

Acquainted with the Night



SUMMARY

The speaker declares their familiarity with the night. It was raining when the speaker began a walk across the city, and it was still raining at the end of the walk. During the walk, the speaker progressed beyond even the outermost light of the city.

The speaker looked into the most desolate city street. The speaker also passed by a watchman patrolling the city. The speaker, however, looked down to avoid eye contact with the watchman, not wanting to talk about the reasons behind the speaker's nighttime walk.

During the walk, the speaker stopped moving upon hearing a distant, broken-off cry. The sound of this other human's voice traveled across houses from a different street.

However, the voice did not call the speaker to come back or bid the speaker farewell. Even more distant and higher up, the moon shines like a bright clock in the sky.

This metaphorical clock declares that the time is not wrong or right. The speaker again says that they are familiar with the night.

sorrow, with raindrops often representing human tears. Therefore, the physical rain that surrounds the speaker is a reflection of the speaker's sorrow.

As the speaker continues walking, the darkness and sorrow of the surroundings intensify. The speaker walks beyond even the "furthest city light," thus sinking further into physical darkness. In a similar vein, the speaker characterizes the "city lane" they look into as the "saddest." The use of superlatives—"furthest" and "saddest"—reflects the heightening of the speaker's emotions. Indeed, the speaker's despair and sorrow seem never-ending; although the speaker continues to progress on the walk, the speaker doesn't actually go anywhere on a figurative and emotional level. This sense of despair and sorrow is inescapable, like the night itself.

What's more, the speaker's feelings of suffering and despair prevent the speaker from finding solace in any companionship and preserve a state of isolation. The speaker has deliberately walked beyond "the furthest city light" and is thus on the outskirts of the city. The speaker is thus unlikely to encounter another human being to keep company with. However, even when the speaker encounters a "watchman" patrolling the city, the speaker refuses to make eye contact or speak to him. Then, the speaker hears another human voice from "far away." The distance and darkness make it impossible for the speaker to locate the owner of the voice. Moreover, the voice does not "call [the speaker] back or say good-bye"; neither the speaker nor the other voice can make a connection with one another. Thus, though the speaker is teased with opportunities for human connection, the speaker's inability to make that connection happen only reinforces the speaker's isolation.

Consequently, the speaker's walk does not provide the solace or resolution the speaker searches for. Rather, the speaker remains in the same state as the beginning. The speaker looks up at the sky for some sort of answer. However, the moon, which the speaker views as a "luminary clock," tells them that "the time [is] neither wrong nor right." Thus, even the moon cannot provide the speaker with any comfort or definitive answer. The speaker repeats the assertion that they are "one acquainted with the night," making it clear that the speaker's isolation, sorrow, and despair have not lessened or even changed.

Furthermore, the word "one" suggests that the speaker is "one" of many who are similarly familiar with these particular emotions. And indeed, the speaker's self-perpetuating cycle of isolation and despair exists beyond a particular reason or explanation; the reader never finds out why the speaker is so sad. As the speaker's suffering is not unique, the poem suggests that isolation, sorrow, and despair are an inherent part of the



THEMES



ISOLATION, SORROW, AND DESPAIR

In "Acquainted with the Night," the speaker describes a solitary nighttime outing in the city. During this aimless wandering, the speaker grapples with a sense of despair and sorrow. Indeed, the speaker's emotions are so powerful that they prevent the speaker from talking to or connecting with others, keeping the speaker in a state of isolation. The poem thus implies a link between these states: despair leads to isolation, and vice versa, creating a self-perpetuating cycle. The poem further explores how isolation, sorrow, and despair can feel inescapable—like walking through an endless night.

The physical details of the city at night reflect the speaker's mood. The speaker is "one acquainted with the night." The night is generally associated with darkness, which, in turn, is associated with suffering and despair. Thus, the speaker's familiarity with the "night" is also symbolic of the speaker's familiarity with these particular *emotions*. Furthermore, given the sense of isolation that pervades the poem, "acquainted" is used [ironically](#) to imply that the only thing the speaker is connected to is disconnection itself. Additionally, the speaker begins and ends this walk in "rain." Rain is often associated with

human experience.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

*I have been ...
... back in rain.*

The first two lines of "Acquainted with the Night" establish the setting, uses vivid [imagery](#) to illustrate the speaker's emotional mood. In the first line, the speaker declares that they are "acquainted," or familiar, "with the night." On a physical level, the speaker is familiar with the night as the speaker is taking a walk through the city during the nighttime. However, the night brings darkness, which is often associated with negative feelings such as despair, sorrow, or isolation. Therefore, "night" can also be a [metaphor](#) for these particular emotions. Thus, the speaker's declaration of familiarity with the "night" suggests a familiarity with despair, sorrow, or isolation as well.

The term "acquainted," which suggests connection, is used in an [ironic](#) manner here to describe the speaker's connection to isolation—or, in other words, the speaker's very *lack* of connection. Thus, the speaker is not connected to any other humans, the way one might be "acquainted with" friends or neighbors. Rather, the speaker is connected to sorrow, despair, and isolation.

In the second line, the speaker states that they have begun and ended a walk in the rain. The use of [epistrophe](#) in the repetition of the phrase "in rain" emphasizes the fact that the rain is unceasing and relentless. The rain is often associated with sorrow, as raindrops are often metaphorically compared to human tears: the speaker's sorrow, like the rain, is unceasing and steady. Neither the rain nor the speaker's sorrow abate during the speaker's walk.

"Acquainted with the Night" is a terza rima [sonnet](#) with the traditional 14 lines and ending [couplet](#). Each line is also written using [iambic pentameter](#), which is typical for sonnets. As with any sonnet, the opening of "Acquainted with the Night" establishes the "problem" of the poem—in this case, the speaker's sense of despair, sorrow, and isolation. However, the unconventional use of a terza rima [rhyme scheme](#) sets the reader up for similarly unconventional takes on the traditional sonnet form, hinting that this problem may not end up being solved.

LINES 3-4

*I have outwalked ...
... saddest city lane.*

In the third and fourth lines, the intensification of the surrounding darkness and sorrow of the city reflect a parallel intensification of the speaker's own despair. The city the speaker walks in is illuminated, perhaps by streetlights or the lights of people's homes. Nevertheless, the speaker walks beyond the outermost "city light," presumably to the edge of the city or even beyond the city's border. The speaker therefore journeys deeper into the natural darkness of the night and also farther away from other humans. Correspondingly, the speaker seems to be further immersed in despair and isolation.

Moreover, the speaker looks into "the saddest city lane." The [personification](#) of this city street as being the "saddest" is a reflection of the speaker's own inner sorrow; the street isn't literally sad, but it seems sad because the speaker (and maybe the people who live on this street) is sad. Additionally, the [assonance](#) of the short /a/ sound in "have" and "saddest" is evocative of a long, sorrowful sigh. This line shows that the speaker's sorrow is so powerful that it shapes the way the speaker sees the surrounding world. At the same time, the personification of the city displays the speaker's overwhelming desire for some sort of human connection—this desire is so strong that the speaker is willing to personify even streets to relieve the loneliness.

Furthermore, the use of superlatives—"furthest" and "saddest"—in lines 3 and 4 emphasize the intensification of the speaker's despair, isolation, and sorrow. The speaker's walk has not soothed any of these feelings. Although the speaker has physically progressed across the city, the speaker has *not* progressed emotionally. Instead, the speaker's feelings seem to be inescapable, like the surrounding darkness of the night.

LINES 5-6

*I have passed ...
... unwilling to explain.*

The fifth and sixth lines describe the first and only instance where the speaker sees another individual while out walking. This individual is a watchman out patrolling the city, someone whose job it is to keep the city and its inhabitants safe. The speaker has an opportunity to make a human connection with the watchman—indeed, the reader almost expects the speaker to use this chance to solve the problem of their own isolation. Frost's use of [enjambment](#) creates anticipation as readers continue into the next line; line 5 ends with the possibility that anything could happen with the watchman. In line 6, however, rather than connecting with the watchman as expected, the speaker lowers their eyes to avoid eye contact, thereby physically losing sight of potential human connection. Furthermore, the speaker does not wish to speak to the watchman, feeling that they would need to explain their late-night walk—and feeling reluctant to do so.

Through this encounter, readers see how the speaker's feelings

of sorrow and despair feed into the speaker's choice to further self-isolate. Then, in turn, the speaker's isolation intensifies these feelings of sorrow and despair. Thus, the speaker experiences a self-perpetuating cycle of misery and isolation. This cyclical nature is reflected in the poem's unusual terza rima [rhyme scheme](#). In this rhyme scheme, each subsequent stanza borrows part of its rhyme from previous stanzas. Thus, each stanza is interlocked with the previous one through the particularities of its rhyme scheme. So just as the speaker's despair, sorrow, and isolation are interlocked, so too are the stanzas of the poem.

LINES 7-8

*I have stood ...
... an interrupted cry*

The beginning of the third [stanza](#) continues to emphasize the speaker's lack of connection to other people. In the seventh and eighth lines, the speaker is teased with another possibility of human connection. The speaker hears the sound of a human voice and, consequently, stops walking. The speaker willingly halts their footsteps in order to hear the human voice more clearly, showing the speaker's desire to make a connection.

However, this human voice comes from "far away," so whoever is making the sound is physically distant from the speaker. Furthermore, the use of [synecdoche](#) in "cry" to refer to a human presence results in a voice that is disembodied from a physical human presence. It is impossible for the speaker to connect with this voice or even see the owner of the voice, so another chance for connection is lost. The physical distance between the speaker and the person crying out mirrors the emotional distance between the speaker and other people more generally.

It's also important that this human voice is a "cry." This "cry" may be simply someone shouting or speaking loudly, but the word "cry" also has sorrowful connotations, as in someone weeping. This suggestion of an individual weeping reflects not only the speaker's own mood, but also the rain and raindrops mentioned back in line 2.

At the end of these two lines, the speaker is left with silence. The speaker no longer produces the "sound of feet." The [alliteration](#) of soft /s/ sounds in line 7 in the words "stood," "still," "stopped," and "sound" mimics the hush of the speaker's surroundings. The [consonance](#) of the harder /t/ sounds in "stood," "still," and "stopped" evokes the sound of the speaker's footsteps before the speaker stops walking, making the silence even more pronounced when it comes. Additionally, the distant "cry" is an "interrupted" sound—that is, it's abruptly cut off, resulting in silence. The [enjambment](#) at the end of line 8 also leaves the line hanging in space, as if the page is also a kind of quiet void in this moment. Supported by all of these poetic devices, the silence that surrounds the speaker emphasizes the speaker's general state of isolation.

LINES 9-10

*Came over houses ...
... or say good-bye;*

In line 9 and 10, the speaker continues to describe the "interrupted cry," the specifics of which further highlight the speaker's isolation and lack of human connection. The cry comes from several "houses" away. Moreover, these "houses" are not the houses in the same street as the speaker. Rather, these houses are from "another street" than the one the speaker is currently standing in. All of these details emphasize the distance, both physical and emotional, between the speaker and other people.

In the next line, the speaker realizes that the "cry" is not even directed toward the speaker. The cry does not "call [the speaker] back"; it expresses no longing for the speaker, and it carries no information about what the speaker should do. Therefore, the speaker's longing for human connection is not reciprocated by whoever is making the "cry." Additionally, the cry does not even "say good-bye." These details emphasize that there is entirely no relationship between the speaker and the other human voice that is encountered, no matter how much the speaker might wish otherwise. The [end-stop](#) at the end of line 10 emphasizes the finality of the other voice's actions—or lack thereof—toward the speaker. The speaker will not have any further opportunities to connect with another person on this walk, and the end-stop makes it clear that the speaker's isolation is indeed complete.

LINES 11-12

*And further still ...
... against the sky*

Line 11 is another statement of distance. Whatever the speaker observes here is described as even "further," or more distant, than the "cry" in line 8. Indeed, the object is located "at an unearthly height," which makes it seem so far away that the speaker (an earthly creature) will never be able to reach it. In the next line, the speaker reveals that this distant object is a "luminary clock" hanging in the sky. This bright clock is a [metaphor](#) for the moon, a metaphor never explicitly stated but only implied. A clock is a manmade object, associated with civilization and society. However, this "clock" hangs in the "sky," out of the speaker's reach. Thus, this image suggests that human civilization and society, too, are out of the speaker's reach and access—even though the speaker is standing at the outskirts of a human city.

In the previous [stanza](#), the distance between the speaker and the "cry" is a reflection of the speaker's sense of alienation from others. Similarly, the distance here between the speaker and the moon reinforces the speaker's sense of alienation. In this case, the speaker is not only isolated from other people, but even from nature itself. The speaker does not admire or find comfort in the moon's beauty or brightness, as the speakers of

other poems often do. Rather, the speaker only sees the moon as a reminder of the human connection they cannot access.

LINES 13-14

*Proclaimed the time ...
... with the night.*

The poem's ending [couplet](#) reasserts the lack of change in the speaker's despair, sorrow, and isolation. The clock of line 12 tells the speaker that "the time [is] neither wrong nor right." Thus, the clock, and thereby the moon (for which the clock is a [metaphor](#)), provides no assurance, comfort, or direction to the speaker. As in the beginning of the poem, the speaker's external surroundings, such as the city or nature, only reflect and intensify the speaker's feelings.

Similarly, the last line is a word-for-word [repetition](#) of the first line of the poem. The speaker declares they are familiar with the night, and by using exactly the words, the speaker makes it clear that nothing at all has changed during this nighttime walk. The use of [anaphora](#) in the repetition of the phrase "I have" in lines 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 14 emphasizes that although the speaker has tried seemingly countless solutions, the speaker is still unable to escape these overwhelming feelings of despair, sorrow, and isolation. Each subsequent appearance of "I have" builds on a sense of resignation in the speaker; the speaker has done everything they can think of, but nothing helps.

Consequently, the [sonnet's](#) "problem" remains the same and is, in fact, reasserted, at the end. Thus, in addition to its unconventional use of terza rima, the poem never provides the traditional "solution" to the sonnet's "problem." Rather, the speaker's "problem" grows until it is all-encompassing and inescapable, and the deviation from the traditional sonnet form highlights what a truly enormous problem this is.



SYMBOLS



DARKNESS

Darkness is often associated with negative emotions such as evil or fear. In a literal sense, when an individual is surrounded by darkness, that individual is unable to see or connect with the world around them. The darkness can bring danger too, and thus death and suffering. In "Acquainted with the Night," darkness is symbolic of the speaker's relationship to their despair, sorrow, and isolation from the rest of humanity.

The speaker never explicitly uses the word "dark" in the poem. However, the darkness is clearly implied through the mention of the "night" in lines 1 and 14. The speaker walks through the city at night and declares a familiarity with the night. Therefore, the speaker declares their familiarity to the despair, sorrow, and isolation that are associated with the darkness.

In line 3, the speaker also walks beyond the "furthest city light," thus walking deeper into the darkness. The night, and its associated darkness, is inescapable no matter how far the speaker walks. Indeed, the darkness only intensifies during the speaker's walk. Consequently, the speaker is never able to escape their despair, sorrow, and isolation. Rather, the speaker only experiences these emotions more intensely as the night goes on.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I have been one acquainted with the night."
- **Line 3:** "I have outwalked the furthest city light."
- **Line 14:** "I have been one acquainted with the night."



LIGHT

In contrast to darkness, light is generally associated with positive emotions such as hope, joy, and goodness. Light is often viewed as a life-giving necessity and a symbol of triumph. In "Acquainted with the Night," however, light is symbolic of what the speaker cannot have, and it only serves as a contrast to emphasize the speaker's further descent into the darkness of the night.

In line 3, the speaker notes the presence of a "city light." However, this city light does not signal an increase in light. Rather, the speaker walks *past* this "furthest city light" into the outskirts of the city and, perhaps, even beyond. Therefore, this "city light" serves only as a marker between the lights of the city and the darkness beyond. This progression into the literal darkness is symbolic of the speaker's further immersion in metaphorical darkness and the associated feelings of despair, sorrow, and isolation.

Similarly, the light of the "luminary clock against the sky," a [metaphor](#) for the moon, is unattainable and out of reach. The speaker describes the moon's light as even "further" than the distant cry that appeared in line 8. In fact, the moon is located at an "unearthly height." Thus, the moon cannot be reached by earthly figures such as the speaker. For the speaker, the moon's light is distant and out of reach—as are hope and joy. Instead of offering hope, the moon's light only highlights despair.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "I have outwalked the furthest city light."
- **Line 11:** "And further still at an unearthly height,"
- **Line 12:** "One luminary clock against the sky"



RAIN

Rain is often associated with sorrow and mourning, and raindrops falling are frequently used as symbols to represent teardrops. In "Acquainted with the Night," the rain

is a physical representation of the speaker's never-ending sorrow.

The speaker begins *and* ends their walk "in rain." The rain is constant throughout the night; the speaker is unable to escape the rain no matter how far or how long the speaker walks. Therefore, symbolically, the speaker begins and ends their journey in sorrow and despair. These feelings are inescapable for the speaker. Indeed, the speaker cannot progress beyond them no matter what actions they take and no matter how far they walk through the night.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "I have walked out in rain—and back in rain."



CLOCK

Because they track time through human systems and are relatively technologically-advanced objects, clocks are often associated with civilization and human society. In "Acquainted with the Night," the clock represents the speaker's sense of alienation from other people and society. The clock also represents the inability of human civilization to provide comfort, certainty, or direction to the speaker.

In line 11, the clock, a [metaphor](#) for the moon, is described as being located "at an unearthly height." The speaker, who is very much at an *earthly* height, is not able to access or connect to the clock. So in a symbolic sense, the speaker cannot connect with human society or other humans. Moreover, the clock declares "the time [is] neither wrong nor right." Therefore, the clock, and thus human society, can offer no assurance or direction for the speaker; it doesn't seem to tell the speaker anything useful at all. Consequently, the symbol of the clock emphasizes the speaker's isolation and the inability of human connection to comfort or soothe the speaker's feelings.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-13:** "And further still at an unearthly height, / One luminary clock against the sky / Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right."



POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

In "Acquainted with the Night," the surrounding environment is [personified](#) in various ways to reflect the speaker's desire for human connection. In lines 1 and 14, the speaker declares that they are "acquainted with the night." The word "acquainted" is often used to refer to a connection between one individual and another, as people might be "acquainted" with their neighbors, coworkers, or friends. Here, the speaker is "acquainted" with

the night, which makes the night itself seem to be a person. However, the night does not represent real human connection, but rather the speaker's connection to despair, sorrow, and isolation. The personification indicates that the speaker is connected to *something*—but that something turns out to be, put simply, nothing.

The city the speaker walks through is also personified. In line 4, the speaker looks into "the saddest city lane." This particular city street is thus personified as having emotions of sorrow, which reflect the speaker's own inner sorrow. Nature, too, is personified in a manner that reflects the speaker's feelings. In lines 12 and 13, the moon, which is described through the [metaphor](#) of a "luminary clock," "proclaim[s] the time [is] neither wrong nor right." Although the moon, through personification, becomes a figure that communicates with the speaker, the connection between the moon and the speaker is not a comforting one. The moon's message provides the speaker with no certainty or direction.

Overall, the personification throughout the poem suggests that the speaker desires human connection so strongly that this desire influences the way the speaker views the world—the speaker is seeking a person, so everything looks like a person. However, no matter how the surroundings are personified, this personification ultimately provides no real connection or comfort for the speaker, highlighting just how isolated the speaker really is.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I have been one acquainted with the night."
- **Line 4:** "I have looked down the saddest city lane."
- **Lines 12-13:** "One luminary clock against the sky / Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right."
- **Line 14:** "I have been one acquainted with the night."

IMAGERY

The abundant [imagery](#) in "Acquainted with the Night" intensifies the speaker's feelings of despair, sorrow, and isolation and reflects these emotions out onto the surrounding environment. The image of the "night" appears in the very first line of the poem. The night brings with it darkness, which is often associated with feelings of suffering and despair. The second line builds on these feelings by including the imagery of the "rain" as well. As rain is often a [metaphor](#) for tears, rain is also associated with sorrow. Thus, the first two lines of the poem use imagery to illustrate the speaker's emotions and suggest that they're so strong that they color the whole world around the speaker.

The imagery of darkness and light continues to feature prominently throughout the poem. In line 3, the speaker walks beyond the "furthest city light," thus becoming fully immersed in the darkness of the night. This outward action suggests an

intensification of the speaker's inner suffering and despair. Moreover, even when the speaker experiences the light of the moon (described through the metaphor of a "luminary clock"), the moon's brightness brings no comfort. Instead, the luminous moon simply reaffirms the speaker's uncertainty and lack of direction. The darkness of the night and the city intensify the speaker's sorrow, despair, and isolation, while even the light is unable to alleviate the speaker's suffering. The imagery of the poem therefore shows the inescapability of the speaker's self-perpetuating cycle of sorrow, despair, and isolation.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I have been one acquainted with the night."
- **Line 2:** "I have walked out in rain—and back in rain."
- **Line 3:** "I have outwalked the furthest city light."
- **Line 11:** "And further still at an unearthly height,"
- **Line 12:** "One luminary clock against the sky"
- **Line 13:** "Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right."
- **Line 14:** "I have been one acquainted with the night."

REPETITION

In "Acquainted with the Night," various forms of [repetition](#) stress the magnitude of the speaker's emotions, highlight the speaker's inability to escape those emotions, and contribute to the poem's overall sense of defeat.

The [anaphora](#) of the phrase "I have" in lines 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 14 is one of the most prominent examples of repetition in the poem. The repetition of "I have" at the start of each line emphasizes the fact that though the speaker has tried various actions during the walk, nothing alleviates the speaker's sorrow, despair, and isolation. There is also one instance of [epistrophe](#) in the poem, with the repetition of the phrase "in rain" in line 2. The speaker both begins and ends the walk "in rain." Therefore, the speaker starts and ends their journey, both physically and emotionally, in the same manner; nothing has changed from start to finish. The repetition of this image of "rain" reinforces the speaker's inability to progress or escape from their despair, sorrow, and isolation over the course of the walk.

Additionally, the poem begins and ends with the same line. This line is the speaker's own declaration of familiarity with despair, sorrow, and isolation, and it seems at first like it may be the "problem" that the [sonnet](#) will try to resolve. However, the repetition of this statement at the end of the poem signals that the problem hasn't been solved at all; the speaker's inability to escape these emotions remains clear. Consequently, by the end of the poem, the line expresses a sense of defeat and hopelessness.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I have been one acquainted with the night."
- **Line 2:** "I have," "in rain," "in rain"
- **Line 3:** "I have"
- **Line 4:** "I have"
- **Line 5:** "I have"
- **Line 7:** "I have"
- **Line 14:** "I have been one acquainted with the night."

CAESURA

Although "Acquainted with the Night" is written in [iambic pentameter](#), its two instances of [caesura](#) create variation in the regular rhythm of the poem. Caesura also builds up anticipation through delaying the reader's understanding of the full meaning of a line, thereby creating certain expectations that are later subverted. In line 2, for example, the speaker begins a walk in the rain. Readers might expect that the rain will stop by the time the speaker returns. The pause created by the em dash caesura provides time for this expectation to build. However, surprisingly, the speaker reveals that the walk ends "in rain" as well. The way the caesura lengthens the line emphasizes the fact that the speaker's state, physical and emotional, never changes from beginning to end.

In the second [stanza](#), the use of caesura again subverts readers' expectations. The speaker, isolated and despairing, passes by a watchman walking in the street. Contrary to what the reader might expect, the speaker does not take this opportunity to form a connection with another person. Rather, the speaker lowers their eyes. The pause created by the comma invites the reader to dwell on the speaker's surprising action of avoiding eye contact with another human, despite seeking human connection. The pause also gives readers a moment to wonder whether the avoidance of eye contact may be due to the speaker's shyness, but then the end of the sentence, after the pause, shows that this isn't the case. The speaker is not simply shy or introverted. Rather, the speaker is "unwilling" to connect, even though the rest of the poem suggests a longing for human connection.

These subversions of expectation emphasized through caesuras highlight the self-perpetuating cycle of despair, sorrow, and isolation which prevents the speaker from finding emotional relief. Although the speaker wants the human companionship that may alleviate these feelings, the feelings themselves prevent the speaker from making that connection.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "rain—and"
- **Line 6:** "eyes, unwilling"

ENJAMBMENT

[Enjambment](#) occurs in four places in "Acquainted with the

Night," at the ends of lines 5, 7, 8, and 12. Similar the effect of [caesura](#), the enjambment contrasts with the regular meter of the poem, mirrors the speaker's experience, and subverts readers' expectations.

In line 5, the speaker is given an opportunity to make a human connection with the watchman. Readers may expect the speaker to take advantage of this opportunity, as the speaker feels a sense of isolation and loneliness during the walk. However, the following line contradicts this expectation through the use of enjambment. In line 6, the speaker, rather than take advantage of the opportunity, avoids any kind of connection with the watchman. This enjambment plays with the readers' expectations and enhances a sense of surprise within the poem.

The third [stanza](#) is entirely enjambed, from line 7 through line 9. In this stanza, the speaker stops walking upon hearing a distant cry. The use of enjambment delays and draws out the full length of the sentence, thereby mirroring the distance between the speaker and the far-off person who is calling out. The details surrounding the "interrupted cry" are also broken up through the use of enjambment, similarly mimicking the "interrupted" nature of the cry.

The last instance of enjambment appears at the end of line 12. In line 12, the speaker views a "luminary clock" in the sky, a [metaphor](#) for a bright full moon. In the end of a traditional [sonnet](#), the poet provides a "solution" to the established "problem" of the poem. The image of the moon and its brightness often has positive connotations such as hope and beauty, particularly when contrasted against the darkness of the night. However, line 13 reveals that the moon is *not* a symbol of hope or resolution for the speaker. In fact, the moon represents the opposite, as it provides no direction or comfort at all. The use of enjambment between these two lines again delays the full meaning of the speaker's statement, making its conclusion all the more disappointing and thus highlighting how hopeless the speaker feels.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "beat / And"
- **Lines 7-8:** "feet / When"
- **Lines 8-9:** "cry / Came"
- **Lines 12-13:** "sky / Proclaimed"

ALLITERATION

In "Acquainted with the Night," [alliteration](#) is used to mirror the speaker's emotions and experiences. Alliteration of "s" sounds features especially prominently in the poem. In the first line of the second [stanza](#), for example, the speaker looks into the "saddest city lane." The alliteration of soft /s/ sounds in "saddest" and "city" is evocative of a sorrowful sigh, reflecting the speaker's sorrow.

In the third stanza, the speaker suddenly hears "an interrupted cry" and stops walking. Similarly to line 4, line 7 contains alliteration of /s/ sounds and, more specifically, /st/ sounds. The soft /s/ sounds in "stood," "still," "stopped," and "sound" mimic the quiet hush of the speaker's surrounding environment. Meanwhile, the overlapping alliteration of the /st/ sounds creates a sound of something softer (the /s/ sounds) hitting a hard surface (the harder /t/ sounds). This effect mirrors the sound of the speaker's footsteps against the ground, which come to an end at the end of the line. Thus, the word "sound" at the end of line 7 is fitting, because it lacks the harder /t/ sound but continues the alliteration of /s/ sounds. In other words, when the footsteps no longer tap against the ground, the /t/ sound also disappears from the line.

In a similar way, the hard /c/ sounds of "cry" and "came," which come on either side of the [enjambment](#) across lines 8 and 9, mimic the sounds the speaker hears. The "cry" travels across the streets to reach the speaker's ears, but it's also "interrupted," so the way the alliteration stretches across the line break brings the cry's broken-off quality to life. Overall, alliteration enhances the reading experience of "Acquainted with the Night" by bringing the reader more deeply into the speaker's experience of the nighttime walk.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "looked," "saddest," "city," "lane"
- **Line 5:** "watchman"
- **Line 6:** "unwilling"
- **Line 7:** "stood still," "stopped," "sound"
- **Line 8:** "cry"
- **Line 9:** "Came," "street"
- **Line 10:** "But," "back," "bye"
- **Line 12:** "luminary," "clock," "sky"
- **Line 13:** "wrong," "right"

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) appears abundantly throughout "Acquainted with the Night." It enhances the musicality of the language, slows down the lines, and also resonates with the speaker's emotions and experiences. All of these enhance the reader's understanding of the poem and bring the speaker's experience to life.

The poem's first and last consonance comes in the repeated /n/ sounds of line 1 and line 14, which are identical. This soft but forceful sound permeates both lines, making the speaker's statement sound inevitable and inescapable. And indeed, this repeated line emphasizes exactly that: the speaker is caught up in loneliness and misery that don't change or fade over the course of the poem. The insistent /n/ sounds highlight just how strong and unavoidable these feelings are.

The repetition of /s/ sounds occurs frequently in the first three

[stanzas](#). Some instances of this consonance are also [alliterative](#), such as the /s/ and /st/ sounds in line 4 and line 7. Overall, the soft /s/ sounds evoke a despairing sigh or sometimes a general hush in the surrounding environment. During a nighttime walk through a deserted city, the speaker experiences great sorrow and despair, so the /s/ sounds reinforce the speaker's despair and isolation alike.

"Acquainted with the Night" also repeats harsher consonants, such as hard /c/ and /t/ sounds. For instance, the densely clustered repeated /t/ sounds of "furthest city light" in line 3 create a sonic image of lights gathered together as they would be in a city, emphasizing the kind of togetherness that the speaker has given up by wandering so far away. Later, the harsh /c/ sounds in line 10 ("call" and "back") slow down the reading experience of the line. This delay mirrors the speaker's desire to linger and wait for the voice to call for the speaker's return. Finally, in lines 1 and 14 the hard /t/ sounds in "acquainted" and "night" again emphasize the firmness of the speaker's declaration.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "been one acquainted," "with," "night"
- **Line 2:** "walked"
- **Line 3:** "outwalked," "furthest city light"
- **Line 4:** "looked," "down," "saddest city lane"
- **Line 7:** "stood still," "stopped," "sound," "feet"
- **Line 8:** "When far away"
- **Lines 8-9:** "cry / Came"
- **Line 9:** "street"
- **Line 10:** "But," "call," "back," "bye"
- **Line 12:** "luminary clock," "against," "sky"
- **Line 13:** "neither wrong nor right"

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#), like [consonance](#), appears often throughout "Acquainted with the Night." Assonance highlights the sonic beauty of the poem's language and often reinforces the content of the lines.

In line 2, the long /a/ sound in the repetition of "rain" draws out the length of the word itself. This effect mirrors the constancy of the rain. The speaker, after all, begins and ends the journey through the city in rain; it pours down all night long. Similarly, in line 11, the assonance of the /u/ sound in "further" and "unearthly" draws out the sound of the line. This stretched feeling suits the content, as the line describes the great distance between the speaker and the moon (described [metaphorically](#) as a "luminary clock").

At times, assonance also adds a sonic texture that plays with the regular [iambic](#) pentameter of the lines. In line 7, the assonance of the /o/ sounds in "stopped" and "of" adds a light emphasis on the unstressed syllable "of." The repetition also

mimics the thudding of the speaker's footsteps as they walk across the city.

Assonance can also evoke the emotional undertones of a line. For example, the assonance of the short, soft /a/ sound in "have," "saddest," and "passed" in lines 4 and 5 is evocative of a sigh. This is fitting, as the lines reveal the speaker's sorrow and isolation. Overall, the textural layering that assonance provides to the [imagery](#), rhythm, and emotional experience of the lines greatly enriches the overall reading of the poem.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "have," "rain," "back," "rain"
- **Line 4:** "have," "saddest"
- **Line 5:** "have passed"
- **Line 7:** "stopped," "of"
- **Line 11:** "further," "unearthly"
- **Line 12:** "sky"
- **Line 13:** "time," "neither," "right"
- **Line 14:** "I," "night"

SYNECDOCHE

[Synecdoche](#) appears in two instances in "Acquainted with the Night." It enhances the speaker's sense of alienation from other people and even the speaker's own self.

Both instances of synecdoche appear in the third [stanza](#). In this stanza, the speaker, in the midst of taking a walk, stops upon hearing someone calling in the distance. In line 7, the speaker "stop[s] the sound of feet." Through the use of synecdoche, the sound of the speaker's footsteps represents the sound of the speaker's body while walking. Thus, "feet" is used to represent the speaker's whole body. This disembodiment of "feet" from the speaker's overall self represents the speaker's overall sense of alienation.

Indeed, this alienation is further developed in the next line. In line 8, the speaker hears "an interrupted cry" from "far away." This "cry" represents the human individual who produces such a "cry." However, the speaker cannot make a connection to this individual despite wanting to. The "cry" is physically distant from the speaker. Additionally, as revealed in 10, the "cry" does not engage with the speaker; it has nothing at all to say to the speaker. Furthermore, the speaker cannot even get in touch with the person who made the noise. Rather, the speaker can only access a small part of this individual—their "cry." Therefore, the synecdoche again highlights how the speaker remains isolated from others and unable to make a genuine human connection.

Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "feet"
- **Line 8:** "cry"

METAPHOR

There is a clear, and highly symbolic, [metaphor](#) in lines 11-13 of the poem:

And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky
Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.

The speaker is not talking about a literal clock here. Rather, this is a metaphorical way of talking about the moon. This metaphor is discussed in depth in the Symbols section of this guide. Briefly, however, this metaphor implies a few things.

First off, the moon is presented as being very distant from the speaker—at an "unearthly height," in fact. Because light in the poem is broadly symbolic of hope and joy, the fact that the moon is so far away suggests that these emotions are out of reach for the speaker. Any light that filters down to earth only reveals the speaker's despair.

It is also worth noting that clocks are closely associated with civilization; they are mechanical devices created by human beings to add structure to the day and night. Because the metaphorical clock is so distant from the speaker, this metaphor further suggests that modern society is not able to offer the speaker any sense of comfort or guidance. That the speaker cannot access the clock might further suggest the speaker's alienation from the rest of humanity.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-13:** "And further still at an unearthly height, / One luminary clock against the sky / Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right."



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Acquainted with the Night" is written in the form of a [sonnet](#). However, the poem is not a traditional English or Italian sonnet, but rather a terza rima sonnet. Although the poem incorporates the traditional elements of a sonnet such as the 14 lines and ending [couplet](#), its use of terza rima [stanzas](#) is an unconventional choice. The poem begins with four three-line tercets and ends on a rhyming, two-line couplet:

- Tercet
- Tercet
- Tercet
- Tercet
- Couplet

Traditional sonnets often establish a problem around the subject of love, frequently unrequited love. In "Acquainted with the Night," however, the speaker seeks a connection not with an idealized lover figure, but rather with any human individual. It begins as a traditional sonnet does by setting up the speaker's "problem" in the opening lines. However, unlike traditional sonnets, the poem does not contain a "turn" or "resolution" to the speaker's problem. Rather, the speaker's problem of despair, sorrow, and isolation intensifies without relief as the poem progresses, ultimately ending with exactly the same line with which it started—and subverting the conventions of the sonnet form in the process.

METER

"Acquainted with the Night" follows the form of a terza rima [sonnet](#). As with a traditional sonnet, the poem is written in regular [iambic](#) pentameter, which means that it contains five poetic feet per line, following an unstressed-stressed da-DUM pattern. Take line 6, for example:

And **dropped** | my **eyes** | un**wil-** | ling **to** | **explain**.

The perfect regularity of the [meter](#) reflects the unchanging monotony of the speaker's emotional state. The speaker's despair, sorrow, and isolation are never alleviated throughout the poem. Moreover, the regular beat of the meter also evokes the rhythm of the speaker's footsteps across the city during their nighttime walk.

Although the meter is steady, there are occasions where the rhythm of the poem is broken up by pauses, usually through enjambment or [caesura](#). For example, the em dash in line 2 and the comma in line 6 (the poem's only two instances of caesura) create variation in the meter. These pauses delay the reading of the words that follow and create an anticipation and expectation of change. In line 2, the reader may expect that the



VOCABULARY

Acquainted (Line 1, Line 14) - Familiar with or connected to.

Watchman (Line 5) - A man whose job is to patrol and keep watch, similar to a police officer.

Beat (Line 5) - The particular shift assigned to a police officer or, in this case, the watchman.

Unearthly (Line 11) - Otherworldly; not of this earth. In the poem, the moon is physically located high up in space, far beyond the earth.

Luminary (Line 12) - Something that is luminous, in other words bright and full of light. Here, the moon is compared [metaphorically](#) to a bright clock in the sky.

Proclaimed (Line 13) - Declared; announced. The clock, a [metaphor](#) for the moon, declares the time to the speaker.

rain would stop by the time the speaker finishes their walk. However, surprisingly, the rain continues to pour down when the speaker returns home.

In line 6, the pause in the middle of the line delays the explanation of why the speaker looks down and away from the watchman. The second half of the line reveals that it is not simply because the speaker is shy, as readers might expect, but rather that the speaker is "unwilling" to engage with the watchman, despite the speaker's isolation and apparent hope for connection. The pauses in the lines encourage readers to build expectation for the speaker's situation to improve, but this expectation is never fulfilled, highlighting just how deep the speaker's isolation and despair are.

RHYME SCHEME

"Acquainted with the Night" is a [sonnet](#) with the traditional 14 lines and ending [couplet](#). However, the first four [stanzas](#) are written in a [terza rima rhyme scheme](#), which is unusual for a sonnet.

In a terza rima tercet, the first and third lines borrow their rhyme from the second line of the preceding stanza. Accordingly, the rhyme scheme of "Acquainted with the Night" is as follows:

ABA BCB CDC DED EE

Thus, each subsequent stanza is interlocked with the previous stanza through their shared rhymes. This effect enhances the sense of inescapability that pervades the poem, both in form and content. That is, the speaker cannot get away from their despair and isolation; these feelings follow the speaker throughout the entire walk the poem describes. What's more, the speaker's feelings seem to be a kind of vicious cycle. The speaker is alone and craves connection, but because the speaker is so isolated, they struggle to connect with others (as in line 6, when the speaker looks away from the watchman), which only makes the isolation worse. The terza rima rhyme thus gives the poem a cyclical, all-encompassing feel that mirrors the speaker's situation.

Additionally, the poem often features [internal rhyme](#) and [slant rhyme](#) within and across lines as a counterpoint to the broader rhyme scheme. In lines 4-7, for example, the slant rhyme in "looked," "passed," "dropped," and "stopped" creates a monotonous rhythm in the speaker's various actions. The monotony of the rhythm emphasizes the fact that nothing the speaker does can change their state of despair, sorrow, and isolation.



SPEAKER

The speaker of "Acquainted with the Night" is nameless and genderless. While it's possible that Frost himself may be the speaker, the speaker could be anyone. Indeed, Frost seems to

purposefully leave any personal details about the speaker out of the poem in order for any reader to be able to identify with the speaker. Because the speaker is completely anonymous, Frost seems to imply that what the speaker goes through in this poem is a universal aspect of human experience; it can (and often does) happen to anyone.

The main thing that readers know about the speaker is that the speaker is immersed in a state of sorrow and despair. The speaker wants to escape those feelings during a walk in the night. The speaker walks beyond the outermost lights of their city in an attempt to physically escape. However, those feelings prove to be inescapable—just like the night itself. Indeed, the speaker's sorrow and despair keep the speaker from connecting with others (as when the speaker looks away from the watchman), thereby isolating the speaker further.

Therefore, the speaker is trapped in a self-perpetuating cycle of isolation, sorrow, and despair. The speaker cannot find solace in other humans or even in elements of nature itself, such as the moon or the night. Nothing provides any comfort, relief, or resolution for the speaker. At the end of the poem, the speaker is in the same state of misery and loneliness as the beginning of the poem, reaffirming the speaker's seeming inability to escape those emotions.



SETTING

The setting of "Acquainted with the Night" is a city during the nighttime. The streets are, for the most part, deserted—perhaps in part due to the constant rain. Certain parts of the city are illuminated with light, while others are not. A watchman patrols the city and the occasional human voice calls out into the night. Overhead, the moon shines brightly, but offers no comfort or solace to the viewer.

Together, this collection of details indicates that the city is not any particular city. Rather, its details are particular enough to evoke a sense of sorrow and isolation, yet vague enough to apply to many cities around the world. As a result, many readers can relate to the speaker's experience of walking throughout this anonymous city.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Frost first published "Acquainted with the Night" in the Virginia Quarterly Review in 1927. The next year, it appeared in Frost's fifth collection of poetry, *West-Running Brook*. "Acquainted with the Night" is one of Frost's most celebrated poems from that collection; other poems in *West-Running Brook*, such as "Spring Pools" and "Once by the Pacific," also acquired a degree of fame. At this point in his career, Frost had won the Pulitzer

Prize for poetry in 1924 and was an established star in the literary world. *West-Running Brook*, however, was less favorably received than previous collections. This may have been due in part to its shift in style toward more philosophical preoccupations and abstraction, as opposed to the more concrete subjects of Frost's previous works.

"Acquainted with the Night" is a [sonnet](#). Many of Frost's Modernist contemporaries, such as Edna St. Vincent Millay and T.S. Eliot, either wrote sonnets or referenced the form in other works. However, these writers often challenged the traditional restrictions and expectations of the sonnet form. This resistance of tradition would have been very much in line with Modernist values and aesthetics, which emphasized experimentation, ambiguity, and psychological complexity. Millay, for example, departed from tradition by writing sonnets exploring female sexuality from a woman's point of view. Similarly, T.S. Eliot broke up the form and used sonnet fragments in his longer poems. Frost, too, pushed back against tradition, like his fellow Modernists. "Acquainted with the Night" is not a traditional English or Italian sonnet. Rather, it is written in the challenging terza rima sonnet form. Moreover, the poem does not contain the expected "turn" and "resolution" a traditional sonnet would have. Rather, the poem's initial "problem" remains unresolved, with the same opening and ending lines.

The poem's frank exploration of the despair, sorrow, and isolation of the human psyche is also a definite precursor to the Postmodern, or Confessional, poetry of the 1950s and '60s, which similarly explored the darker aspects of the human experience. "Acquainted with the Night" continues to resonate with writers, artists, and readers today, with many paying homage to the poem through various artistic adaptations.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The 1920s in America were aptly named the Roaring Twenties, due to the nation's flourishing economy and prosperity. Innovation, invention, and change dominated the period. Telephones, radios, and televisions were installed in homes across the country. Women gained the right to vote, and fashion also changed to reflect women's greater social independence. Every aspect of society appeared to break or resist in some way with tradition and the past. At the same time, the recent horrors of World War I left many with a foreboding sense of humanity's capacity for death and destruction—a capacity that was enabled by the very innovation that also created such prosperity.

Many artists and writers of this time were interested in exploring this tension between hope and fear, as Frost does here. They often broke with tradition through their work's content or form, or sometimes both. Indeed, Modernism, a global cultural movement during this time, is defined by its break with the past. Another aspect of Modernism is a sense of

alienation and isolation as urbanization progresses and rapid change constantly estranges individuals from the certainties of the past. These feelings of alienation and isolation feature prominently not only in "Acquainted with the Night," but also in other art and literature of the time.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "[Acquainted with the Night](#)" Read Aloud — Listen to author Robert Frost read his entire poem. (<https://youtu.be/n6xqyHDDCc>)
- "[Acquainted with the Night](#)" Music Video — Listen to and watch an original music video adaptation of the poem. (https://youtu.be/mBPP_dC2tEU)
- "[Acquainted with the Night](#)" Musical Adaptation — Listen to a musical adaptation of the poem. (<https://youtu.be/lxQEIT1czXs>)
- "[Acquainted with the Night](#)" Art Exhibit — Read about artist Howard Hodgkin's exhibit titled "Acquainted with the Night" and learn about Frost's influence on a contemporary artist. (<https://cristearoberts.com/exhibitions/80/>)
- [Acquainted With the Night: How Whistler's Nocturnes Changed America](#) — Read about the connection between James Abbott McNeill Whistler's paintings and "Acquainted with the Night." (<https://www.mutualart.com/Article/Acquainted-With-the-Night--How-Whistlers/42179197014DE7CB>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT FROST POEMS

- [After Apple-Picking](#)
- [Birches](#)
- [Fire and Ice](#)
- [Home Burial](#)
- [Mending Wall](#)
- [Nothing Gold Can Stay](#)
- [Out, Out—](#)
- [Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening](#)
- [The Road Not Taken](#)



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