

Alone



POEM TEXT

1 From childhood's hour I have not been
 2 As others were—I have not seen
 3 As others saw—I could not bring
 4 My passions from a common spring—
 5 From the same source I have not taken
 6 My sorrow—I could not awaken
 7 My heart to joy at the same tone—
 8 And all I lov'd—I lov'd alone—
 9 *Then*—in my childhood—in the dawn
 10 Of a most stormy life—was drawn
 11 From ev'ry depth of good and ill
 12 The mystery which binds me still—
 13 From the torrent, or the fountain—
 14 From the red cliff of the mountain—
 15 From the sun that 'round me roll'd
 16 In its autumn tint of gold—
 17 From the lightning in the sky
 18 As it pass'd me flying by—
 19 From the thunder, and the storm—
 20 And the cloud that took the form
 21 (When the rest of Heaven was blue)
 22 Of a demon in my view—



THEMES



LONELINESS, ISOLATION, AND DIFFERENCE

The speaker of “Alone” has always felt markedly different from those around him. It's not just that he has different tastes or beliefs than most: he seems to live in a totally different world, in which he experiences things much more intensely and imaginatively than other people. And while that sense of being different feels like a burden to this speaker, it's also a source of identity, vision, and inspiration. To this speaker, being alone is both a blessing and a curse—and it's part of his very nature, making him who he is.

From earliest childhood, the speaker has felt out of step with the people around him. His passions didn't come from “a common spring,” and his sorrows didn't come from “the same source” as other people's. Similarly, he couldn't “awaken [his] heart to joy” in the same way that others could. It's not that he didn't experience passion, sorrow, or joy at all: rather, he was into different things than those around him, and this difference kept him from fitting in. While other people shared joys and sorrows, he experienced everything in solitude.

The things that have set the speaker apart throughout his life aren't only to do with his likes and dislikes, but with the actual way he sees the world. The speaker says that as far back as he can remember, he didn't “see/As others saw.” Instead, he perceived a deep, haunting “mystery” in the everyday world, seeing “demon[s]” in clouds and strange power in the landscape. To him, the world has always felt magical and menacing: nothing is ordinary, in his eyes. Because other people can't share these visions, he ends up living all alone in a private world of the imagination.

Both the speaker's tastes and his perceptions mean that he's eternally and profoundly alone. But while this fate is painful, it's also its own reward. The mysterious force that makes the speaker see and feel things differently from those around him “binds [him] still”: in other words, he feels trapped by his perceptions. At times, he might even feel that he's living in his own personal hell: the cloudy “demon” that he sees in a clear blue sky suggests that his private world is often more dangerous and threatening than the everyday world of the people around him.

But there's something exalted about his aloneness, too. The very things that isolate the speaker also make him special. He seems to recognize the complicated beauty of his lonely fate, saying that his way of seeing the world was “drawn/From ev'ry depth of good and ill.” In other words, for better or worse, his



SUMMARY

Ever since I was a child, I haven't been like other people. I've never perceived things the way that other people perceived them. And I couldn't get excited about the same things that other people did. I haven't been sad for the same reasons, and I've never felt the same happiness that others could. Everything that I loved, I loved all by myself. Back then, when I was little, at the start of my turbulent life, I discovered—for better or worse—the mysterious force which still has a hold on me. That mystery comes to me from waterfalls or springs, from the red rock mountainside, from the golden fall sun that spun round me, from the lightning shooting past me through the sky, from the rumbling of thunderstorms, and from the cloud that once took the shape (while the rest of the sky was blue) of a devil, in my eyes...

isolation is part of being in contact with the extreme and mysterious depths of his own soul—the very depths you need to plumb to be a poet.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*From childhood's hour I have not been
As others were—I have not seen
As others saw—I could not bring
My passions from a common spring—*

"Alone" begins with a speaker recalling the loneliness and isolation of his childhood. From the very beginning of his life, he says, he's sensed that he is different from those around him, and that his difference stems from the way he sees the world.

The [parallelism](#) in the first three lines helps to make that point clear:

From childhood's hour I have not been
As others were— || I have not seen
As others saw— || I could not bring

These similarly-shaped lines suggest that the way the speaker is and the way he sees the world are closely related. And the [caesurae](#) here—strong dashes—make it sound as if it's pretty hard for the speaker even to talk about how lonely and misunderstood he's felt. It's as if he's breaking off mid-thought, trying to communicate his extreme feelings of loneliness—but not sure, even now, that he'll be understood.

Altogether, the first four lines really set the tone of the poem. There is no doubt that this is an intensely lonely speaker who desperately longs to connect.

But perhaps there are also some consolations in this loneliness. These lines are subtly musical: they use singsongy rhymed [couplets](#) and harmonious /n/ and /m/ [consonance](#):

My passions from a common spring.

These gentle, musical sounds perhaps suggest the speaker has found a silver lining in his loneliness and difference. His unique way of seeing the world might make him special as much as it sets him apart: it might, in fact, have made him a poet!

He may not have been able to draw his "passions" (or deep feelings) from the [metaphorical](#) "common spring" that most people shared. But, as the poem will show, his passions might come from an even deeper and wilder source.

LINES 5-7

*From the same source I have not taken
My sorrow—I could not awaken
My heart to joy at the same tone—*

The speaker continues to relay his lifelong experience of being different, saying that for him, sorrow hasn't come "From the same source" as other people's—and neither has joy, for that matter. He feels joy and sorrow, of course, but he feels them differently, and for different reasons, from those around him. He describes his experience of joy as being "ton[ally]" different, almost as if he sees the world in unusual shades and hues—perhaps deeper, richer, moodier ones than most.

Like lines 1-4, lines 5-7 use [parallelism](#) to show that the speaker feels alienated from others in every possible way. He can't connect to others over the way that he is, the way that he sees things, the things he feels sorrow about, or the ways he experiences joy. The [sibilance](#) in lines 5-6 underline the speaker's isolation:

From the same source I have not taken
My sorrow—

These whispery /s/ sounds evoke the speaker's struggle to communicate: it's as if he can barely raise his voice enough to be heard. And once again, he breaks off in the middle of the line with another [caesura](#), as if he's halting, hesitating to even try to explain himself.

There's deep sadness in these lines, too. When the speaker says he "could not awaken" his heart to feel "joy" the way that others did, there's a hint that joy itself isn't nearly as familiar to him as despair.

LINE 8

And all I lov'd—I lov'd alone—

Line 8 succinctly sums up everything the speaker has described thus far, and has a strong emotional impact. Here, the speaker is essentially saying that though he is capable of loving, wants to love, *does* love—he himself remains unloved, misunderstood, and profoundly alone. It's an intensely vulnerable admission.

Another [caesura](#) creates a sense of hesitancy and visceral emotion: this is not an easy thing for the speaker to say. And then there is [anadiplosis](#):

And all I lov'd—I lov'd alone—

With the [repetition](#) of "I lov'd," anadiplosis draws attention to the imbalance of the speaker's emotional life. Rather than loving and being loved in return, the speaker loves, but remains lonely. The /l/ [consonance](#) here also connects the word "lov'd" to the words "all" and "alone." In other words: no matter how much capacity the speaker has for love, it doesn't bring him any

closer to other people.

Of course, the musicality of that /l/ consonance also suggests the speaker is taking some kind of comfort in the act of writing itself. Poetry, it seems, is a source of solace and company to the lonely speaker. He can't make friends, but he can make something beautiful, something no one else can make.

LINES 9-12

Then
—in my childhood—in the dawn
Of a most stormy life—was drawn
From ev'ry depth of good and ill
The mystery which binds me still—

Following the speaker's naked confession of total isolation, he goes on to explain that it was in the "dawn"—or beginning—of his life that his unusual and mysterious way of seeing the world came into being. The dramatically italicized "Then" draws attention to the importance of the speaker's early experience of difference: it's shaped his entire life. Also emphasizing the importance of the speaker's childhood experience is the double [caesura](#) in line 9:

Then—in my childhood—in the dawn

The two em dashes section off the phrase "in my childhood," evoking the speaker's isolation.

The poem then uses two different [metaphors](#) in the same clause:

Then—in my childhood—in the dawn
Of a most stormy life—was drawn

The first metaphor compares childhood, which is the beginning of a life, to dawn, which is the beginning of a day. The second metaphor compares the speaker's life to a storm—turbulent, moody, and chaotic. In other words, the speaker's lonely childhood was just the beginning of what would become a dramatic and volatile life.

And yet, the speaker feels that his imagination, his visionary way of seeing the world, the "mystery which binds" him, was ultimately birthed "From ev'ry depth of good and ill." In other words, for better or worse, this is the life he is meant to lead.

LINES 13-16

From the torrent, or the fountain—
From the red cliff of the mountain—
From the sun that 'round me roll'd
In its autumn tint of gold—

The speaker has spent the first twelve lines of the poem examining how lonely and different he's always felt. Now, he starts to describe the inner experiences that have made him

feel so isolated, launching into a stream of [imagery](#) as he relates the things he has seen (and the unique way he sees them).

The "mystery" the speaker describes seems to emerge from the natural world—or from a visionary experience of that world. How much of the landscape the speaker describes is literal and how much is only in his imagination isn't entirely clear; it also doesn't really matter. What matters is that what he sees shapes the solitary, visionary creature that he is.

Whether internal or external, the landscape the speaker describes seems to sweep him away. Look at how [anaphora](#) gives these lines a sense of momentum:

From the torrent, or the fountain
From the red cliff of the mountain—
From the sun that 'round me roll'd
In its autumn tint of gold—

These [repetitions](#) make the speaker's visions seem to arrive in an overwhelming rush—like the very "torrent" he describes.

Instead of loving and being loved by other people, these lines suggest, the speaker feels drawn to the landscape around him, which also serves as a powerful [metaphor](#) for his *internal* landscape. And this isn't a landscape of calm meadows, delicate flowers, or bubbling brooks, but a dramatic and even menacing wilderness:

- He describes a "torrent," which is a powerful stream or waterfall, and a "fountain," both of which evoke his emotional overflow.
- He describes the "red cliff of the mountain," a dramatic image: is he looking up at something huge and immovable? Or is he standing on the edge of that "cliff," feeling like the king of the world—or like he might fall?
- He describes an autumn sun "roll[ing]" around him, an image that is all the more evocative because of the rocky sound created by /r/ and /d/ [consonance](#) in "'round" and "roll'd." It's almost as if the sun were a boulder he can hear grinding against the landscape as it moves.

All in all, then, this speaker's experience of the world seems both rich and threatening, gorgeous and dangerous.

LINES 17-19

From the lightning in the sky
As it pass'd me flying by—
From the thunder, and the storm—

As the speaker continues to list the things he's seen, the poem races toward its conclusion, becoming wilder and wilder, more and more impassioned.

Here, as the speaker describes a thunderstorm, he really seems

to be having a visionary experience. Now, "the lightning in the sky" isn't far off, but alarmingly close—it "pass[es him] flying by." The speaker seems almost to be flying through the sky himself, dangerously close to being struck by the storm's electric charge.

The lightning may be a [metaphor](#) for the way the speaker's sources of inspiration are both powerfully dangerous (they might very well kill him!) and rich with possibility. After all, lightning is concentrated energy; people often describe having a sudden flash of inspiration as being hit by a bolt of lightning.

In other words: the very things that make the speaker's life "stormy" are also the things that "bind" him to his fate—and his fate isn't just lonely and tortured, but inspired. He seems to have a perspective that no one else does. He's not tied down by reality, but free in his imagination to roam the heavens and peer inside the most dangerous places.

The [imagery](#) here evokes what the speaker must feel in the wildest reaches of his imagination: wonder, terror, and awe all mixed together.

LINES 20-22

*And the cloud that took the form
(When the rest of Heaven was blue)
Of a demon in my view—*

In its last lines, the poem describes seeing or imagining a cloud transforming into a "demon." The [imagery](#) at the end of the poem is telling. Having spent the last few lines describing a storm, the speaker now describes a cloud in an otherwise "blue" sky: a cloud that shapes itself into a terrifying "demon."

These lines might make the reader suspect that the "storm" the speaker has been describing has been [metaphorical](#) all along, representing the turbulent way he experiences the world. After all, he describes "the rest of Heaven" as "blue," indicating that the sky is serene and otherwise clear. Maybe this demonic "cloud" is just an image of the speaker's emotional experience: what seems like a lovely day to everyone else is to him a driving, terrifying storm.

That seems all the more likely when this stormcloud morphs into an evil spirit before his very eyes. Perhaps this demon is a [symbolic](#) demon, an image of the speaker's own torment projected into the sky. In his "view," a lovely day gets warped by his inability to see things in the same way as other people. He can't see the blue expanse everyone else sees because he's too busy dealing with the "demon" in front of him.

And perhaps the speaker actually sees a demon! He's already insisted that he sees the world very differently from most people. Perhaps part of that difference is to do with genuinely seeing things that other people would say aren't really there.

Either way, there's something both heartbreaking and extraordinary in this final image. On the one hand, the speaker is utterly isolated, alone with a terrifying vision of his own pain.

On the other hand, he's extraordinary: the lone visionary inhabitant of a world no one else can see.



SYMBOLS



THE DEMON

The demon in the clouds at the end of the poem [symbolizes](#) two things: the speaker's vivid and sometimes awful imagination, and his suffering.

The speaker feels as if he is doomed—or damned—to be forever alone with his intense perceptions, experiencing both joy and profound sorrow in solitude. The demon he sees in the clouds is an image of that isolation, reminding him that even while "the rest of Heaven"—or everything else in the world—seems calm and peaceful, he himself will always be subject to intense visions that cut him off from others.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 20-22:** "And the cloud that took the form / (When the rest of Heaven was blue) / Of a demon in my view—"



POETIC DEVICES

PARALLELISM

The poem uses [parallelism](#) to show the relationship between how the speaker *sees* and how he *is*—and to evoke his futile struggle to make himself understood.

In lines 1-3, the parallel grammatical structures of "I have not been / As others were" and "I have not seen / As others saw" equate being and seeing: the speaker isn't like everyone else *because* he doesn't see things the way everyone else does. As long as he perceives the world differently than other people, he is always going to feel alone. And since he can't change the way he sees the world, he's more or less fated to live a lonely existence.

This flavor of parallelism, which reappears all through the first seven lines of the poem, also might suggest the speaker is trying to communicate clearly—in spite of the fact that he knows no one really understands him. First, he goes from saying he isn't like anyone else to saying he sees things differently than other people. Then, he tries to be even more precise, saying "I have not taken / My sorrow" and "I could not awaken / My heart" from the same places or in the same ways as other people. These increasingly specific lines speak to his desperate desire to be understood.

There's more parallelism to be found here, too; see the entry on Anaphora for more on the parallel shape of lines 11-19.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "I have not been / As others were—I have not seen / As others saw"
- **Line 3:** "—I could not bring"
- **Line 4:** "My passions"
- **Lines 5-7:** "I have not taken / My sorrow— / My heart"
- **Line 6:** "I could not awaken"
- **Line 11:** "From ev'ry depth of good and ill"
- **Lines 13-15:** "From the torrent, or the fountain— / From the red cliff of the mountain— / From the sun that 'round me roll'd"
- **Line 17:** "From the lightning in the sky"
- **Line 19:** "From the thunder, and the storm—"

ANAPHORA

[Anaphora](#) gives the poem momentum, and draws attention to the idea that the speaker has been alone for as long as he can remember.

The repeated "From" that begins every new idea between lines 11-19 echoes the "From" that begins the poem: "From childhood's hour I have not been / As others were—"

The use of anaphora in the second half of the poem thus illustrates with vivid [imagery](#) what childhood felt like to the speaker, and his sense that his difference stemmed from the way he experienced the world. The "mystery which binds" him—his unique vision of the world—comes *from* the things he sees (the torrent, the fountain) but also from the *way* he sees things (a cloud shapeshifting into a malevolent spirit).

Anaphora also creates a rising sense of urgency, a momentum which carries the reader through the second half of the poem at a faster and faster pace. In this way, the poem evokes the speaker's sense that he's caught up helplessly in his own visions. Fated to experience the world differently and more vividly than others, he gets carried away by the power of his imagination—until, at last, he's confronting a demon in an otherwise "heaven[ly]" blue sky.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "From childhood's hour I have not been"
- **Line 2:** "As others"
- **Line 3:** "As others"
- **Line 11:** "From"
- **Line 13:** "From the"
- **Line 14:** "From the"
- **Line 15:** "From the"
- **Line 17:** "From the"
- **Line 19:** "From the," "and the"
- **Line 20:** "And the"

ANADIPLOSIS

The [anadiplosis](#) in line 8 creates a moment of poignant drama, evoking the speaker's fruitless efforts to find connection.

Line 8 concludes the speaker's description of his lifetime of isolation with a striking [repetition](#):

And all I lov'd—I lov'd alone—

This anadiplosis, set off by that dramatic [caesura](#), creates a moment of tension. When the speaker brings up "all [he] lov'd," he reminds readers that it's not that he didn't have the *capacity* for love and connection. But when he repeats the words "I lov'd" a second later, it's only to conclude that he "lov'd alone." His "lov[e]" was never shared with another human being, this anadiplosis stresses: it was always a strictly solitary affair.

Not only did the speaker not love the same things as other people, this moment suggests, he never loved anything that could love him back. His whole life has been, in a sense, one long episode of unrequited love. Even the beautiful, dangerous "mystery" that has captivated the speaker all his life long doesn't love him back: everything that moves him is a powerful but emotionless force of nature, a "torrent" or a "red cliff."

Repeating the word "lov[e]" only to emphasize his own isolation, the speaker makes his loneliness feel even more profound.

Where Anadiplosis appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "I lov'd—I lov'd"

ENJAMBMENT

A little over half of the lines in this poem are [enjambéd](#), and even the lines that are [end-stopped](#) are end-stopped with breathless dashes. This gives the poem a sense of urgency and a confessional quality, as if the speaker is revealing something very personal and difficult. It feels like this confession is tumbling out of him, as if he's held it in for too long, and at the same time, it feels raw and fresh, as if he himself is just beginning to understand the full extent of his loneliness and difference.

Much of the poem's urgency and sense of difficulty comes from the push and pull between enjambment and [caesura](#). In the first half of the poem (lines 1-10), lines are frequently enjambéd only for the clause to be interrupted partway through the next line by a dash. Take the first four lines, for example:

From childhood's hour I have not **been**
As others were || —I have not **seen**
As others saw || —I could not **bring**
My passions from a common spring—

In this case, lines 1-3 are enjambed, but then hit a caesura: the speaker seems to be saying something in a rush and then breaking off, saying something in a rush and then breaking off, over and over. This movement evokes his desperation to be understood—and his struggle to articulate exactly what it is that makes him so different.

After line 10, though, enjambment is less frequent and caesura disappears completely. This change makes the second half of the poem feel more self-assured, as if the speaker is gaining confidence in his own vision.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "been / As"
- **Lines 2-3:** "seen / As"
- **Lines 3-4:** "bring / My"
- **Lines 5-6:** "taken / My"
- **Lines 6-7:** "awaken / My"
- **Lines 9-10:** "dawn / Of"
- **Lines 10-11:** "drawn / From"
- **Lines 11-12:** "ill / The"
- **Lines 15-16:** "roll'd / In"
- **Lines 17-18:** "sky / As"
- **Lines 20-21:** "form / (When)"
- **Lines 21-22:** "blue) / Of"

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) gives the poem some subtle music—and hints that the speaker finds his lonely fate a little romantic, as well as tragic.

Listen to the lilting /l/ sound in line 8, for instance:

And all I lov'd—I lov'd alone—

Not only does the speaker's /l/ consonance here emphasize the word "lov'd," it links the words "all" and "alone," underlining the speaker's total isolation. But there's also something soft and gentle about that long /l/ sound, something musical: the speaker is perhaps relishing this dramatic declaration of his eternal loneliness, a little.

Consonance also evokes the beauty and danger of the speaker's internal life. Listen to the sounds in the passage where he introduces his strange and perilous inner world:

Then—in my childhood—in the dawn
Of a most stormy life—was drawn
From ev'ry depth of good and ill
The mystery which binds me still—

Here, a [sibilant](#) /s/ and a crisp /t/ travel together. These quiet sounds evoke the very "mystery" they describe: the long /s/ sound and short /t/ sound in combination feel like a whisper

getting sharply cut off. It's as if the speaker is telling readers a dangerous secret.

This poem's evocative use of consonance thus gives readers a window into the speaker's emotional experience. But in its melodiousness, it also suggests that one of the gifts of the speaker's isolation has been poetic mastery.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "bring"
- **Line 4:** "passions," "common," "spring"
- **Line 6:** "sorrow," "awaken"
- **Line 7:** "heart," "tone"
- **Line 8:** "all," "lov'd," "lov'd," "alone"
- **Line 10:** "most," "stormy"
- **Line 12:** "mystery," "still"
- **Line 13:** "torrent," "fountain"
- **Line 16:** "autumn," "tint"
- **Line 17:** "lightning"
- **Line 18:** "flying"

IMAGERY

The poem uses [imagery](#) to paint a picture of the speaker's unique perception of the world. The poem begins with more abstract ideas as the speaker tries to articulate how he's different from those around him. But when the speaker comes to the "mystery" that "binds" him, he breaks into a flurry of imagery. It's tough to explain that mystery, but he knows it has to do with the way he sees things. So, rather than trying to explain, he switches gears, instead *showing* what the world looks like to him.

He draws his imagery here from the natural world: "the torrent," "the fountain," "the red cliff of the mountain." These places are both real and [metaphorical](#), evoking the speaker's emotional state. The "torrent" (or waterfall) and the "fountain" evoke the speaker's own passionate, overflowing thoughts and feelings. And the "red cliff" suggests both the exhilaration and danger of the speaker's inner life: on that cliff, is he on top of the world, or about to plummet to his doom?

The imagery here often seems to put the speaker right in the midst of the things he imagines. He's able to feel the sun "roll[ing]" around him and the lightning "flying by," as if he's in the sky himself—a dizzying experience, and one that suggests that the border between reality and fantasy is pretty uncertain in his mind.

That border becomes particularly fuzzy in the final lines of the poem, as the speaker sees or imagines a cloud breaking away from Heaven and taking the form of a "demon." That demon is clearly an image of the speaker's own lonely torment—but there's nothing to say the demon can't be literal as well. The speaker may actually see things no one else can see.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-22:** "From the torrent, or the fountain— / From the red cliff of the mountain— / From the sun that 'round me roll'd / In its autumn tint of gold— / From the lightning in the sky / As it pass'd me flying by— / From the thunder, and the storm— / And the cloud that took the form / (When the rest of Heaven was blue) / Of a demon in my view—"

METAPHOR

The poem's [metaphors](#) help to evoke the speaker's strange, lonely experience of the world.

in lines 3-4, for instance, the speaker says he "could not bring / [His] passions from a common spring." In this metaphor, the speaker imagines that most people's "passions" (or deep feelings) come the same source, as if everyone were drawing from the same natural well. But the speaker's own internal life seems more like a "torrent": not a gentle "spring," but an uncontrollable rush of water.

In lines 9-10, meanwhile, the speaker describes his childhood as "the dawn / Of a most stormy life." Here there are two metaphors happening at once. First, there's the idea of childhood as morning: just as dawn begins the day, childhood begins a life. But the speaker's "dawn" wasn't some idyllic fresh new day: it was "stormy," metaphorically turbulent, chaotic, and out of control.

Some of that chaos finally manifests as a vision of a "demon"—an image that can be taken literally or metaphorically. While it's quite possible the speaker actually sees evil spirits where other people see clear, serene skies, the demon is also a vivid [symbol](#) of the speaker's sense of being haunted or cursed—fated to a lonely existence, with only his wild, dangerous imagination to keep him company.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "I could not bring / My passions from a common spring—"
- **Lines 9-10:** "in the dawn / Of a most stormy life—"
- **Line 22:** "Of a demon in my view—"

CAESURA

In the first half of the poem, [caesurae](#) often interrupt the momentum of [enjambment](#), breaking continuous lines off sharply in the middle. The speaker almost always uses strong dashes for his caesurae (rather than, for instance, a milder comma or semicolon), so his pauses feel particularly dramatic. That drama echoes the speaker's own sense of separation and isolation: he, like his sentences, is split off, disconnected from the world around him.

The poem's dramatic pauses also evoke the speaker's struggle

to articulate his loneliness. He has always known himself to be different, but perhaps this poem is the first place he's expressed exactly how and why. His caesurae make it sound like the words aren't coming easily.

Caesurae might even evoke hesitancy. Despite the speaker's intense desire to be known and understood, he is also perhaps afraid of admitting the full extent of his difference, worrying that such a confession will only further alienate him from others.

Caesura also pulls the emphasis of a line to its middle rather than to the end, where it would otherwise naturally settle. So for instance, in lines 9-10, rather than emphasizing the [end rhyme](#) between "dawn" and "drawn," the caesura draws attention to words in the *middle* of the lines:

Then—|| in my childhood || —in the dawn
Of a most stormy life ||—was drawn

Here, caesurae emphasize the connection between the speaker's lonely childhood and the painful, turbulent adult life that followed.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "were—I"
- **Line 3:** "saw—I"
- **Line 6:** "sorrow—I"
- **Line 8:** "lov'd—I"
- **Lines 9-9:** "Then / —in"
- **Line 9:** "childhood—in"
- **Line 10:** "life—was"

**VOCABULARY**

Childhood's Hour (Line 1) - The beginning of childhood; as far back as the speaker can recall.

Passions (Line 4) - Deep, intense feelings.

Common Spring (Line 4) - A "spring" is a natural fountain of water; here, the term is being used [metaphorically](#) to mean a shared source of feeling or meaning.

Good and Ill (Line 11) - Here, the speaker means that his experience of the world draws on intense feelings that are both wonderful, "good," and terrible, "ill."

Torrent (Line 13) - A flood, waterfall, or cataract.

Demon (Line 22) - An evil spirit or devil.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem is made up of 22 lines that form a narrow column. This shape, which resembles a singular "I," feels fitting for a poem that grapples with intense loneliness and isolation.

The poem's lines are often [enjambéd](#), flowing into each other and giving the poem a breathless momentum that suits the speaker's experience. Bound up by his stormy, poetic vision since he was a child, he feels like a leaf on the wind, at the mercy of his own imagination. The combination of these pressured lines and the poem's steady, [couplet](#)-driven [rhyme scheme](#) evokes the speaker's sense that he's the helpless prisoner of his own mind, forever isolated by his own driving visions.

METER

Generally speaking, the poem is written in [iambic](#) tetrameter. This means there are four iambs (an iamb is a foot made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, da-DUM) per line. The first three lines of the poem establish this [meter](#):

From child- | hood's hour | I have | not been
As oth- | ers were— | I have | not seen
As oth- | ers saw— | I could | not bring

However, the meter is far from consistent. For instance, line 9 starts with a [trochee](#) (a foot made up of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable, DUM-da—the exact opposite of an iamb):

*Then—*in | my child- | hood—in | the dawn

Breaking through the soothing lilt of iambs, that first trochee feels rocky and dramatic (much like the speaker's life!).

In fact, as the poem goes on, Poe uses the trochee more and more often, and the overall rhythm of the poem shifts. Take lines 13-16 for example:

From the | torrent, | or the | fountain—
From the | red cliff | of the | mountain—
From the | sun that | 'round me | roll'd
In its | autumn | tint of | gold—

Here the poem shifts into trochaic tetrameter. This pattern continues through the end of the poem, perhaps suggesting that the speaker has come to some kind of acceptance around his differences. Caught up in his own visions, he is no longer trying to march to the beat of someone else's drum.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem is written in [couplets](#), which means that its [rhymes](#)

come in pairs, like this:

AABBCCDD

There's something a little claustrophobic about this pattern of paired, lockstep rhymes. The one-two inevitability of these couplets evokes the speaker's sense that he's trapped and isolated in his own mind.

That feeling is only enhanced by the way the poem's [enjambéd](#) lines spill over, one flowing into the next: the poem's breathless momentum just keeps running into another wall of rhyme, like a mouse struggling to escape a maze.



SPEAKER

The speaker is someone who has felt profoundly different from everyone around him for as long as he can remember. He doesn't just have different beliefs or different ideas about the world, but actually sees and perceives things differently: more intensely, more imaginatively, and more terrifyingly. He feels as if he inhabits his own world, a strange and sometimes frightening place that he often wishes he could escape. He feels haunted, lonely, and deeply unhappy.

But the very things that cause him loneliness and pain also make him who he is. This speaker has a unique vision of the world that allows him to see things no one else can see. He struggles against the "mystery" of these differences, but he also takes comfort in the fact that he isn't "common." His way of experiencing the world is a curse, but it's also a blessing, giving him a sense of being fated for some higher purpose.

The poem is highly autobiographical: Poe famously had a painful childhood and was tormented by loneliness and isolation throughout his life. He was also a visionary who transformed the landscape of American literature. Both his "demons" and his gifts are on display here.



SETTING

The setting of this poem is both literal and [figurative](#): its outer landscape is also often a [metaphor](#) for the speaker's inner experience. The rushing waters and stormy skies he observes, for instance, reflect his emotional turmoil. And his powerful imagination can make a simple cloud turn into a menacing "demon." Seen through his idiosyncratic eyes, all of nature seems dramatic, full of power and danger.

The speaker even sometimes seems to become *part* of the wild landscapes he envisions. The lightning, for instance, doesn't just light up the sky: it flies past him as if *he* is in the sky, dangerously close to being struck.

In other words, even a literal landscape wouldn't stay literal very long for this speaker: everything he sees gets swallowed up by his intense imagination.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) is considered one of the parents of modern literature: a major figure not just in the United States, where he was born and lived most of his life, but all over the world. He is best known for his short stories and essays, but poetry was his first love.

Poe wrote "Alone" at the young age of twenty, but this sensitive poem already showcases the psychological intensity for which many of his best-loved stories and poems would come to be known. The mention of a "demon" in the last line, for instance, contains a hint of the horror he would later explore in famous stories like "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat."

While he's considered the "father" of horror, Poe explored a variety of genres, and his work also set the stage for later styles like realism, mystery, and science fiction. His work also influenced French [Symbolism](#) and [Surrealism](#), two movements which dramatically reshaped literature in the late 19th century.

While a variety of forms and genres can all be traced back to Poe, Poe himself was of course influenced by writers and movements before him. He was deeply indebted to the sinister stories of E.T.A. Hoffman, and to Ann Radcliffe's 18th-century Gothic romance novels. Poe's work also has roots in [Romanticism](#), the dominant poetic movement during his lifetime: the solitary, melancholic speaker of "Alone" would not be out of place amongst the likes of [Byron](#) and [Keats](#).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Poe was born to the actors David and Elizabeth Poe in 1809. David Poe abandoned his family in 1810, and less than a year later, Elizabeth Poe died of tuberculosis. In the wake of this tragedy, the young Poe and his siblings were separated, all sent to different foster families.

Poe ended up living with John and Frances Allan in Richmond, Virginia. A wealthy merchant who handled a variety of exports, John Allan also bought and sold slaves. Notably, Poe never addressed the issue of slavery in his writing, despite being active during the years leading up to the American Civil War, when abolition was a hot topic.

Poe's relationship with Frances Allan was affectionate, but overshadowed by his contentious relationship with John. Although John was a father figure to Poe growing up, the two became more and more combative as Poe grew older.

In 1826, at the age of 17, Poe attended the University of Virginia, where he at first excelled. Unfortunately, Allan was stingy with his resources, and repeatedly failed to send his foster son enough money for basic expenses. Poe tried to increase the little that he had by gambling, but this just drove him into debt, and further alienated Allan. Unable to pay his

debts, Poe quit school and in 1827 enlisted in the army, hoping to gain some independence.

Frances Allan died in 1829 after a long and painful illness. It's likely that John Allan didn't even write Poe to let him know his foster mother was sick: Poe missed her funeral, arriving the day after she was buried. Poe wrote "Alone" a few months later, likely grieving not only the loss of a second mother, but the only person in his life who had shown him any real kindness. Poe's anguish and isolation are clear in the poem—which is, for him, unusually autobiographical.

John Allan's unwillingness to provide emotional or financial support to his foster son must also have echoed Poe's earlier abandonment by his biological father. It's no wonder the speaker of "Alone" describes his life as "stormy."



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Publication History](#) — Read about the publication history of the poem, from its first appearance to the present day. (<https://www.eapoe.org/works/info/pp022.htm>)
- [The Poem Aloud](#) — Hear the poem read aloud by the actor Basil Rathbone. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4IBNbYks74>)
- [Biography and Poems](#) — Read a biography of Poe at the Poetry Foundation, and find links to more of his work. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/edgar-allan-poe>)
- [The Poe Museum](#) — Learn more about Poe's life, times, and works at the website of the Edgar Allan Poe Museum. (<https://www.poemuseum.org/who-was-edgar-allan-poe>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EDGAR ALLAN POE POEMS

- [A Dream Within a Dream](#)
- [Annabel Lee](#)



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