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Second Lecture: Frost at Midnight: S.T. Coleridge

Introduction

Coleridge wrote “Frost at Midnight” in 1798 to celebrate the birth of his son, Hartley. The poem is a conversational poem that is written in blank verse; which is poetry written with regular metrical but unrhymed lines. “Frost at Midnight” could be seen as autobiographical poem because Coleridge discusses his childhood experience in a negative way and asserts the need to be reared in the lap nature. He believes that his son will enjoy greater freedom and healthier life if he was raised in the country side. In “Frost at Midnight,” the poet asserts the importance of countryside; nature, in the formation of individual personality and also in inspiring the poet to write poetry. Coleridge’s creed of nature has developed under the influence of Wordsworth.

Analysis

First

Stanza

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.

In the first Stanza, the atmosphere is gloomy. Coleridge is sitting alone in his cottage besides the fireplace, watching the snow as it forms. There is no wind to help the formation of the snow. The snow is a symbol of death. However, death in this poem is not physical but spiritual. Coleridge is spiritually dead because he cannot write poetry. He looks for a source of inspiration. He suddenly hears the owlet's cry at intervals. He looks around him and finds that all the members of his family have fallen asleep leaving him in perfect solitude as if he is surrounded by death. His little son (Hartley), who is a symbol of life, is peacefully sleeping in a cradle by his side. There is perfect silence around him. In fact, it is so silent that he is disturbed in his thoughts.

Furthermore, the poet suggests a well-known psychological fact. While it is true that if there is no solitude, there can be no deep thinking, it is also known that too much solitude produces a feeling of loneliness and uneasiness in the mind and thus disturbs deep thinking. The silence becomes oppressive and vexes meditation instead of promoting it. His mind leaves the cottage and flies around the village. The inhabitants of the village are lying asleep in their houses. The various activities of life have been suspended. They are now silent like dreams. Inside the cottage, the blue flame means that fire is going to fade. The only wakeful thing is the film; a line of smoke or soot, which was quivering on the

grate; framework of bars used to hold fire.

The poet thinks that the movement of the film creates between them some kind of affinity, since they are the only two wakeful things. The film is a kind of mirror in which Coleridge's thoughts are being reflected. He is playing with his thoughts as one plays with a toy. Here, the film is a source of inspiration (hope), that inspires him to think and write.