London Snow

POEM TEXT

When men were all asleep the snow came flying,
In large white flakes falling on the city brown,
Stealthily and perpetually settling and loosely lying,
    Hushing the latest traffic of the drowsy town;
Deadening, muffling, stifling its murmurs failing;
Lazily and incessantly floating down and down:
    Silently sifting and veiling road, roof and railing;
Hiding difference, making unevenness even,
Into angles and crevices softly drifting and sailing.
    All night it fell, and when full inches seven
It lay in the depth of its uncompacted lightness,
The clouds blew off from a high and frosty heaven;
    And all woke earlier for the unaccustomed brightness
Of the winter dawning, the strange unheavenly glare:
The eye marvelled—marvelled at the dazzling whiteness;
    The ear hearkened to the stillness of the solemn air;
No sound of wheel rumbling nor of foot falling,
And the busy morning cries came thin and spare.
    Then boys I heard, as they went to school, calling,
They gathered up the crystal manna to freeze
Their tongues with tasting, their hands with snowballing;
    Or rioted in a drift, plunging up to the knees;
Or peering up from under the white-mossed wonder,
'O look at the trees!' they cried, 'O look at the trees!'
    With lessened load a few carts creak and blunder,
Following along the white deserted way,
A country company long dispersed asunder:
    When now already the sun, in pale display
Standing by Paul's high dome, spread forth below
His sparkling beams, and awoke the stir of the day.
    For now doors open, and war is waged with the snow;
And trains of sombre men, past tale of number,
Tread long brown paths, as toward their toil they go:
    But even for them awhile no cares encumber
Their minds diverted; the daily word is unspoken,
The daily thoughts of labour and sorrow slumber
At the sight of the beauty that greets them, for the charm they have broken.

SUMMARY

The poem begins with heavy snowfall during the night, while all the citizens are sleeping. The snow's whiteness steadily covers up the brown of the city, slowly veiling and quieting all the sights and sounds of sleepy London. Though unrushed, the snowfall is persistent, and its accumulation—on roads, rooftops, and railings—levels out all of the city's irregularities.

Snow falls throughout the whole night, until seven inches of soft snow has piled up. When the morning comes, the clouds part in the cold sky, and the reflected glare of the dawn light on the snow wakes London's citizens unusually early. The Londoners gaze in wonder and awe at the snow's vivid whiteness and the serious silence that fills the air. The sounds of the city's usual morning routine—of wheels rumbling down the street, footsteps, and early chatter—have all been muffled.

The speaker then hears boys shouting on their way to school, gathering up the heavenly snow to taste it, throwing snowballs, and playing rambunctiously in the snowdrifts that come up to their knees. They look up at the snow-covered tree limbs and repeatedly call out to each other in awe. A few carts, carrying fewer things than usual, creak and thud through the empty, white streets on their way out of the city.

The pale sun rises above the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, and its shining beams herald the beginning of the day's work. As the city's workers head out of their homes, they now have to fight against the snow. Seemingly endless lines of serious-looking laborers trudge to their jobs, leaving muddy brown paths in their wake. But even these workers' burdens are lightened by the distraction of the snow. With their habitual worries laid (however briefly) to rest, the men experience a glimpse of beauty that has the power to shake them out of the hypnotized inattention of their daily lives.

THEMES

THE POWER AND FRAGILITY OF NATURE

In "London Snow," heavy snowfall transforms grimy Victorian London into alien terrain: overnight, the bustling city becomes white, quiet, crystalline, and unearthly. The snow hides "difference" and makes "unevenness even"; in other words, it makes the city look not just beautiful but perfect

and unified. The citizens respond with wonder—but their interactions with the snow quickly spoil its pristine surface; the snow offers the laboring Londoners only a momentary glimpse of a different, better world. Nature in "London Snow" is thus both fragile and powerful. The snow's unifying perfection is quickly spoiled by the grinding pressure of daily life—but the memory of that perfection remains, and has the power to break daily life's oppressive "charm."

The poem begins with snowfall in the night, unobserved by the sleeping city. The snow is unrushed but inexorable: its power is not in force, but in slow gathering. It is personified as stealthy and lazy, and presented in contrast with London's human inhabitants. It is an active force, with power and intent ("Hiding difference, making unevenness uneven"), but its unhurried transformation is very different from the pressured, grinding labors of London's citizens. As such, its work can only be perfected when humans are all asleep.

When the sun rises, the people of London awaken to a transformed landscape, and respond as a single entity. The snow enchants and unifies a normally discordant and downtrodden populace, leveling the landscape and the citizens at once. The city's population arrives in the poem as a unified body. "All woke earlier," and the city's collective "eye marvelled" and "ear hearkened." The speaker then moves into a specific perspective; an "I" appears, and observes schoolboys playing in the snow.

The schoolboys are another kind of collective body, speaking for the city in one voice ("'O look at the trees,' they cried, 'O look at the trees!'"). In their youthful wonder at and engagement with the snow—they don't just see the snow's beauty, they taste it—they embody the city's own awe and delight. The use of the schoolboys as the city's voice also speaks to the snow's rejuvenating power: the city is not just perfected by the snow, but made newly young. The snow makes the city capable of wonder and joy in the same way that schoolboys are.

Soon enough, however, daily reality inevitably emerges again as the demands of the workday mar the snow's surface. Eventually, "trains of sombre men, past tale of number / Tread long brown paths" in the snow as they emerge to make their way to work. The image is both quotidian and visionary, almost apocalyptic: the working men become an endless train of drudging marchers. Where the snow unifies the people of London, the force of society and the daily pressures of labor make them into a dehumanized mass.

But these archetypal laborers are re-humanized by their experience of the snow's beauty. Its transcendent vision of shared, unifying wonder wipes their worries away—if only for a little while. The snow is both an enchantment and the means of *breaking* an enchantment: the shining city it produces is only an impermanent illusion, but that illusion in itself has the power to break the spell of drudgery cast by the workaday Victorian industrial world.

The poem thus presents a vision that is at once realistic and idealistic. It does not shy from the painful realities of daily life, but holds out hope for a better, more harmonious world—one people can glimpse especially through the experience of natural beauty.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-37

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

When men were all asleep the snow came flying,
In large white flakes falling on the city brown,
Stealthily and perpetually settling and loosely lying,
Hushing the latest traffic of the drowsy town;

The poem begins in a landscape without human beings. The first line tells readers that "men were all asleep," a fairy-tale-like image in a big city (where, in reality, you could count on at least someone being awake all night!). This line sets the stage with a sense of mystery and enchantment, later emphasized by the speaker's description of the snow as "stealthy": this snow falls unseen by humans (and perhaps could *only* fall unseen by humans).

Much of this stanza focuses on the snow's action, describing the way the snow moves and gathers. The speaker evokes the snow's accumulation through the use of the past progressive tense (which is the technical way to describe the use of verbs ending in "-ing" in the past tense). Rather than saying that the snow "flew" or "fell," the speaker says that it came "flying," "falling," etc. The feeling of ongoing action these "-ing" verbs create suggests a steady, accumulative transformation, not an instantaneous one. The reader thus gets a private window onto a slow process that the sleeping Londoners only see all at once after the city's transformation is complete.

The snow performs three major transformations in the poem: it makes the city quiet where it was noisy, white where it was brown, and even where it was uneven. The speaker's use of alliteration and sibilance in these opening lines helps to build a picture of the smooth silent landscape the snow is creating: the softness of /s/ sounds and the regularity of repeated initial letters mimics the snow's gentle, inescapable unification of the city. In addition to sibilance, note how the frequent consonance of /w/, /l/, and /f/ sounds throughout these lines adds to their sleepy, gentle, muffled quality:

> When men were all asleep the snow came flying,
> In large white flakes falling on the city brown,
> Stealthily and perpetually settling and loosely lying,
> Hushing the latest traffic of the drowsy town;

The speaker will repeat these sounds throughout the first nine lines of the stanza. There is a great deal of assonance throughout these lines as well. Note the short /eh/, long /ee/, /ow/, /ay/, and long and short /i/ sounds:

> When men were all asleep the snow came flying,
> In large white flakes falling on the city brown,
> Stealthily and perpetually settling and loosely lying,
> Hushing the latest traffic of the drowsy town;

All together, these lines are intensely musical—filled with repetitive, incessant sounds that reflect the hypnotic nature of the falling snow.

Finally, both the snow and London are personified here and throughout the poem. The snow has agency—the ability to be "stealthy," for instance—and London is described as being "drowsy" because it is nighttime. This personification reflects the poem's thematic idea of unity, presenting both the snow and the city itself in this moment as cohesive, unified entities.

LINES 5-9

> *Deadening, muffling, stifling its murmurs failing;*
> *Lazily and incessantly floating down and down:*
> *Silently sifting and veiling road, roof and railing;*
> *Hiding difference, making unevenness even,*
> *Into angles and crevices softly drifting and sailing.*

The poem continues with its lavish use of poetic devices like asyndeton, alliteration, assonance, and sibilance. This continues to create a vivid sensory impression of the snow and the way it transforms the city.

All of the many devices that the speaker uses here help to evoke the snow's ability to make "unevenness even." The snow's magic is in its power to cover, to fill, and to level: it alters London by disguising it, making familiar things unfamiliar and turning the city's angularity to softness. As such, the language of the poem here often suggests both a covering-over and a smoothness.

For instance, the asyndeton of "Deadening, muffling, stifling" creates a piling up sensation, suggestive of the snow's accumulation. Meanwhile, the diacope in the repetition of "down and down" emphasizes the snow's irresistible and constant progress.

The persistent sibilance of these lines hushes the poem just as the snow hushes the city. Note that /f/ sounds are often characterized as sibilant as well, and here create the same effect as the many /s/ sounds: a sense of quiet and calm. The many gentle /l/ sounds and resonant /d/ sounds add to this sense of wonder and tranquility. Take a closer look at the sibilance and consonance of lines 5-7:

> Deadening, muffling, stifling its murmurs failing;
> Lazily and incessantly floating down and down:
> Silently sifting and veiling road, roof and railing;

Also take a look at what the speaker does with sound in the last line of this stanza:

> Into angles and crevices softly drifting and sailing

The hard, pointy, distinct sounds of "angles" and "crevices"—with their hard /g/ and /k/ sounds—are covered over by softness by the end of the line. The sibilance here combined with consonance of /ft/ and /ng/ sounds—"softly drifting and sailing"—mimics the snow's gentle evenness.

LINES 10-18

> *All night it fell, and when full inches seven*
> *It lay in the depth of its uncompacted lightness,*
> *The clouds blew off from a high and frosty heaven;*
> *And all woke earlier for the unaccustomed brightness*
> *Of the winter dawning, the strange unheavenly glare:*
> *The eye marvelled—marvelled at the dazzling whiteness;*
> *The ear hearkened to the stillness of the solemn air;*
> *No sound of wheel rumbling nor of foot falling,*
> *And the busy morning cries came thin and spare.*

In the second stanza, London wakes up, and readers experience its collective first sight of the snow. The speaker slowly introduces the transformed landscape in the order in which the Londoners would experience it:

1. First, there is the glaring brightness, without a clear source;
2. Then, there is the whiteness of the snow;
3. And finally, there is the quiet.

The Londoners are presented collectively, as one eye and one ear experiencing this transformation. This use of synecdoche reveals that the snow has united the city dwellers in their wonder.

The epizeuxis and caesura of "marvelled—marvelled" both emphasize this wonder, and give a hint of the Londoners' behavior: you can see a double-take in this quick repetition separated by a dash of disbelief.

Also note how the words "uncompacted" and "unheavenly" in this stanza make room for their opposites. It's the "don't think of an elephant" principle: these two "un-" words suggest that the snow *will* one day be compacted—and that the "heavenly" is certainly in the room, even if the snow's light is strangely reflected upward from the Earth. (The use of the word "heaven" to mean the sky in line 12 further supports the idea that the snow has something supernatural or holy about it.)

"Unaccustomed," meanwhile, does a related but inverted job, reminding readers of the Londoners' day-to-day lives—a theme that will return at the end of the poem. The London to which

these citizens are accustomed is gone, but not for long.

Similarly, the usual world is evoked here by negatives. In lines 17 and 18, the reader is told what London *usually* sounds like through what it *doesn't* sound like now—and what it usually sounds like is the rumble of commerce. There is "No sound of wheel nor of foot falling," and while the morning is typically filled with people shouting, the "busy morning cries" now are "thin and spare." Readers are told what the world might usually sound like so that they can fully appreciate the strangeness of the quiet.

LINES 19-24

Then boys I heard, as they went to school, calling,
They gathered up the crystal manna to freeze
Their tongues with tasting, their hands with snowballing;
Or rioted in a drift, plunging up to the knees;
Or peering up from under the white-mossed wonder,
'O look at the trees!' they cried, 'O look at the trees!'

After the second section's introduction of Londoners as a collective group—all with one "eye" and one "ear"—the poem moves into a more specific perspective. For the only time in the poem, the speaker becomes an "I," and this "I" sees and hears schoolboys in the street below. The introduction of a specific perspective lends great warmth to the portrayal of the schoolboys: the speaker's evocative description suggests a shared sense of pleasure in, or even identification with, these children.

Where the previous stanzas focus on sight and sound, the schoolboys here immerse themselves in the snow with all of their senses. Notice how the *cold* of the snow hasn't appeared until this moment; it's as if watching the boys helps the *speaker* to experience the snow with the *speaker's* whole body. Strong verbs like "snowballing" and "rioted," meanwhile, give a sense of the boys' uproarious energy. The use of enjambment here, carrying ideas over multiple lines, also helps to convey the lively momentum of their play:

> They gathered up the crystal manna to freeze
> Their tongues with tasting ...

The snow's magic is made visible through metaphor in this stanza. Called "crystal manna" and "white-mossed wonder," the snow is presented as both mystical (manna was a miraculous food that fell from heaven in the biblical book of Exodus) and organic.

Though they're more distinctly drawn, the boys, like the unspecified Londoners of the past stanzas, still act as one body. This is especially evident in line 24, when—in the only moment of quoted speech in the poem—they all cry, "O look at the trees!" The repetition of these exact spoken words suggests not only a shared wonder, but ongoing time, giving readers a picture of the speaker looking on as many boys go past, all brought *together* in the same exclamation by their shared delight.

The musicality noted in the previous sections continues here. Alliteration, assonance, consonance, and sibilance continue to serve their roles as melody-makers and snow-imitators. Take the quick, delicate /t/ of "tongues with tasting," which indeed evokes the sensation of catching a snowflake on the tongue, and the /w/ of "white-mossed wonder"—an open sound that pulls readers' attention to this wondrous phrase.

The alternation of masculine and feminine endings here also helps to create a pleasant rhythm. Feminine endings include the final, unstressed sounds of "calling" and "snowballing." These alternate with the more percussive, stressed endings of "freeze," "knees," and "trees."

LINES 25-27

With lessened load a few carts creak and blunder,
Following along the white deserted way,
A country company long dispersed asunder:

In these lines the poem pulls back from the particular characters of the watching "I" and the frolicking boys into another more generalized segment of society: the carts making their way through the city, following a long-gone "country company." The carts here are not just carts, but a metonym for their drivers, a first hint at the image of mechanized workers that will become so prominent and important by the end of the poem.

The word "country" is notable here, standing in contrast with the relentlessly urban landscape of London. That the "country company" that the carts follow is "long dispersed asunder" suggests a lost rural past, perhaps one that the industrialized city might be reminded of through the natural beauty of the snow. The carts seem both to *follow* this ghostly company and, in some strange way, to *be* the company itself.

The carts are said to have "lessened loads," but also to "blunder": the day-to-day mechanical and commercial activity of the city is made less burdensome by the snow, and also stymied by it. The snow doesn't just make the city look different and sound different, but changes London's very functioning.

The alliteration and consonance of this section draws readers' attention to important phrases. The gentle /l/ sounds of "lessened loads" evokes the way that these loads are easier to carry, while the hard /k/ of "carts [that] creak" and the "country company" adds a sense of harshness to images associated with labor.

LINES 28-30

When now already the sun, in pale display
Standing by Paul's high dome, spread forth below
His sparkling beams, and awoke the stir of the day.

With its three clearly enjambed lines in a row, the final section

of the poem marks a major transition point. The sun rises fully, dividing the un-preservable enchantment of the early morning from the inevitability of the working day.

The enjambment of these lines helps to give readers a sense of the inescapable onward pull of time. Much as it does in the earlier lines about the frolicking boys, the enjambment here suggests continuous motion—this time, toward the end of the magic world the snow has created.

The rising sun is said to stand by the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral—a building with a huge symbolic meaning for London, as both one of its major monuments and its traditional religious heart. The juxtaposition of the general, heavenly, celestial power of the sun and the specific, local, concrete (yet still mystical) power of St. Paul's suggests two related but contrasting forces: nature and society. These are at odds throughout the poem.

The "stir" of the day is different than the marvel of the early-waking Londoners; the word "stir" helps to give the reader an image not only of gathering activity, but of the physical *disturbance* of the snow as people begin to make their accustomed way to work in the next lines.

LINES 31-33

For now doors open, and war is waged with the snow;
And trains of sombre men, past tale of number,
Tread long brown paths, as toward their toil they go:

Where the Londoners were at first united in wonder upon seeing all the snow, they are now crushed by the pressures of day-to-day habits and labor.

The description of the workers is almost apocalyptic, like something out of the frenzied visionary work of another famous London poet, William Blake. The hyperbole of "past tale of number" gives readers an image of an impossibly long trail of workers, all slogging along as if chained together. There's also a sinister implication in the speaker's description of the workers as a "train": while "train" can simply mean a line, it also carries a mechanical subtext that suggests the workers have been robbed of their humanity.

The passive voice in "doors open, and war is waged" further supports the sense that the workers are driven by some force beyond their own wishes. Similarly, "war is waged" with the snow is hardly a neutral description of folks getting out their shovels and their road salt. This charged language suggests that the Londoners have been forced into a position of genuine violence: not only can they not stop to enjoy the snow's beauty, they must actively fight against it.

In these lines, the poem's persistent use of assonance and consonance begins to serve anxious purposes. For instance, consider line 31:

For now doors open, and war is waged with the snow

This creates a forceful wall of linked sounds, like the workers charging out as one to begin to beat the snow back. Here, readers see a different kind of unity: not the beautiful shared experience of the snow, but the depressing force of day-to-day life, which squashes identities rather than bringing them together in a common experience.

LINES 34-37

But even for them awhile no cares encumber
Their minds diverted; the daily word is unspoken,
The daily thoughts of labour and sorrow slumber
At the sight of the beauty that greets them, for the charm
they have broken.

"Broken," the last word of the poem, reflects a complicated idea. Readers have just seen the beauty of the snow "broken" by the harsh reality of everyday life, but the "broken" here refers to the "charm"—that is, the pressure of habits, customs, and repetition that numbs the workers to beauty in the first place. The idea that this numbness created by urban life is its *own* kind of spell, broken briefly by the strange loveliness of the snow, underlies the whole poem: the snow gives the downtrodden citizens the momentary ability to see beauty in their daily lives, and that spell-breaking can, for a little while, be carried with them, even after the snow is inevitably spoiled.

The word "broken" also breaks the poem's established chain of *terza rima*. By its nature, *terza rima* can go on forever (see the "Rhyme" section for a full explanation), making it a good choice for a poem about a glimpse of a beauty that, while fragile on earth, seems to touch something eternal. But the poem, like the snow, must end. This final line also carries on much longer than any that has come before it, breaking out of the verse's lilting, hypnotic rhythms.

SYMBOLS

SNOW

Snow is a complex symbol in the poem, representing both nature at large—in its power and in its fragility—and a transcendent ideal of life and unity.

The snow's strength, in the poem, is presented in contrast with human ideas of power and labor. It does not use force to achieve its overwhelming effects, but rather a steady, stealthy accumulation. Yet its gentleness has the capacity to utterly transform London. The snow also presents a vision of an unstained world. The speaker's emphasis on its whiteness suggests purity. And the London the citizens first see under the snow is not just beautiful, but unspoiled—as is made painfully clear when the workers begin to tread the snow into the mud and the usual "brown" paths reemerge. In these qualities, the snow stands for all of nature: a leveling, unifying, beautiful

power that is nevertheless all too easily scarred by brute human force.

The snow's ability to unite what seemed different also has a mystical edge as well, as readers can see when it's described as "manna" and a "wonder." In covering the city in an even blanket, "hiding differences" and bringing the citizens together in shared joy, the snow paradoxically represents something that's usually buried under day-to-day life: a transcendent human unity.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-9:** "the / came flying, / In large white flakes falling on the city brown, / Stealthily and perpetually settling and loosely lying, / Hushing the latest traffic of the drowsy town; / Deadening, muffling, stifling its murmurs failing; / Lazily and incessantly floating down and down: / Silently sifting and veiling road, roof and railing; / , / Into angles and crevices softly drifting and sailing."
- **Line 1:** "snow"
- **Line 8:** "Hiding difference, making unevenness even"
- **Lines 10-12:** "All night it fell, and when full inches seven / It lay in the depth of its uncompacted lightness, / The clouds blew off from a high and frosty heaven;"
- **Line 15:** "the dazzling whiteness"
- **Line 20:** "crystal manna"
- **Line 21:** "snowballing"
- **Line 22:** "a drift, plunging up to the knees"
- **Line 23:** "white-mossed wonder"
- **Line 26:** "the white deserted way"
- **Line 31:** "war is waged with the snow"

WORKERS

The poem's vision of an endless toiling line of workers presents the plight not only of the downtrodden Victorian laborer, but of humanity—and perhaps of urban life itself—as a whole. Caught up in thoughtless repetition, distracted by their own cares, and kept busy by inhumane societal demands, urban human beings become unable to see the world's great and unifying beauty.

The speaker's use of the word "trains" is particularly interesting. This represents the line of workers not only as lengthy, but homogenous, and almost mechanical. In effect, this dehumanizes the workers—making them mere cogs in a machine. This image raises particular Victorian concerns about the effects of the Industrial Revolution on the soul.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 32-33:** "And trains of sombre men, past tale of number, / Tread long brown paths, as toward their toil they go:"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration in "London Snow" often supports the poem's themes of unification—for better and for worse. In a poem that's interested in how a busy, noisy city is brought together in shared delight, alliteration helps to create connections between unlike things. It often also mimics the physical qualities of the things it's used to describe.

For instance, in the first stanza of the poem, repeated soft sounds—/s/, /f/, /l/, /m/—help to evoke the softness, lightness, and muted nature of the snow. (Note that the words "soft," "light," and "muted" all use those very letters!) Take phrases like "flakes falling" and "Silently sifting." This pattern of soft-voiced alliteration reappears throughout the poem, reliably appearing wherever the snow is described.

Within all this softness, harder alliteration is used to describe the physical components of the city: for instance, in line 7, where "road, roof and railing" are all veiled by the snow. The repeated /r/ sound here contrasts with the gentle, quiet sounds attached to the snow, helping to establish both the city's literal and metaphorical roughness and to pull the city together as one conglomeration of human-made structures.

Alliteration also helps to give a shared identity to the "country company" (line 27), and to the laborers at the end of the poem:

> trains of sombre men, past tale of number,
> Tread long brown paths, as toward their toil

The hard repeated /t/ sounds mimic the repetitive rhythm of their trudge to work.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When," "were," "flying"
- **Line 2:** "flakes falling"
- **Line 3:** "Stealthily," "settling," "loosely lying"
- **Line 4:** "latest," "traffic," "drowsy," "town"
- **Line 5:** "Deadening," "muffling," "murmurs," "failing"
- **Line 6:** "floating," "down," "down"
- **Line 7:** "Silently sifting," "road," "roof," "railing"
- **Line 9:** "softly," "sailing"
- **Line 10:** "fell," "full"
- **Line 16:** "stillness," "solemn"
- **Line 17:** "sound," "foot falling"
- **Line 18:** "cries came"
- **Line 21:** "tongues," "tasting"
- **Line 23:** "white," "wonder"
- **Line 25:** "lessened load"
- **Line 26:** "white," "way"
- **Line 27:** "country company"

- **Line 28:** "sun," "display"
- **Line 29:** "Standing," "dome," "spread"
- **Line 30:** "sparkling," "stir," "day"
- **Line 31:** "war," "waged," "snow"
- **Line 32:** "trains," "sombre," "tale"
- **Line 33:** "Tread," "toward," "toil"
- **Line 35:** "diverted," "daily"
- **Line 36:** "sorrow slumber"

SIBILANCE

The poem's myriad hushed /s/ sounds, like many of the other kinds of sonic repetitions already discussed in this guide, evoke the mystical quietness of the snow. Inherently soft (try it—you can't yell a hiss!), sibilance also suggests the snow's lightness and delicacy. The particular prominence of sibilance here is appropriate for a poem about a city getting covered up in snow: the /s/ sound that begins "snow" itself falls like flakes all over the poem's terrain. In this liberal scattering of /s/ sounds, it's almost easier to point out the places in the poem where sibilance *doesn't* appear. It begins to diminish in the last few lines—appropriately, as the trains of men begin to tread their "long brown paths" into the snow. But the return of pronounced sibilance in line 36 suggests that while the snow itself is starting to fade, the memory of its transformation remains.

Perhaps most notably, the last line of the poem contains only one sibilant link to the parade of /s/ sounds before it, replacing the sound of the impermanent snow with the charm-breaking power of its remembered beauty. That charm-breaking is driven home with emphatic alliterative /b/ sounds.

The poem also uses lots of /f/, /z/, /th/, and /sh/ sounds, which are sometimes, though not always, considered to be a kind of sibilance as well. We've marked many such words as sibilant in this guide because they are *so* common and *so* important to the poem's sound. Sibilance, like many devices, is ultimately subjective, and what's important is paying attention to how these sounds reinforce the tone of certain phrases and lines in the poem. Regardless of their exact categorization, these sounds add to the poem's gentleness and to its quiet sense of reverence for the snow.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "asleep," "snow," "flying"
- **Line 2:** "flakes falling," "city"
- **Line 3:** "Stealthily," "settling," "loosely"
- **Line 4:** "Hushing," "latest," "traffic," "drowsy"
- **Line 5:** "muffling," "stifling," "its," "murmurs," "failing"
- **Line 6:** "Lazily," "incessantly," "floating"
- **Line 7:** "Silently," "sifting," "roof"
- **Line 8:** "difference," "unevenness"
- **Line 9:** "angles," "crevices ," "softly," "drifting," "sailing"
- **Line 10:** "fell," "full," "inches," "seven"
- **Line 11:** "the," "depth," "its," "lightness"
- **Line 12:** "The," "clouds," "off," "from," "frosty"
- **Line 13:** "unaccustomed," "brightness"
- **Line 15:** "dazzling," "whiteness"
- **Line 16:** "stillness," "solemn"
- **Line 17:** "sound," "foot falling"
- **Line 18:** "busy," "cries," "thin," "spare"
- **Line 19:** "Then," "boys," "as," "they," "school"
- **Line 20:** "They," "gathered," "the," "crystal," "freeze"
- **Line 21:** "Their," "tongues," "with," "tasting," "their," "hands," "with," "snowballing"
- **Line 25:** "lessened," "few," "carts"
- **Line 26:** "Following," "deserted"
- **Line 27:** "dispersed," "asunder"
- **Line 28:** "sun," "display"
- **Line 29:** "Standing," "Paul's," "spread," "forth"
- **Line 30:** "His," "sparkling," "beams," "stir"
- **Line 31:** "with the," "snow"
- **Line 32:** "trains," "sombre," "past"
- **Line 33:** "paths," "as"
- **Line 35:** "unspoken"
- **Line 36:** "sorrow," "slumber"
- **Line 37:** "sight"

CONSONANCE

Consonance, like its cousins alliteration and assonance, helps to subtly weave lines together—and, also like alliteration and assonance, it's used very liberally in this poem. For one thing, as noted in this guide's discussion of sibilance, the poem relies on lots of soft, gentle sounds to create a quiet, reverent tone. In addition to the /s/, /z/, /th/, /f/, and /sh/ sounds previously discussed in the aforementioned sibilance entry, note how many /l/ sounds pervade these lines. Take lines 1 to 3 alone:

> When men were all asleep the snow came flying,
> In large white flakes falling on the city brown,
> Stealthily and perpetually settling and loosely lying,

The /l/ sound is very gentle, and in addition to adding a sense of cohesiveness to these lines, it evokes the calmness and beauty initially created by the falling snow. In general, the repeated internal sounds created through consonance help to create melody and represent the snow's leveling and uniting powers. Shared sounds reflect the work of the snow itself: consonance literally "Hid[es] difference" and makes "unevenness even."

On a similar note, it's also worth observing how consonance solves some poetic difficulties. For example, when the poet matches "even" with "seven" and "heaven," using the consonance of the "ven" sound rather than an actual *rhyme*, he doesn't just find an easy way out of the problem with writing

terza rima in English (there aren't enough rhyme words—certainly not as many as there are in *terza rima*'s originating Italian!). This moment of consonance also works with the poem's themes, uniting disparate sounds just as the snow unites the disparate people of London.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When," "were," "all," "asleep," "snow," "flying"
- **Line 2:** "large," "white," "flakes," "falling," "city," "brown"
- **Line 3:** "Stealthily," "perpetually," "settling," "loosely," "lying"
- **Line 4:** "latest," "traffic," "drowsy," "town"
- **Line 5:** "Deadening," "muffling," "stifling," "its," "murmurs," "failing"
- **Line 6:** "Lazily," "incessantly," "floating," "down," "and," "down"
- **Line 7:** "Silently," "sifting," "veiling," "road," "roof," "railing"
- **Line 8:** "Hiding," "difference," "unevenness," "even"
- **Line 9:** "crevices," "softly," "drifting," "sailing"
- **Line 10:** "All," "fell," "full," "inches," "seven"
- **Line 11:** "lay," "uncompacted," "lightness"
- **Line 12:** "clouds," "blew," "off," "from," "high," "frosty," "heaven"
- **Line 13:** "woke," "unaccustomed," "brightness"
- **Line 14:** "winter," "dawning," "unheavenly," "glare"
- **Line 15:** "marvelled," "marvelled," "dazzling," "whiteness"
- **Line 16:** "stillness," "solemn"
- **Line 17:** "sound," "wheel," "rumbling," "foot," "falling"
- **Line 18:** "cries," "came," "spare"
- **Line 19:** "school," "calling"
- **Line 20:** "crystal"
- **Line 21:** "Their," "tongues," "with," "tasting," "snowballing"
- **Line 22:** "rioted," "drift," "plunging"
- **Line 23:** "peering," "up," "white," "wonder"
- **Line 24:** "look," "trees," "cried," "look," "trees"
- **Line 25:** "carts," "creak"
- **Line 26:** "white," "deserted," "way"
- **Line 27:** "country company," "dispersed," "asunder"
- **Line 28:** "sun," "pale," "display"
- **Line 29:** "Standing," "Paul's," "dome," "spread," "below"
- **Line 30:** "sparkling," "beams," "awoke," "stir," "day"
- **Line 31:** "war," "waged," "with," "snow"
- **Line 32:** "trains," "sombre," "men," "past," "tale"
- **Line 33:** "Tread," "paths," "toward," "their," "toil," "they"
- **Line 34:** "cares," "encumber"
- **Line 35:** "diverted," "daily," "word," "unspoken"
- **Line 36:** "daily," "labour," "sorrow," "slumber"
- **Line 37:** "sight," "beauty," "broken"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is a subtle way to bind words together within or across lines. Making links through internal vowels rather than the more pronounced similarity of alliteration or sibilance, it lends the poem a quiet musicality.

"London Snow" makes frequent use of assonance, often weaving complex patterns of sound across lines. To take just one example from a first stanza that's laden with assonance, lines 7-10 repeat a soft /ih/ sound across "sifting," "difference," "crevices," and "drifting"—appropriately, since these three lines describe "hiding difference, making unevenness even," exactly the action that these patterns of sound help to evoke.

Assonance also sometimes mirrors the unification of the poem's people. The assonance in "drowsy town" and "country company" helps to create a sense of gentle linkage across differences: the people of the city all drowsing together, the carts of the country as a gathered "company." Similarly, the assonance across "marvelled" and "hearkened" suggests a holistic sensory reaction to the snow, linking eye and ear: the Londoners are caught up in a full-body wonder.

The lavish use of assonance in this poem creates a lilting and continuous melodiousness. The interweaving vowel sounds help not only to evoke the snow's level evenness and the people's unity, but the beauty of these unifications.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When," "men," "all"
- **Line 2:** "falling"
- **Line 3:** "Stealthily," "perpetually," "settling"
- **Line 4:** "drowsy town"
- **Line 5:** "Deadening," "muffling," "stifling," "its," "failing"
- **Line 6:** "Lazily," "incessantly," "floating"
- **Line 7:** "Silently," "sifting," "veiling," "road," "railing"
- **Line 8:** "Hiding," "difference," "making," "unevenness," "even"
- **Line 9:** "Into," "crevices," "drifting," "sailing"
- **Line 10:** "fell," "when," "seven"
- **Line 11:** "depth," "uncompacted," "lightness"
- **Line 12:** "high"
- **Line 13:** "brightness"
- **Line 15:** "marvelled," "marvelled," "whiteness"
- **Line 16:** "hearkened"
- **Line 20:** "gathered," "manna"
- **Line 22:** "knees"
- **Line 23:** "peering," "up," "under," "wonder"
- **Line 24:** "trees," "trees"
- **Line 25:** "blunder"
- **Line 26:** "Following," "along," "deserted"
- **Line 27:** "country company," "dispersed," "asunder"
- **Line 28:** "sun," "pale," "display"
- **Line 29:** "by," "high," "dome," "below"
- **Line 30:** "awoke"
- **Line 31:** "doors," "war," "waged"
- **Line 32:** "trains," "tale"
- **Line 33:** "toward," "toil"
- **Line 34:** "awhile"

- **Line 35:** “minds”
- **Line 36:** “thoughts,” “sorrow”

PERSONIFICATION

Though the poem only uses a touch of personification—calling the snow stealthy and lazy, deeming the town drowsy, and referring to the sun with human pronouns—those few words have a big effect. By giving the snow, sun, and city a touch of personality, these words contribute to the sense that this natural phenomenon has its own mysterious purposes, and this town its own life.

The snow's stealth and laziness also contrast with the driven labor of waking London; the power of nature, here, is very different from the power of humankind. The snow's tremendous transformation comes not from aggression, force, or other more familiar forms of power, but from a quiet, unhurried, almost offhand process. Later, the sun is granted a sense of almost god-like power, "Standing" by the dome of St. Paul's and waking up the city's inhabitants with "His sparkling beams."

Personification here hints that the transformation the snow effects on the city is not just any old weather event, but a vision with a message. It helps to emphasize the poem's ultimate conclusion: that there are other ways to experience life than through the lens of habit and toil.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “Stealthily and perpetually settling and loosely lying”
- **Line 4:** “the drowsy town”
- **Line 6:** “Lazily and incessantly floating down and down”
- **Lines 28-30:** “When now already the sun, in pale display / Standing by Paul’s high dome, spread forth below / His sparkling beams, and awoke the stir of the day.”

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment often appears in this poem at moments of surprise or change. At the beginning of the poem, the lines are largely self-contained, each describing a distinct action of the snow. Fittingly, the first nine lines of the poem are all end-stopped. When enjambment first appears at lines 10-11 and 13-14, it heralds a new event: the awakening of the city.

Here's a closer look at lines 10-11:

> All night it fell, and when full inches seven
> It lay ...

And then at lines 13-14:

> And all woke earlier for the unaccustomed
> brightness
> Of the winter dawning ...

Enjambment appears again at lines 20-21, where it supports the feeling of the boys' liveliness ("... to free / Their tongues ..."). The energy of the sentence, spilling over from line to line, has a continuous momentum that is like the boys' play.

Enjambments also begin and end the final stanza of the poem. At lines 28-30, they mark the moment when the sun calls the citizens out to work, again imitating a new kind of continuing action.

Perhaps most significantly, three of the last four of the poem are enjambed:

> But even for them awhile no cares encumber
> Their minds diverted; the daily word is unspoken,
> The daily thoughts of labour and sorrow slumber
> At the sight ...

The enjambment here both breaks ideas across lines and unifies these final lines with one continuous idea, reflecting the poem's images of unification and of charm-breaking. The continuity of one sentence across the final lines of the poem here changes the poem's rhythm, sweeping the reader up in a final feeling of complicated hope.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** “seven / It”
- **Lines 13-14:** “brightness / Of”
- **Lines 20-21:** “freeze / Their”
- **Lines 28-29:** “display / Standing”
- **Lines 29-30:** “below / His”
- **Lines 34-35:** “encumber / Their”
- **Lines 36-37:** “slumber / At”

ASYNDETON

As is often the case with the devices this poem uses, asyndeton helps to emphasize the physical action of the snow. In line 5, for instance, synonyms accumulate as the snow accumulates on London. These three words—"Deadening, muffling, stifling"—all describe ways in which the snow quiets the city, and the lack of conjunctions in the sentence supports the sensation of being "muffled." Asyndeton often creates a sort of piling up effect, which, here and throughout the poem, reflects the action of the snow itself. The sense of accumulation that asyndeton provides helps to create feelings of being overwhelmed, of voluminousness and energy. For instance, in line 14, it's used in describing the glare of light reflecting off the snow, suggesting the intensity of the brightness:

> Of the winter dawning, the strange unheavenly glare:

The boys' riotous play in line 21 similarly gains some of its momentum from asyndeton:

> Their tongues with tasting, their hands with snowballing;

It's as if there's no time for contractions; there are snowballs to be thrown!

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Deadening, muffling, stifling"
- **Lines 8-9:** "Hiding difference, making unevenness even, / Into angles and crevices softly drifting and sailing."
- **Line 14:** "the winter dawning, the strange unheavenly glare"
- **Line 21:** "Their tongues with tasting, their hands with snowballing"
- **Lines 35-36:** " the daily word is unspoken, / The daily thoughts of labour and sorrow slumber"

CAESURA

The frequent use of caesura in "London Snow" contributes to the poem's lilting, swinging rhythms. Often appearing alongside the poem's enjambments, the caesurae serve a similar purpose: they help to emphasize moments of change or of marvel.

Many of the caesurae in this poem are simple commas, creating only gentle breaks or slowing down the reader's pace. For instance, the commas of "Deadening, muffling, stifling" in line 5 create a swinging, drifting rhythm that mimics the snow's movement.

But a stronger caesura appears at the semicolon in line 35:

> Their minds diverted; the daily word is unspoken,

Here, a more intense division in the middle of the line sets the reader up for the climactic punch of the poem's last ideas about how the snow momentarily shakes Londoners out of their daily stupor.

Caesura can help to frame important moments for particular attention, and here it sometimes works alongside other punchy devices like epizeuxis. For instance, in line 15, there's a caesura at the dash between the repetitions of "marvelled" which helps the reader to feel the intensity of the moment of wonder. A similar break and repetition happens in line 24, when the pause to describe the boys' voices divides their two identical cries of "O look at the trees!" (See the entry on repetition for further discussion of these lines.)

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Deadening, muffling, stifling"
- **Line 8:** "difference, making"
- **Line 10:** "fell, and"
- **Line 14:** "dawning, the"
- **Line 15:** "marvelled—marvelled"
- **Line 19:** "heard, as," "school, calling,"
- **Line 21:** "tasting, their"
- **Line 22:** "drift, plunging"
- **Line 24:** "trees!' they cried, 'O"
- **Line 28:** "sun, in"
- **Line 29:** "dome, spread"
- **Line 30:** "beams, and"
- **Line 31:** "open, and"
- **Line 32:** "men, past"
- **Line 33:** "paths, as"
- **Line 35:** "diverted; the"
- **Line 37:** "them, for"

IMAGERY

This poem is almost one long image: it is, after all, about a new kind of seeing the world. From the simplicity of color-related words in line 2 (the "large white flakes" and "city brown"), to the "strange unheavenly glare" of line 14, to the "trains of sombre men, past tale of number" in line 32, "London Snow" is concerned with giving readers an intense picture of a transformation. As such, it is overflowing with lush imagery.

While it leans most heavily on sight and sound, the poem also uses sensory imagery related to taste and touch in the description of the frolicking schoolboys (lines 19-22). Smell is the *only* sense Bridges doesn't use in his setting of this scene—which in itself is an evocative choice, as snow has a way of *muting* smells.

The only place the consistent texture of imagery breaks is at the very end of the poem, when the speaker looks into the minds of the laborers going to work. This change reflects what it describes. The transformative snow, so lavishly pictured above, is now in the process of fading away, and the poem thus begins to move into what remains: the internal effect its beauty has on the laborers, even if its physical presence can only be temporary.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-9
- Lines 11-16
- Lines 17-18
- Lines 19-23
- Lines 25-26
- Lines 28-30
- Lines 31-33

REPETITION

Repetition in the poem—specifically the punchy, quick repetition of diacope and epizeuxis—emphasizes moments of surprise and wonder. For example, the repetition (technically epizeuxis) of the word "marvelled" in line 15 reflects the almost unbelieving nature of this marvel: there's a double-take built into this line. In this instance, the dash between the two instances of "marvelled" helps to bring even more attention to the repetition, suggesting a space in which the observers looking out onto the snow are wonder-struck, maybe even struck dumb. (See the entry on caesura for further discussion of how repetition and caesura work together in these lines.)

The boys' repeated cry in line 24 of "O look at the trees!" does similar work, helping readers to feel the children's awe and delight. They're so excited that they quickly repeat themselves, adding emphasis to their sense of wonder and appreciation for the snow-covered trees. The repetition brings out the shared joy of the experience. The anaphora of "Or" in this section of the poem, meanwhile, adds to the general feeling of abundance by suggesting that there are many different ways that the children can play in/appreciate the snow.

And, yet again, "London Snow" uses a poetic device to do a bit of snow-mimicking: the repetition of "down and down" in line 6 gives readers a sense of the volume and ceaselessness of the falling snow in the night. Later, the repetition of "the daily" in lines 35 and 36 emphasizes the regular monotony of urban life before the snowfall.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "down and down"
- **Line 15:** "marvelled—marvelled"
- **Line 22:** "Or"
- **Line 23:** "Or"
- **Line 24:** "'O look at the trees!' they cried, 'O look at the trees!'"
- **Lines 35-36:** "the / word is unspoken, / The / thoughts"
- **Line 35:** "daily"
- **Line 36:** "daily"

VOCABULARY

Perpetually (Line 3) - Constantly or unchangingly.

Stifling (Line 5) - Restraining or smothering.

Incessantly (Line 6) - Continuously, without stopping.

Veiling (Line 7) - Draping or covering, as with a veil.

Crevices (Line 9) - Narrow cracks or openings.

Uncompacted (Line 11) - Not packed together or pressed down. The use of "uncompacted" here foreshadows the snow's eventual fate; "uncompacted" has "compacted" within it.

Hearkened (Line 16) - Listened. This archaic term gives a sense of importance or gravity to the Londoners' listening.

Solemn (Line 16) - Dignified or serious.

Manna (Line 20) - In the Book of Exodus in the Bible, manna is the heavenly food miraculously supplied to the fleeing Israelites. More generally, "manna" is used to mean any kind of spiritual nourishment or blessing—sometimes metaphorically, as in the common phrase "manna from heaven."

White-mossed (Line 23) - An image of the snow covering the trees' branches as thickly as moss might.

Dispersed (Line 27) - Spread out over a large area; separated or scattered.

Asunder (Line 27) - Apart or divided.

Paul's high dome (Line 29) - The dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, a major London landmark. St. Paul's stands on the northern bank of the river Thames.

Sombre (Line 32) - Gloomy or solemn, either in mood or appearance. The word comes from the Latin for "shadow."

Past tale of number (Line 32) - Uncountable. Bridges is here using hyperbole to give a sense both of London's huge population and the grinding pressure of their daily labor.

Toil (Line 33) - Labor or work. "Toil" has an especially negative sense, implying difficult or exhausting work.

Encumber (Line 34) - To burden or weigh down.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

While "London Snow" does not use a named poetic form (it's not an ode or a sonnet, for example), its shape does reflect its content. Using a lengthy and unbroken sequence of lines of roughly equal length, the poem's smooth surface mimics the evenness of the snow it describes.

The poem doesn't space out its stanzas, but it does contain thematic division points hidden at regular intervals. The poem's use of *terza rima*, with its weaving one-two-three waltz-pattern of rhymes, means that the poem divides into three groupings of nine lines each, and a final one of ten lines:

1. The first group describes the accumulation of snow overnight.
2. The second describes Londoners then waking up to the snow and taking in the surreal sense of calm and silence.
3. The third describes people actually interacting with the snow joyfully before it's spoiled.
4. And the fourth describes the day resuming as normal, with people trudging through the snow on the way to work and, in doing so, destroying its

beauty.

The concluding tenth line of this fourth section does what it describes: it breaks the pattern. It literally disrupts the rhyme scheme, and it also breaks up the relatively steady line lengths in being much longer than any other line in the poem. To emphasize this, the line even uses "broken" as its final word.

METER

The poem's meter is irregular. For instance, the first line of the poem seems to be in straightforward iambic pentameter. This means that there are five iambs per line, for a total of ten syllables (an iamb is a poetic foot with an unstressed-stressed, or da DUM, beat pattern:

When men were all asleep the snow came flying,

Already things aren't perfect though, since there's a dangling, unstressed syllable at the end (technically called a feminine ending). And almost immediately, the speaker breaks this pattern. Take line 2:

In large white flakes falling on the city brown,

While it's possible to read differently, there are clearly additional stresses in this line. These add emphasis to the snow itself—with the triple stress of "large white flakes"—as well as their action—"falling." The trochee (stressed-unstressed) of "falling" in fact echoes the action itself, as the word seems to descend from the high of "fal-" to the softness of "-ling."

There are many trochees and spondees (stressed-stressed, as in "white flakes" above) throughout the poem. The speaker's use of meter thus seems likely influenced by the experimental technique of Bridges's friend and fellow poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins. Hopkins was the mastermind of something called "sprung rhythm," which, very simply put, is a meter in which feet usually consist of a stressed syllable followed by up to four unstressed syllables. The basics units of sprung rhythm are trochees and spondees, and it's meant to sound like natural speech. Something like sprung rhythm can be seen in line 3:

Stealthily and perpetually settling and loosely lying,

And again line 7:

Silently sifting and veiling road, roof and railing;

This meter—with its initial stressed beats seeming to cover those that follow, DUM da da—mirrors the work of the snow as it covers the city. Rather than using the steady rhythmic pulse of iambic pentameter, with its regular peaks and troughs, the poem's mixture of stresses gives the lines a gentle, lilting feel that reflects the swirling and falling of the snow.

RHYME SCHEME

"London Snow" is written in terza rima, a rhyme scheme invented and popularized by the great medieval Italian poet Dante Alighieri (c. 1265-1321). Terza rima is an interlocking pattern of three rhyme words that runs:

ABA BCB CDC DED

...and so on. It's a relatively rare rhyme scheme in English, as English has far fewer rhyming words than Italian and the other Romance languages (as readers can see when Bridges rhymes "even" with "seven" and "heaven" in lines 8, 10, and 12).

The speaker's use of terza rima supports the poem's theme of nature's power, harmony, and unity—and its fragility. A poem in terza rima doesn't have a natural stopping point, but can go on indefinitely. Bridges chooses to end his poem on the word "broken," emphasizing both the snow's power to break the "charm" of daily routine and its impermanence.

Bridges may also have used terza rima to make a connection with Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where the rhyme scheme's infinite dance of threes serves as an image of the relationship of the Holy Trinity and the joys of heaven. The snow's perfect unity can't last on Earth, but alongside the use of terza rima, Bridges's references to St. Paul's cathedral and manna raise the possibility of less fleeting perfections in a Christian afterlife.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "London Snow" is both omniscient and specific. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker seems to have the power to perceive the snow's action during the night, though "men were all asleep." But in the middle of the poem, the speaker becomes an "I," who can hear schoolboys in the street. This makes the speaker feel like a specific character, a single resident of London. By the poem's end,however, the speaker's perspective has again broadened out, and the speaker talks with authority of the shared thoughts and feelings of the men walking to work.

The speaker at once shares London's general joy, and stands apart, observing this all. The speaker is deeply moved by both the unifying beauty of the snow and the sorrows of daily life in London. By keeping the speaker's identity vague and nonspecific, the poem allows readers to find *themselves* in the speaker—for readers to share in the speaker's wonder and despair.

SETTING

The poem is set in London. While the time period isn't specified, the poem's reference to the city's brownness and to rumbling carts help to place it in the period of its composition: the late 19th century, when English cities were notoriously dirtied by

the smoke of the Industrial Revolution. The poem's horror at the dehumanizing toil of the workers also gives readers a taste of Victorian ethics and concerns.

London undergoes two metamorphoses over the course of the poem: the snow makes the city white and shining, and the emerging workers begin to undo that transformation. Bridges's reuse of the word "brown" at the beginning and end of the poem suggests the reemergence of the city's usual state.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

A contemporary of the lush, florid Pre-Raphaelites (a Victorian-era school of artists and poets who advocated for a return to medieval themes and aesthetics), Bridges resisted the prevailing cultural winds of his time. He was the founder of the Society for Pure English, and his poetic choices reflect his fondness for the poetic themes of the earlier Romantic era. This doesn't mean romantic in the "love" sense; rather, Romantic poetry focused on subjects such as the wisdom of childhood and the sublime power of nature.

It's also possible to see the influence of earlier poets like William Wordsworth and William Blake in Bridges's writing about London. In Wordsworth's "Composed upon Westminster Bridge"and Blake's "London," readers can see how Wordsworth's experience of London in a moment of strange quiet and Blake's apocalyptic condemnation of industrialized cruelty might have influenced "London Snow."

Bridges was, however, also a great champion of the experimental verse of his friend and contemporary Gerard Manley Hopkins ("God's Grandeur," "Pied Beauty," "The Caged Skylark"). Hopkins's idea of "sprung rhythm" (in which lines of verse are measured solely by number of stresses, rather than both number and pattern) has a clear influence on Bridges's own work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Bridges's horror at the mechanization of humanity and his wistfulness for natural beauty are deeply rooted in the concerns of his era. "London Snow" was written in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, which transformed the English economy and the English way of life. As workers began slowly to leave traditional occupations in the countryside, English cities—London in particular—became crowded and filthy. The famous "London fog" was not just fog, but a toxic haze of coal smoke.

Many writers of the time were deeply alarmed by these developments, worrying not only for the beauty of nature crushed under the heel of industry, but for the human soul in a world that seemed built for machines. This poem clearly reflects such anxieties.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- More About Robert Bridges — A short biography and links to more of Bridges's poems. (https://poets.org/poet/robert-bridges)
- St. Paul's Cathedral — Some background on St. Paul's and its history as a London symbol. (https://www.stpauls.co.uk/history-collections/history)
- The Poem Out Loud — One reader's interpretation of the poem. (https://youtu.be/snmUPt1tqfE)
- The Poem Out Loud - Again! — A very different reading. Compare them and consider the effect the different voices have! (https://youtu.be/JQtv6Y9FWkI)
- Bridges as Poet Laureate — Some background on Bridges's public role as England's Poet Laureate. (https://www.historytoday.com/archive/robert-bridges-appointed-poet-laureate)

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