variety, which emphasizes his belief in the importance of individuality.

## Symbols

### The Sun

Coleridge believed that symbolic language was the only acceptable way of expressing deep religious truths and consistently employed the sun as a symbol of God. In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Coleridge compares the sun to "God's own head" (97) and, later, attributes the first phase of the mariner's punishment to the sun, as it dehydrates the crew. All told, this poem contains eleven references to the sun, many of which signify the Christian conception of a wrathful, vengeful God. Bad, troubling things happen to the crew during the day, while smooth sailing and calm weather occur at night, by the light of the moon. Frequently, the sun stands in for God's influence and power, as well as a symbol of his authority. The setting sun spurs philosophical musings, as in "The Eolian Harp," and the dancing rays of sunlight represent a pinnacle of nature's beauty, as in "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison."

### The Moon

Like the sun, the moon often symbolizes God, but the moon has more positive connotations than the sun. In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the sun and the moon represent two sides of the Christian God: the sun represents the angry, wrathful God, whereas the moon represents the benevolent, repentant God. All told, the moon appears fourteen times in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and generally favorable things occur during night, in contrast to the horrors that occur during the day. For example, the mariner's curse lifts and he returns home by moonlight. "Dejection: An Ode" (1802) begins with an epitaph about the new moon and goes on to describe the beauty of a moonlit night, contrasting its beauty with the speaker's sorrowful soul. Similarly, "Frost at Midnight" also praises the moon as it illuminates icicles on a winter evening and spurs the speaker to great thought.

## Dreams and Dreaming

Coleridge explores dreams and dreaming in his poetry to communicate the power of the imagination, as well as the inaccessible clarity of vision. "Kubla Khan" is subtitled "A Vision in a Dream." According to Coleridge, he fell asleep while reading and dreamed of a marvelous pleasure palace for the next few hours. Upon awakening, he began transcribing the dream-vision but was soon called away; when he returned, he wrote out the fragments that now comprise "Kubla Khan." Some critics doubt Coleridge's story, attributing it to an attempt at increasing the poem's dramatic effect. Nevertheless, the poem speaks to the imaginative possibilities of the subconscious. Dreams usually have a pleasurable connotation, as in "Frost at Midnight." There, the speaker, lonely and insomniac as a child at boarding school, comforts himself by imagining and then dreaming of his rural home. In his real life, however,

Coleridge suffered from nightmares so terrible that sometimes his own screams would wake him, a phenomenon he details in "The Pains of Sleep." Opium probably gave Coleridge a sense of well-being that allowed him to sleep without the threat of nightmares.



"Dejection: An Ode"



### Summary

The speaker recalls a poem that tells the tale of Sir Patrick Spence: In this poem, the moon takes on a certain strange appearance that presages the coming of a storm. The speaker declares that if the author of the poem possessed a sound understanding of weather, then a storm will break on this night as well, for the moon looks now as it did in the poem. The speaker wishes ardently for a storm to erupt, for the violence of the squall might cure his numb feeling. He says that he feels only a "dull pain," "a grief without a pang"—a constant deadening of all his feelings. Speaking to a woman whom he addresses as "O Lady," he admits that he has been gazing at the western sky all evening, able to see its beauty but unable fully to feel it. He says that staring at the green sky will never raise his spirits, for no "outward forms" can generate feelings: Emotions can only emerge from within.

According to the speaker, "we receive but what we give": the soul itself must provide the light by which we may hope to see nature's true beauty—a beauty not given to the common crowd of human beings ("the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd"). Calling the Lady "pure of heart," the speaker says that she already knows about the light and music of the soul, which is Joy. Joy, he says, marries us to nature, thereby giving us "a new Earth and new Heaven, / Undreamt of by the sensual and the proud."

The speaker insists that there was a time when he was full of hope, when every tribulation was simply the material with which "fancy made me dreams of happiness." But now his afflictions press him to the earth; he does not mind the decline of his mirth, but he cannot bear the corresponding degeneration of his imagination, which is the source of his creativity and his understanding of the human condition, that which enables him to construct "from my own nature all the natural man." Hoping to escape the "viper thoughts" that coil around his mind, the speaker turns his attention to the howling wind that has begun to blow. He thinks of the world as an instrument played by a musician, who spins out of the wind a "worse than wintry song." This melody first calls to mind the rush of an army on the field; quieting, it then evokes a young girl, lost and alone.

It is midnight, but the speaker has "small thoughts" of sleep. However, he hopes that his friend the Lady will be visited by "gentle Sleep" and that she will wake with joyful thoughts and "light heart." Calling the Lady the "friend devoutest of my choice," the speaker wishes that she might "ever, evermore rejoice."

### Form

The long ode stanzas of "Dejection" are metered in iambic lines ranging in length from trimeter to pentameter. The rhymes alternate between bracketed rhymes (ABBA) and couplets (CC) with occasional exceptions.

### Commentary

In this poem, Coleridge continues his sophisticated philosophical exploration of the relationship between man and nature, positing as he did in "The Nightingale" that human feelings and the forms of nature are essentially separate. Just as the speaker insisted in the earlier poem that the nightingale's song should not be called melancholy simply because it sounded so to a melancholy poet, he insists here that the beauty of the sky before the storm does not have the power to fill him with joy, for the source of human feeling is within. Only when the individual has access to that source, so that joy shines from

him like a light, is he able to see the beauty of nature and to respond to it. (As in “Frost in Midnight,” the city-raised Coleridge insists on a sharper demarcation between the mind and nature than the country-raised Wordsworth would ever have done.)



Coleridge blames his desolate numbness for sapping his creative powers and leaving him without his habitual method of understanding human nature. Despite his insistence on the separation between the mind and the world, Coleridge nevertheless continues to find metaphors for his own feelings in nature: His dejection is reflected in the gloom of the night as it awaits the storm.

“Dejection” was written in 1802 but was originally drafted in the form of a letter to Sara Hutchinson, the woman Coleridge loved. The much longer original version of the poem contained many of the same elements as “The Nightingale” and “Frost at Midnight,” including the same meditation on his children and their natural education. This version also referred explicitly to “Sara” (replaced in the later version by “Lady”) and “William” (a clear reference to Wordsworth). Coleridge’s strict revision process shortened and tightened the poem, depersonalizing it, but the earlier draft hints at just how important the poem’s themes were to Coleridge personally and indicates that the feelings expressed were the poet’s true beliefs about his own place in the world.

A side note: The story of Sir Patrick Spence, to which the poet alludes in the first stanza, is an ancient Scottish ballad about a sailor who drowns with a boatload of Scottish noblemen, sailing on orders from the king but against his own better judgment. It contains lines that refer to the moon as a predictor of storms, which Coleridge quotes as an epigraph for his ode: “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.”

“Frost at Midnight”



### Summary

As the frost “performs its secret ministry” in the windless night, an owlet’s cry twice pierces the silence. The “inmates” of the speaker’s cottage are all asleep, and the speaker sits alone, solitary except for the “cradled infant” sleeping by his side. The calm is so total that the silence becomes distracting, and all the world of “sea, hill, and wood, / This populous village!” seems “inaudible as dreams.” The thin blue flame of the fire burns without flickering; only the film on the grate flutters, which makes it seem “companionable” to the speaker, almost alive—stirred by “the idling Spirit.”

“But O!” the speaker declares; as a child he often watched “that fluttering stranger” on the bars of his school window and daydreamed about his birthplace and the church tower whose bells rang so sweetly on Fair-day. These things lured him to sleep in his childhood, and he brooded on them at school, only pretending to look at his books—unless, of course, the door opened, in which case he looked up eagerly, hoping to see “Townsmen, or aunt, or sister more beloved, / My play-mate when we both were clothed alike!”

Addressing the “Dear Babe, that sleep[s] cradled” by his side, whose breath fills the silences in his thought, the speaker says that it thrills his heart to look at his beautiful child. He enjoys the thought that although he himself was raised in the “great city, pent ’mid cloisters dim,” his child will wander in the rural countryside, by lakes and shores and mountains, and his spirit shall be molded by God, who will “by giving make it [the child] ask.”

All seasons, the speaker proclaims, shall be sweet to his child, whether the summer makes the earth green or the robin redbreast sings between tufts of snow on the branch; whether the storm makes “the eave-drops fall” or the frost’s “secret ministry” hangs icicles silently, “quietly shining to the quiet Moon.”



## Form

Like many Romantic verse monologues of this kind (Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" is a notable example), "Frost at Midnight" is written in blank verse, a term used to describe unrhymed lines metered in iambic pentameter.

## Commentary

The speaker of "Frost at Midnight" is generally held to be Coleridge himself, and the poem is a quiet, very personal restatement of the abiding themes of early English Romanticism: the effect of nature on the imagination (nature is the Teacher that "by giving" to the child's spirit also makes it "ask"); the relationship between children and the natural world ("thou, my babe! shall wander like a breeze..."); the contrast between this liberating country setting and city ("I was reared / In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim"); and the relationship between adulthood and childhood as they are linked in adult memory.

However, while the poem conforms to many of the guiding principles of Romanticism, it also highlights a key difference between Coleridge and his fellow Romantics, specifically Wordsworth. Wordsworth, raised in the rustic countryside, saw his own childhood as a time when his connection with the natural world was at its greatest; he revisited his memories of childhood in order to soothe his feelings and provoke his imagination. Coleridge, on the other hand, was raised in London, "pent 'mid cloisters dim," and questions Wordsworth's easy identification of childhood with a kind of automatic, original happiness; instead, in this poem he says that, as a child, he "saw naught lovely but the stars and sky" and seems to feel the lingering effects of that alienation. In this poem, we see how the pain of this alienation has strengthened Coleridge's wish that his child enjoy an idyllic Wordsworthian upbringing "by lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags / Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds..." Rather than seeing the link between childhood and nature as an inevitable, Coleridge seems to perceive it as a fragile, precious, and extraordinary connection, one of which he himself was deprived.

In expressing its central themes, "Frost at Midnight" relies on a highly personal idiom whereby the reader follows the natural progression of the speaker's mind as he sits up late one winter night thinking. His idle observation gives the reader a quick impression of the scene, from the "silent ministry" of the frost to the cry of the owl and the sleeping child. Coleridge uses language that indicates the immediacy of the scene to draw in the reader; for instance, the speaker cries "Hark!" upon hearing the owl, as though he were surprised by its call. The objects surrounding the speaker become metaphors for the work of the mind and the imagination, so that the fluttering film on the fire grate plunges him into the recollection of his childhood. His memory of feeling trapped in the schoolhouse naturally brings him back into his immediate surroundings with a surge of love and sympathy for his son. His final meditation on his son's future becomes mingled with his Romantic interpretation of nature and its role in the child's imagination, and his consideration of the objects of nature brings him back to the frost and the icicles, which, forming and shining in silence, mirror the silent way in which the world works upon the mind; this revisitation of winter's frosty forms brings the poem full circle.