

18th

Century

Poetry

Third Stage

Third Lecture: Frost at Midnight: Romantic Poetry

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Second Stanza

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,
Townsmen, or aunt, or sister more beloved,
My play-mate when we both were clothed alike!

The movement of the film stirs Coleridge's imagination. It reminds him of his childhood and the days he has spent in Christ's Hospital school. As a child, Coleridge superstitiously believed that seeing the film on the grate means that he would have a visitor next day. The visitors for the children are good omen because they bring sweets and gifts with them. So, he kept gazing at the grate to catch a glimpse of the film. Then, the poet thinks of his birth-place and hears the ringing of the church bells which was the only music the poor villagers could enjoy.

The sound of the church bells aroused in him deep emotions of joy. In the next morning, he went to school and waited for the visitor he had thought of the previous night. His teacher was very strict; therefore, he pretended to be reading carefully. But in reality he was absent minded. The word "swimming" is used metaphorically and means that the words of the book were swimming in front his eyes. His eyes were fixed on his book but his mind was at the door. Whenever the door was half opened, he would steal a hasty glance, expecting the appearance of a visitor. He expected that a townsman, an aunt, or his beloved sister with whom he had played during his childhood when both of them were dressed alike might come to visit him.

1. Summary and Meaning of the Passage:

In this passage from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight” (1798), the poet recalls his childhood memories while watching a small, fluttering piece of ash on the fire.

When he was a boy at school, he often stared at the same kind of flickering movement, imagining it as a “fluttering stranger” — a visitor, perhaps a messenger from home.

He dreamed of his birthplace, the church bells, and his sister or aunt — **all symbols of love, warmth, and belonging.**

The bells, which he calls “the poor man’s only music,” express both **simplicity and spiritual comfort** — ordinary things that become beautiful through emotion and imagination.

As a child, he escaped the strict discipline of school and the harsh face of the teacher by **daydreaming**; his imagination became his refuge and source of freedom.

So, this stanza is both **nostalgic and symbolic**: it shows **how imagination transforms loneliness into meaning.**

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2. Connection to the Romantic Era

This passage reflects key ideas of English Romanticism (late 18th – early 19th century), a movement that valued emotion, nature, childhood, and imagination over logic and reason.

Here’s how:

Romantic Feature	How It Appears in the Passage
Emotion & Individual Experience	The speaker’s deep feelings of loneliness, nostalgia, and longing for home.
Childhood as Sacred	The poet recalls childhood not as naïve, but as a time of spiritual sensitivity.
Nature & Imagination	Even a tiny, natural thing (the fluttering

	ash) becomes meaningful through imagination.
Rejection of Rationalism	The boy's "mock study" contrasts intellect with the emotional truth of dreams.
Spiritual Connection with the World	The natural sounds (church bells, fluttering film) seem to carry divine or prophetic meaning.

So Coleridge turns an ordinary, quiet moment into a vision of the soul's relationship with nature and memory — a perfect Romantic theme.

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3. Meter and Rhyme Scheme

Coleridge writes Frost at Midnight in blank verse, which means:

- Unrhymed iambic pentameter
- Each line typically has 10 syllables, arranged in five iambic feet (da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM).

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4. Why This Form Fits the Poem?

Blank verse allows Coleridge to write naturally and meditatively, almost like thinking out loud.

The lack of rhyme mirrors the quiet and introspective mood of the poem — it feels conversational, personal, and sincere.

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In conclusion:

- Theme: Nostalgia, imagination, and childhood memory.
- Romantic Traits: Emotion, nature, individuality, imagination, and spiritual depth.
- Form: Blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter).
- Tone: Reflective, intimate, and dreamlike.