This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison

POEM TEXT

[Addressed to Charles Lamb, of the India House, London]

Well, they are gone, and here must I remain,
This lime-tree bower my prison! I have lost
Beauties and feelings, such as would have been
Most sweet to my remembrance even when age
Had dimm'd mine eyes to blindness! They, meanwhile,
Friends, whom I never more may meet again,
On springy heath, along the hill-top edge,
Wander in gladness, and wind down, perchance,
To that still roaring dell, of which I told;
The roaring dell, o'erwooded, narrow, deep,
And only speckled by the mid-day sun;
Where its slim trunk the ash from rock to rock
Flings arching like a bridge;—that branchless ash,
Unsunn'd and damp, whose few poor yellow leaves
Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still,
Fann'd by the water-fall! and there my friends
Behold the dark green file of long lank weeds,
That all at once (a most fantastic sight!)
Still nod and drip beneath the dripping edge
Of the blue clay-stone.

Now, my friends emerge
Beneath the wide wide Heaven—and view again
The many-steepled tract magnificent
Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea,
With some fair bark, perhaps, whose sails light up
The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles
Of purple shadow! Yes! they wander on
In gladness all; but thou, methinks, most glad,
My gentle-hearted Charles! for thou hast pined
And hunger'd after Nature, many a year,
In the great City pent, winning thy way
With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain
And strange calamity! Ah! slowly sink
Behind the western ridge, thou glorious Sun!
Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb,
Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds!
Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!
And kindle, thou blue Ocean! So my friend
Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,
Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
Less gross than bodily; and of such hues
As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes
Spirits perceive his presence.

A delight
Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad
As I myself were there! Nor in this bower,
This little lime-tree bower, have I not mark'd
Much that has sooth'd me. Pale beneath the blaze
Hung the transparent foliage; and I watch'd
Some broad and sunny leaf, and lov'd to see
The shadow of the leaf and stem above
Dappling its sunshine! And that walnut-tree
Was richly ting'd, and a deep radiance lay
Full on the ancient ivy, which usurps
Those fronting elms, and now, with blackest mass
Makes their dark branches gleam a lighter hue
Through the late twilight: and though now the bat
Wheels silent by, and not a swallow twitters,
Yet still the solitary humble-bee
Sings in the bean-flower! Henceforth I shall know
That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure;
No plot so narrow, be but Nature there,
No waste so vacant, but may well employ
Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart
Awake to Love and Beauty! and sometimes
'Tis well to be bereft of promis'd good,
That we may lift the soul, and contemplate
With lively joy the joys we cannot share.
My gentle-hearted Charles! when the last rook
Beat its straight path along the dusky air
Homewards, I blest it! deeming its black wing
(Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light)
Had cross'd the mighty Orb's dilated glory,
While thou stood'st gazing; or, when all was still,
Flew creeking o'er thy head, and had a charm
For thee, my gentle-hearted Charles, to whom
No sound is dissonant which tells of Life.

SUMMARY

Well, my friends are gone, and I must stay here; this shady arbor is my jail! I've missed out on beautiful sights and profound feelings that would have stayed with me forever, comforting me even when I'm a blind old man. Meanwhile, my friends—whom I might never see *ever again*—wander happily across the firm, bouncy turf of the fields or the crest of the hills. Perhaps they make their way down to the little valley where the waterfall roars, the one I told them about—that valley, thickly forested, narrow, deep, and only dotted here and there with the light of the noon sun. There, the ash tree flings itself from rock to rock, bending itself like a bridge—the bare, wet ash that never gets any sun, whose handful of yellow leaves never quiver in the wind, though they quiver in the breeze that comes off the waterfall. There, my friends see the ranks of long, limp, dark green weeds, which, all at the same time (an astonishing thing to see!) sway and drip together beneath the dripping edge of the bluish stone they hang from.

Now my friends emerge from the valley into a wide-open hillside under the sky, and again see the grand, church-tower-dotted sweep of hills, fields, meadows, and the ocean—which perhaps has some lovely boat out sailing on it, whose sails add a flash of brightness to the little stretch of calm blue water between two islands of dark purple cloud-shadow. Yes! My friends amble on together, all happy—but I think you must be the happiest among them, my kindhearted Charles. For you've been starved for Nature for years now, trapped in London, finding your way (with a sad but persistent soul) through all sorts of terrible misfortunes. Oh, sink slowly behind the hills to the west, great Sun! Glow in the low, angled rays of sunset light, you purple flowers of the heather! Catch fire with even richer color, you clouds! Come alive in the yellow light, you far-off woods! And burn bright, you blue Ocean! Then my friend may stand there in intense joy, as I have in the past—silent and dizzy—yes, looking intently at the broad landscape, looking until the whole world looks almost ethereal, hardly physical at all—until the world looks dressed in the colors of God's garments when he shows himself to mortal spirits.

My heart fills with sudden joy, and I'm as happy as if I were there myself. And it's not as if, while I've been sitting in this little lime arbor, I haven't seen many things that have made me feel better. I saw pale leaves translucent in the bright sunlight, and delighted in the sight of a bright leaf catching the shadow of the leaves and stems above it so that it was freckled with light and shade. And that walnut tree was rich with deep color, and the old ivy seemed to glow as it grew over the elm trees at the front of the house—and now the ivy's dark form makes the trees' branches glow pale in the last of the twilight. And while the bat swoops past in silence, and not a single swallow chirps, a lone bumblebee still sings in the bean flowers! From now on, I'll not forget that nature never abandons those who are wise and pure. There's no stretch of ground so small (if only Nature is there), no wasteland so barren, that it can't touch all the senses and keep the heart alert to Love and Beauty! And from time to time it's not a bad thing to miss out on something you were looking forward to: disappointment helps to raise the soul to higher thoughts, giving us the chance to empathize with other people's joys even if we can't share them. My dear, kindhearted Charles! When the last of the rooks flew straight through the darkening air on its way home, I blessed it, deciding that its black wing (now just a tiny speck, now vanishing in the last of the sunlight) must have crossed the great Sun's swelling sunset light while you stood there watching—or, when everything had fallen quiet, perhaps the rook flew calling over your head, and charmed you, my dear Charles, to whom no sound is unharmonious if it speaks of Life.

THEMES

THE CREATIVE AND CONNECTIVE POWER OF THE IMAGINATION

When an injured foot means he can't join his visiting friends for a hike in the Quantocks (a beautiful region of the southwestern English countryside), this poem's speaker—Coleridge himself—feels pretty put out. All he can do is sit in his own garden, trapped in a "lime-tree bower" (a sheltered sitting-place under lime trees) that feels like a "prison." From here, however, he can *imagine* what his friends are doing—and that makes all the difference. The imagination, in this poem, has the power to conjure and to connect: picturing the hike vividly, Coleridge can both feel as if he's there and take part in his friends' pleasure.

Sulking under the lime trees, Coleridge at first feels dreadfully cut off from his friends and their fun. He's so bereft that he even melodramatically declares he "never more may meet [his friends] again." This may have been the last chance he'll *ever have in his whole life* to go on this walk with these people. And he's missing it!

This gloomy thought leads him to picture what his friends must be doing and seeing right now—and bit by bit, his imagining changes his feelings. Tracing his friends' imagined progress along a well-known path, he sees in his mind's eye the "roaring dell" where a waterfall cascades; the pale ash tree that trembles in the breeze from the falling water; the waterweed dripping under the rocks. As he conjures up the whole scene for himself and the reader alike, his imagination allows him to feel as if he's really there. In a sense, he's *re-creating* the landscape in his own mind.

More than that, these imaginings allow him to take part in his friends' pleasure. In particular, he puts himself in the shoes of his friend Charles Lamb, a Londoner who has terribly missed

the beauty of nature. Coleridge's imagination here bridges not just the physical but the metaphorical space between himself and his buddy, allowing him to be with Charles in a way perhaps even more profound than if he'd been on the walk, feeling his feelings and seeing through his eyes. Imagination offers empathy as well as freedom.

Through deeply imagining both the walk and Charles's experience of the walk, Coleridge finds, to his surprise, that he feels "as glad / As I myself were there!" His imagination has made the walk real to him, leaving him changed.

The poem itself becomes not only a record of this imagining but a demonstration of the imagination's power. By capturing and conveying Coleridge's experience, the poem makes the reader a player in the day, imaginatively present with Coleridge and Lamb at the same time, seeing what they see and sharing in their happiness. In its very form, the poem demonstrates that the creative imagination has the power to transcend space and time.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-78

THE WISDOM, BEAUTY, AND DIVINITY OF NATURE

Stuck in his garden with an injured foot and missing out on a hike, this poem's speaker (Coleridge himself) reflects on all the natural beauties his friends must be experiencing right now—and then on the beauties that surround him even here in his own backyard. Even in the form of a single tree or a little patch of grass, Nature keeps the "heart / Awake to love and beauty," offering wisdom and solace to those willing to open their minds to it.

Coleridge is very familiar with the walk his friends have taken—in fact, he recommended the route—so he can picture just what they're seeing as they go, from a sheltered waterfall to a bright seacoast. Though he mourns missing the chance to see these things himself, he's pleased at the thought that his "gentle-hearted Charles" (Charles Lamb, Coleridge's good friend and a fellow writer) is getting the chance to soak up the local beauties. He knows that Lamb, who's usually "in the great city pent" (that is, penned up in London), has "hunger'd after Nature," desperate for a breath of fresh air.

Such a hunger, in Coleridge's view, isn't just a hunger for beauty. Nature, as he's sure Charles is understanding even now, is also restorative, wise, and even holy, a transparent "veil" for the "Almighty Spirit." To spend time in nature, Coleridge suggests, is to be near God, consoled by the presence of something infinitely good.

In fact, Coleridge realizes, he's felt the same touch of the divine even in the little bit of nature around him at home in the "lime-tree bower" (that is, a sheltered sitting-place under the lime trees). Until now, he's rather sulkily seen the bower as his "prison." But finding himself filled with sympathetic joy at the thought of what Lamb must be getting from his hike, he all at once sees that he's partaking of that joy, too: all along, he's been enjoying the "shadow of the leaf and stem above," the "deep radiance" of the ivy, and the sound of the bee as it "sings in the bean-flower."

Even in the bleakest "waste" or the narrowest strip of grass, Coleridge realizes, the slightest touch of nature can "employ / Each faculty of sense" (that is, awake every one of the senses) and "keep the Heart / awake to Love and Beauty." The natural world, to him, is the work and the garment of God, an awe-inspiring and consoling reminder of goodness itself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-20
- Lines 21-44
- Lines 45-66
- Lines 70-78

THE UNEXPECTED VALUE OF DISAPPOINTMENT

In its first lines, "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" sounds as if it's going to be a poem all about the pain and anxiety of disappointment. The speaker (Coleridge himself) is deeply upset that, due to an injured foot, he can't join his visiting friends on a hike. He fears that he might be missing out on "beauties and feelings" that would have become "sweet to [his] remembrance" for the rest of his life, perhaps even memories he'd return to for comfort in his old age. In short, he's sure that fate has robbed him of something profoundly important.

As he sits and imagines what his friends might be up to out there, however, the power of his imagination and his empathy for his buddy Charles (who's been having a miserable time in London and desperately needed a countryside holiday) build and burgeon until he feels an unexpected "delight" springing up "sudden in [his] heart."

This moment of delight isn't the only unexpected pleasure he gains from his thwarted walk. Being forced to sit still in his garden, he says, has reminded him that "sometimes / 'Tis well to be bereft of promis'd good" (that is, it's sometimes a good thing to be disappointed in a hope or a plan). That's because accepting a disappointment allows us to "lift the soul, and contemplate / With lively joy the joys we cannot share." Not getting what we want, in other words, might offer us an opportunity to feel unselfish pleasure in other people's pleasure, stretching our imaginations to share in their experiences and their happiness.

Coleridge's long afternoon sitting at hope thus offers him not only the joy of unselfish empathy, but enduring wisdom *about* such empathy. For that matter, he gains this poem, a lasting, moving record of his happiness and his insight. Not getting precisely what we wanted, this poem's very existence suggests, can sometimes mean receiving gifts we couldn't have anticipated.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 45-78

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Well, they are gone, and here must I remain,
This lime-tree bower my prison! I have lost
Beauties and feelings, such as would have been
Most sweet to my remembrance even when age
Had dimm'd mine eyes to blindness!

"This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" begins on a note of dismay. "Well," the speaker declares, "they are gone, and here must I remain." His friends, readers gather, have gone for a walk, while he's been left to sit in the garden all by his lonesome. The pleasant, shady "lime-tree bower" (or arbor of lime trees) under whose leaves he rests, he says, is nothing more than a "prison"—a moment of hyperbole that rings with both rueful humor and sincere unhappiness. In these first lines, this poem sets itself up as a tale of severe English Romantic FOMO.

It's not just the walk itself he's missing, the speaker goes on, but the lasting treasures he might have stored up on such a walk:

> [...] I have lost
> Beauties and feelings, such as would have been
> Most sweet to my remembrance even when age
> Had dimm'd mine eyes to blindness! [...]

In other words, the pleasure of going for a walk with friends isn't just about the walk itself. It's about the *memories* of the walk, lasting impressions that the speaker imagines might have stayed with him all his life. Even after his physical eyes have "dimm'd to blindness," he says, his *mind's* eye might still have relished the "beauties" he would have seen today, and he might have felt the day's "feelings" all over again.

On the one hand, these lines might just sound like more hyperbole, and rather self-pitying hyperbole at that: *I'm missing out on making* lifelong memories *right now!* But, quietly, they invite readers to reflect on an idea that will become central to this poem's philosophy: the relationship between what the eye sees and what the mind sees. Here at the outset, the *memory* of the walk seems like what the speaker wants as much as the walk itself.

This is a true story:

- On the day Coleridge drafted this poem in 1797, he was indeed sitting in a garden, missing out on a walk because, in a badly-timed kitchen mishap, his wife Sara had spilled boiling milk on his foot.
- Worse, he was meant to have been walking with close friends who'd come out to visit him at his home in Somerset (a beautiful region of southwest England). Those friends were a pretty illustrious crew. Among them were Coleridge's great collaborator William Wordsworth; Wordsworth's sister, the brilliant diarist Dorothy; and the essayist Charles Lamb, to whom this poem is dedicated.
- For this group, walking wasn't just about passing a pleasant afternoon, but about communing with the natural world, drawing inspiration and joy from a landscape that they saw as inherently divine. Exploring nature and writing poetry went hand in hand for Wordsworth and Coleridge, who often composed while walking—Wordsworth pacing up and down on level ground, Coleridge scrambling over rocks and roots.

Spare a little sympathy for Coleridge, then: the "beauties and feelings" he's lost aren't trivial. But over the course of this poem, he'll find his way toward *other* beauties and feelings, ones he needn't leave his lime-tree prison to discover.

He'll do so in 78 lines of blank verse—that is, unrhymed iambic pentameter, a form with a grand pedigree. These flowing lines of five iambs apiece (that is, five da-DUMs in a row, as in "Well, they | are gone, | and here | must I | remain") might be most familiar to readers from the work of Shakespeare and Milton: this is the rhythm in which Hamlet contemplates death and in which Satan rallies rebel angels. Coleridge, innovatively, uses the form to track the quiet progression of his own thoughts. This is one of what later critics dubbed Coleridge's "conversation poems"—poems in which Coleridge finds his way through the ordinary world into grand metaphysical visions.

LINES 5-9

They, meanwhile,
Friends, whom I never more may meet again,
On springy heath, along the hill-top edge,
Wander in gladness, and wind down, perchance,
To that still roaring dell, of which I told;

Plonked down in the lime-tree bower he can only see as a prison, Coleridge pictures where his friends must be by now, making their way across the "springy heath" (the lush, firm turf) of a hillcrest. It's as if he can almost feel that familiar, joyously bouncy ground underfoot: this is a walk he knows well.

In fact, his friends are on their way to a place he's given them directions to, a "roaring dell"—imagery that suggests that one *hears* this little wooded valley before one sees it. "Still roaring," always full of rushing sound, this dell enfolds a waterfall. "Perchance" (or perhaps) his friends are already "wind[ing]" their way down the tricky path toward that little wonder now.

Alongside the roar of the dell, readers can hear the wistfulness in Coleridge's voice. His friends must "wander in gladness," he's sure: how could they not, making their way through so pleasant a scene on so pleasant a day? Picturing their pleasure, he feels a lonely pang. The people wandering so gladly out there are "Friends, whom I never more may meet again," he declares.

He's being melodramatic. But he's also not necessarily *wrong*. While there's certainly something comically hyperbolic in this moment—*They've gone for a walk* without me, *and I might* never ever *see them* ever again*!*—there's also truth. We never *do* know if we'll see our friends again, any time we part with them; every goodbye might be the last. That Coleridge is thinking in these terms suggests, not just that he's poking a little fun at his own self-pity, but that missing out on this walk has made him feel the deep value of his friendships. Stuck in his leafy prison, he's missing out not only on "beauties and feelings," but on precious, fleeting moments with beloved company.

His earlier regret over the *memories* he might have made on this walk becomes even more poignant in this frame. It's not just that he wants something nice to think about when he's old. It's that he wants to capture as many images as possible of people whom he loves, and from whom he knows he must someday part.

LINES 10-16

The roaring dell, o'erwooded, narrow, deep,
And only speckled by the mid-day sun;
Where its slim trunk the ash from rock to rock
Flings arching like a bridge;—that branchless ash,
Unsunn'd and damp, whose few poor yellow leaves
Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still,
Fann'd by the water-fall!

It is here, perched imaginatively at the edge of the "roaring dell" where he imagines his friends might be wandering now, that something begins to change for Coleridge. The first glimmer of that change appears in a repetition:

> To that still roaring dell, of which I told;
> The roaring dell, o'erwooded, narrow, deep,

The thought—and perhaps the remembered sound—of the dell captures Coleridge's attention. At this musing repetition, the *idea* of that little valley begins to unfold into a vision.

At first, Coleridge's imagery captures the dell as a whole, as if from a little distance: it's "o'erwooded, narrow, deep," a steep-sided valley overgrown with trees. Then, in a flash, he's in the thick of it, beneath its leaves, seeing its terrain "speckled by the mid-day sun."

And then he's looking at one thing in particular—and not the most self-evidently interesting thing, either. He doesn't pay attention to the waterfall, "still roaring" in the background, but to a little tree that leans across the waters. It's an ash sapling, and a pretty scraggly one. Down here under the canopy, "unsunn'd and damp," it's "branchless" and scrawny, with only a "few poor yellow leaves" to its name. Nevertheless, it grows:

> [...] its slim trunk the ash from rock to rock
> Flings arching like a bridge; [...]

Take a careful look at the shape of those lines. To a native English speaker, they sound strangely backwards: the usual "subject, verb, object" order of an English sentence this isn't. Coleridge starts with a description of a tree trunk, then says what kind of tree's trunk it is, then describes the tree's position in space, and then and only then reaches the verb telling us what the tree *does*: it "flings" itself, "arching like a bridge."

This peculiar construction is a model of a thought in progress. Reaching back to his memory of this tree, Coleridge first perceives its *appearance*, its "slim trunk." Then he names the tree in his mind: *that's that one skinny ash tree*. Then his eye moves "from rock to rock," following the tree's movement; then, finally, he finds a simile to describe the action his eye has just tracked. If he'd organized this sentence in a more commonplace way—"the slim ash tree arches like a bridge from rock to rock," say—that sense of a slow, gathering recall leading to a flash of insight wouldn't be there.

Nor would the sense that Coleridge sees this particular little tree for a reason. All the energy of these lines gathers toward the tree's action, the moment it "flings arching like a bridge." This otherwise unremarkable little tree catches Coleridge's mind's eye because the tree and his mind are moving in the same way. His imagination, too, "flings arching like a bridge" as it reaches out to this scene. As the tree leaps from "rock to rock," so does Coleridge's mind leap from where he sits now to where he's stood before.

This moment builds a bridge between Coleridge and the reader, too. His meticulous memory of the shape and movement of this single tree–one amid thousands in this "o'erwooded" dell—brings readers to an exact spot. Somehow, in this moment, Coleridge and his friends and his readers are all gathered into one place, the ash tree the slim bridge that connects them. Together, all can watch as if hypnotized while the tree's "few poor yellow leaves," never stirred by the wind of the outside world, "tremble still / Fann'd by the water-fall"—and so *feel* the breeze of the moving water just as the leaves do, and catch a glimpse of the falls in the background.

LINES 16-20

and there my friends
Behold the dark green file of long lank weeds,
That all at once (a most fantastic sight!)
Still nod and drip beneath the dripping edge
Of the blue clay-stone.

Coleridge has made an imaginative journey into the bottom of the "roaring dell." So far, he's been describing the scene as if staring into it himself, spurred by the idea that his friends might, "perchance," be on their way toward the waterfall. Now, he speaks as if he's sure, not only that his friends have arrived, but that they're looking where he's looking: at the "dark green file of long lank weeds" that grow on the underside of the waterfall's rocks.

These, he exclaims, make a "most fantastic sight"—that is, a strange and magical vision. Of course, they're a "fantastic sight" in a quite literal sense, too: the ones Coleridge sees now are a *fantasy*, a vision he's conjured up.

As with the bridging ash, the magic and meaning of these weeds seems bound up with their *motion*:

> [...] the dark green file of long lank weeds,
> That all at once (a most fantastic sight!)
> Still nod and drip beneath the dripping edge
> Of the blue clay-stone.

Nodding and dripping all together, these long lank weeds act as one, caught up in one stream. Again, this vision of the landscape is also a vision of what's happening in Coleridge's imagination. His description of ash and weeds alike brings himself, his friends, and readers across time and space into one concentrated moment, all moving in the same flow, made to tremble by the same imaginary breeze.

The weeds, Coleridge says, "still nod and drip" here in the "still roaring dell," where the leaves of the ash-tree "tremble still." That repetition might invite readers to contemplate a paradox inherent in still-ness. If something is *still*, it might be either *motionless* (holding still) or *constant* (still doing what it's doing). Here, strangely, both seem true. All of these moments describe things in motion—falling water, nodding weeds, trembling leaves. But these things are also in some sense preserved in stillness. The yellow leaves Coleridge saw are long fallen. And yet, here they are, still on the page.

Seeing the water-weeds, and seeing his friends seeing the water-weeds, Coleridge models the value of remembered "beauties and feelings," the things he fretted he was missing out on earlier. But he also does something more: he performs a creative act. In one sense, he's using his imagination to be *there*, present in the longed-for scene he's been deprived of. In another sense, he's using his imagination to *make* the scene he wants. He doesn't actually know that his friends are in the dell gazing at the waterweeds; for all he knows they could be tying their shoelaces up on the hillcrest. In the world of the poem, though, he and his friends and his readers are meaningfully present together, *still*.

LINES 21-27

Now, my friends emerge
Beneath the wide wide Heaven—and view again
The many-steepled tract magnificent
Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea,
With some fair bark, perhaps, whose sails light up
The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles
Of purple shadow!

Coleridge now both *sees* and *moves* his friends in his mind, deciding that they're emerging from the dell and onto a bright hillside. He marks this change of scene with a caesura:

> [...] the dark green file of long lank weeds,
> That all at once (a most fantastic sight!)
> Still nod and drip beneath the dripping edge
> Of the blue clay-stone.
>
> Now, my friends emerge
> Beneath the wide wide Heaven [...]

Here, he starts up a new stanza in the middle of the line without breaking the stride of his meter, an effect that suggests both change and continuity. The vision of the walk continues; Coleridge's experience of that vision evolves.

Out in the clear air again, Coleridge says, his friends take in a sweeping view. His image of a "many-steepled" landscape (that is, a landscape dotted with church towers) suggests they can see for miles, their gaze reaching out over all the parishes of Somerset, with domestic "hilly fields and meadows" to one side, the wide sea to the other, and the "wide wide Heaven" above. The precise, enclosed detail of the "o'erwooded" dell, with its dripping weeds and trembling leaves, gives way to expansive, airy freedom. Releasing his miniaturist's attention to individual plants, Coleridge moves into landscape-painter mode, capturing grand scale in broad brushstrokes.

He still has an eye to the specific, though. Looking out over the imagined sea, he speculates that there might be "some fair bark"—some beautiful sailboat—out there, its white sail "light[ing] up" the "slip of smooth clear blue" water that appears between two great masses of "purple shadow" that the clouds are casting on the sea.

This moment of imagery is at once the most precise and the most speculative in this passage. Coleridge introduces the imagined sailboat with a "perhaps," a tag that reminds readers that he's making this whole scene up. But his invention is fully persuasive, conjuring not just that flash of brilliant white illuminated between shadows, but a specific kind of *weather*: it must be the kind of breezy day when fleets of clouds sail across

the sky, casting distinct, moving shadows on the landscape below.

This moment thus brings memory, present experience, and imagination together. Coleridge can extrapolate the sky above him to the sky above his friends. He can remember what you can see from that hillside—the vision of sea and hill and wood he knows so well. And he can unite these things in his imagination, adding a touch of his own, the grace note of the white sail.

Like the arching bridge of the ash tree, the sailboat might also metaphorically reflect Coleridge's consciousness itself, sailing down a channel of imaginative light that has, for a moment, opened between shadows.

LINES 27-33

Yes! they wander on
In gladness all; but thou, methinks, most glad,
My gentle-hearted Charles! for thou hast pined
And hunger'd after Nature, many a year,
In the great City pent, winning thy way
With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain
And strange calamity!

As if satisfied with what he's imagined, Coleridge answers himself: "Yes! they wander on." That's what his friends are doing out there right now, he can *see* it. And those friends are all still full of the same "gladness" that he imagined for them back when he pictured them descending into the dell.

His friend Charles in particular, he thinks, must be *so* happy right now. This thought introduces a new kind of imagining. Rather than just daydreaming about how pleased Charles must be, Coleridge reaches out to him in an apostrophe, addressing him directly as "my gentle-hearted Charles"—as he will more than once across the rest of the poem. His warm affection for his old friend shines through in that repetition, which will start to feel something like a Homeric epithet, a tag that reveals a person's essential nature: as the goddess Athena is always and inherently "bright-eyed Athena," so Charles is in his very being "gentle-hearted," dear, kind, and lovable.

Coleridge singles his gentle-hearted Charles out in particular because, he feels, the poor man really, really needed a holiday:

> [...] thou hast pined
> And hunger'd after Nature, many a year,
> In the great City pent, winning thy way
> With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain
> And strange calamity! [...]

Charles, in other words, has been stuck in the dirt and smoke of London—working at India House (the offices of the infamous East India Company), as the poem's dedication informs us—without so much as a breath of fresh air for relief. In that already depressing environment, he's been patiently enduring terrible things.

Coleridge doesn't specify what "strange calamity" Charles has faced, only that he's been suffering. That's all one *needs* to know to understand Coleridge's concern and care for him. But it doesn't hurt to have a little historical context here, too:

- Charles Lamb was a long-time friend of Coleridge's. The two met at university and would be close for the rest of their lives (even after many of Coleridge's other friendships fractured). Lamb had many lifelong friends, in fact: Coleridge was not the only writer to celebrate his good nature, kind heart, and moral courage.
- All those qualities had been put to the test in 1796, the year before Coleridge wrote this poem. One dreadful day that year, Lamb returned home to find that his beloved sister Mary—a brilliant writer and thinker in her own right—had suffered what doctors might now call a psychotic break and fatally stabbed their mother. For the rest of his life, Charles would be responsible for Mary's care.

At the time Coleridge wrote this poem, then, Charles was suffering not just grief for his mother and his sister (who, restored to her right mind, had to come to terms with what she'd done), but the burden of responsibility for a deeply unwell loved one. (Charles himself was no stranger to mental illness, either: it was a family curse.)

Coleridge's concern for his friend and wish that he might be happy feels specially poignant against this background. Perhaps his earlier, apparently hyperbolic declaration that he might never see his friends again rings a little differently, too. Everyone in the Lambs' circle had a fresh and dreadful example of just how unpredictably disaster can strike.

LINES 33-38

Ah! slowly sink
Behind the western ridge, thou glorious Sun!
Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb,
Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds!
Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!
And kindle, thou blue Ocean!

The thought of Charles's past suffering and present gladness spurs Coleridge on to a new kind of imagining. He's already been working like a magician, conjuring up a vivid, sensuous experience using the raw material of memory. Now, he makes a series of grand apostrophes to the imagined landscape, sounding like something between a conductor and a god. Listen to his ringing parallelism here:

> [...] Ah! slowly sink
> Behind the western ridge, thou glorious Sun!
> Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb,

> Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds!
> Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!
> And kindle, thou blue Ocean!

All those grand verbs stage-direct the scene, spurring it to be *even more itself*. Many of these instructions tell things to do what they can't help but do: the "glorious Sun" is going to sink no matter what, those "purple heath-flowers" can't help but shine in its beams. In these images, Coleridge is at once speaking like the god who controls these everyday movements—which, imaginatively speaking, he is!—and like a man thrilled by the world's workings, saying a joyous "Yes!" to the way things are.

Elsewhere, though, Coleridge turns up the heat: he wants the most intense version of this sunset. The clouds must burn not just richly, but "richlier," flaming with bright color. The ocean, against its watery nature, must "kindle," catching fire in the low light. And the "distant groves" must "live in the yellow light," must become *conscious* in that golden glow.

All of these images "burn" and "shine." The "glorious Sun" that Coleridge addresses first in this incantation metaphorically ignites the whole scene, making the world into something like Moses's bush, which burns but is not consumed. The huge, all-encompassing light suggests that, in this moment, Coleridge's imagination and his world are unified: he's at once the creator and the appreciator of this scene, within it and outside it, remembering it and making it. His friends, and his *love* for his friends, are part of this universal glow, too.

LINES 38-47

> *So my friend*
> *Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,*
> *Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round*
> *On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem*
> *Less gross than bodily; and of such hues*
> *As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes*
> *Spirits perceive his presence.*
> *A delight*
> *Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad*
> *As I myself were there!*

All of Coleridge's rapturous imaginings now resolve into a kind of prayer. If the world will blaze and glow the way he imagines it, he says, he and Charles will feel it together:

> [...] So my friend
> Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,
> Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
> On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
> Less gross than bodily; [...]

Here, Coleridge's imagination doesn't place him *next* to Charles, but *within* Charles: he's able to feel Charles's awe as his own and his own awe as Charles's, both of them gazing with dizzy "swimming sense" into a landscape blazing gold. No longer just crossing a bridge between one place and another, Coleridge has crossed the distance between one *person* and another. Or perhaps he's found that that distance was always illusory: the all-encompassing light of that imagined sun, after all, makes everything blaze together.

He imagines, in short, that Charles, in gazing at the landscape, will feel *just what he himself is feeling now*: that the physical world *is* the spiritual world, that the imagined and the real intertwine, that the landscape, "less gross than bodily" (that is, not merely crude and material) is a garment that "veils the Almighty Spirit," the shape God puts on to make "spirits perceive his presence." The Spirit and the little spirits that perceive it, in other words, are part of the same continuous being, moving as one, like sunlight, like a waterfall.

Imaginatively leaping the distance between the "prison" of the lime-tree bower and his friend on the hillside, then, Coleridge has also leapt the prison walls of his own body, the illusion of a separate, lonely, detached self. To achieve this in imagination is to achieve it in reality.

Here at this imaginative climax, as if it can't hold any more joy, the stanza cracks:

> [...] and of such hues
> As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes
> Spirits perceive his presence.
> A delight
> Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad
> As I myself were there!

The attentive reader who has followed Coleridge this far, letting his imagination work on their own, may find that they, too, are there—and glad.

LINES 47-53

> *Nor in this bower,*
> *This little lime-tree bower, have I not mark'd*
> *Much that has sooth'd me. Pale beneath the blaze*
> *Hung the transparent foliage; and I watch'd*
> *Some broad and sunny leaf, and lov'd to see*
> *The shadow of the leaf and stem above*
> *Dappling its sunshine!*

After his boundary-dissolving moment of imaginative empathy, Coleridge comes gently back to earth. Listen to the repetition here:

> [...] Nor in this bower,
> This little lime-tree bower, have I not mark'd
> Much that has sooth'd me.

As Coleridge's gaze shifts from his inner world to the outer one,

the "bower" comes back into focus: first it's just a bower, then it's the familiar "lime-tree bower" again. Even as his imagination has carried him beyond the limits of his body, his body has been right here—and perhaps what he's seen has had some effect on what he's imagined.

For it turns out that he's been silently observing the garden around him all along, bringing to it the same meticulous attention he brought to the ash tree. His earlier vision of all-encompassing sunlight was informed by the "blaze" that made the leaves above him "transparent," like a roof of green stained glass:

> [...] Pale beneath the blaze
> Hung the transparent foliage; and I watch'd
> Some broad and sunny leaf, and lov'd to see
> The shadow of the leaf and stem above
> Dappling its sunshine! [...]

Watching that single "broad leaf"—like the ash tree, one out of so many—he's captured the effect of light and shadow in one tiny spot. The imagery here works rather like the imagery of the ash-tree did, too. By describing how the ash's yellow leaves trembled in the breeze of the waterfall, Coleridge summoned up an image of cool rushing water without once describing the falls directly. Here, the sun-dapple on one leaf unfolds into a whole mosaic of bright "foliage."

Coleridge invests this vision with feeling, too. He "lov'd" to see that dappled leaf; he was moved by it even as his imagination was elsewhere. Throughout the poem, then, two kinds of vision have been overlaid on each other; now, readers are privy to both Coleridge's imaginative world and to his surroundings. The lovely, leafy walls of his "prison" have "sooth'd" him into the calmer, happier, less self-pitying state that gave his imagination and his empathy room to work—almost without his noticing.

LINES 53-58

> *And that walnut-tree*
> *Was richly ting'd, and a deep radiance lay*
> *Full on the ancient ivy, which usurps*
> *Those fronting elms, and now, with blackest mass*
> *Makes their dark branches gleam a lighter hue*
> *Through the late twilight:*

As Coleridge reflects on what he's noticed in the garden without noticing he was noticing it, his imagery starts to carry readers through *his* afternoon, the parallel day to the one he's been imagining for his friends. He spent some happy time gazing on that glowing leaf; he noticed, too, that "that walnut-tree / Was richly ting'd," full of deep color. The same "radiance" that he envisioned on the imagined hillside brightened the "ancient ivy" that grows over the elms.

Now, though, the quality of the light has changed:

> [...] a deep radiance lay
> Full on the ancient ivy, which usurps
> Those fronting elms, and now, with blackest mass
> Makes their dark branches gleam a lighter hue
> Through the late twilight: [...]

The once radiant leaves of the ivy are now just a mass of indistinct blackness; the branches that in the daytime seemed "usurp[ed]," overthrown by the vines, now glow pale against the ivy's darkness. The change of light offers a change of *vision*: the darkness and the ivy don't merely obscure the trees, but bring them to light in a different way. A limit becomes a means of revelation. Again, Coleridge isn't just talking about the garden here (though he's also doing that, very beautifully): the natural world mirrors his experience of the day.

LINES 58-61

> *and though now the bat*
> *Wheels silent by, and not a swallow twitters,*
> *Yet still the solitary humble-bee*
> *Sings in the bean-flower!*

For the first time, now, animals enter the scene:

> [...] and though now the bat
> Wheels silent by, and not a swallow twitters,
> Yet still the solitary humble-bee
> Sings in the bean-flower! [...]

As night comes on, nature's cast of characters changes over, following the rhythm of the "glorious Sun." Again, this image creates other images in its negative space. If the swallows have fallen silent now, they must have been twittering earlier. And the silence of the bats evokes the larger silence of the evening, against which the sound of the "solitary humble-bee" stands out bright, as the elm branches stand out against the ivy. Bustling around in its "bean-flower," that lone bee is still singing away—just like the solitary poet in his bower.

As compared to the imagined walk, the scene of calm domestic nature in the garden feels less "fantastic," more grounded. But Coleridge has prepared his readers to feel that something magical is going on here. All his meticulous imagery of the sights and sounds of a particular garden on a particular night at the end of the 18th century invites readers to overleap the boundaries of time and space—or to find that, like Coleridge, they've leapt that boundary before they notice they've done it. Those wheeling bats, those glowing branches, the tiny drone of that one bee: readers might find that they can see and feel *around* these images, too. Coleridge doesn't mention the cooling air, the blue of the twilight, the fragrance of the grass and the bean-flower—and yet, there they are.

That "fantastic" power isn't only to do with the imagination, but with the eternal rhythm of nature. If readers can sit in the

bower with Coleridge, it's in part because they've experienced a summer twilight themselves. The sun sinks, the ivy darkens, the branches glow, the birds go to bed, and the last bees sing now just as they did two hundred years ago. Like the waterfall, nature itself is "still" in two senses: it's a constant, a perpetual cycling motion, embracing the generations.

LINES 61-69

Henceforth I shall know
That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure;
No plot so narrow, be but Nature there,
No waste so vacant, but may well employ
Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart
Awake to Love and Beauty! and sometimes
'Tis well to be bereft of promis'd good,
That we may lift the soul, and contemplate
With lively joy the joys we cannot share.

As he sits in the darkening garden, Coleridge crystallizes his experience into a lesson:

> [...] Henceforth I shall know
> That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure;
> No plot so narrow, be but Nature there,
> No waste so vacant, but may well employ
> Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart
> Awake to Love and Beauty! [...]

Plunk the wise person down in the saddest vacant lot, in other words, and so long as the sun is overhead or a weed sprouts in the dirt, they won't have to despair. By calling on "each faculty of sense"—a category that encompasses both the bodily senses and the imagination—the "wise and pure" can find their way toward beauty and connection.

Perhaps nature isn't just *open* to the "wise and pure": perhaps it *teaches* wisdom and purity. Look back at what Coleridge notices in the natural world across this poem. The arching ash tree that "flings" itself mirrors active imagination, the power that created Coleridge's empathetic vision of his friends on their walk. The "broad leaf" catching light and shadow mirrors the kind of "pure," passive, accepting contemplation with which Coleridge soaked up the garden's beauty. Actively growing and wisely "still," nature teaches its patient observers how to learn from it.

The "facult[ies] of sense" are central to this kind of learning. Again, think back here to Coleridge's meticulous explorations of the landscape, his singling-out of individual trees and leaves. Learning from nature isn't just a matter of perceiving large-scale constants and cycles and beauties, but about reaching out from one's individual, separate spot—one's own lime-tree bower, if you will—to *other* individual beings, finding connection through particularity.

In that frame, the very shape of this poem makes a new kind of sense. One guy's thoughts on an outwardly uneventful afternoon in an outwardly ordinary garden become the path toward a grand beauty; the particular turns out to be the door to the universal.

That idea has some bearing on Coleridge's second lesson:

> [...] and sometimes
> 'Tis well to be bereft of promis'd good,
> That we may lift the soul, and contemplate
> With lively joy the joys we cannot share.

Missing out on the walk, in this case, has given Coleridge the opportunity to rejoice in imaginative empathy. The diacope here—"to contemplate / With lively joy the joys we cannot share"—points out the paradox: in contemplating the joy he "cannot share," Coleridge *does* share it.

He presents this as a virtuous moral lesson: it's "well" to go through such an experience, it "lift[s] the soul." Similarly, there's morality in being "wise and pure" enough to perceive nature's wisdom and purity. This isn't just about being a good, self-forgetful boy, though. To find "lively joy" in contemplating other people's joys is also, plainly, to find joy (and relief) in the realization that one is never really all alone in the lime-tree bower.

LINES 70-78

My gentle-hearted Charles! when the last rook
Beat its straight path along the dusky air
Homewards, I blest it! deeming its black wing
(Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light)
Had cross'd the mighty Orb's dilated glory,
While thou stood'st gazing; or, when all was still,
Flew creeking o'er thy head, and had a charm
For thee, my gentle-hearted Charles, to whom
No sound is dissonant which tells of Life.

The thought of contemplating "with lively joy the joys we cannot share" turns Coleridge back to his "gentle-hearted Charles," whose name he cries in another joyous apostrophe, as if hailing him from afar. (And soon, he might; his friends, all being well, must be on their way home by now.)

As the sun sank and the "last rook" started making its way back to its nest, Coleridge tells Lamb, he "blest it," deciding that it must have crossed the "dilated glory" of the sunset while Lamb stood and watched:

> [...] deeming its black wing
> (Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light)
> Had cross'd the mighty Orb's dilated glory,
> While thou stood'st gazing; [...]

Again, something Coleridge has seen becomes an image of something he has felt, a feeling he faithfully believes he's shared with Lamb today. This little black speck being absorbed

into the sun's light echoes the earlier imagery of the blazing world all burning and living together in the "yellow light," the particular dissolving into the universal. In Coleridge's vision, the distinction between Coleridge and Lamb symbolically vanishes in the light, too: the bird is what travels between them, what they share at a distance.

More gently, then, Coleridge imagines that perhaps the rook merely "flew creeking o'er [Lamb's] head," calling its croaky call—and that this not-especially-melodious sound "had a charm" for Charles. For to him:

> No sound is dissonant which tells of Life.

In this final image, the very idea of dissonance is nonsensical. In a world unified by the light of imagination, nature, and divinity, all is part of the same "life," all in harmony—and all *tells* of that life, too.

This closing line strikes one last chord between intimacy and philosophical grandeur. Coleridge's tone here is affectionate and familiar; he knows his old friend as a guy who delights in absurdity and awkwardness, all the stuff of imperfect life.

Coleridge also sounds grateful. In addressing this poem to Lamb, he's not just wishing joy on a beloved, suffering friend, but thanking Lamb for an understanding of the wide world that the two have made together. Charles's gentle heart softens Coleridge's, and the prison of the lime-tree bower opens up into lively joy.

SYMBOLS

THE ASH TREE

The frail, yellow-leaved ash tree in the dell becomes a symbol of Coleridge's own imaginative effort. This little tree is physically limited: it grows in a valley so deeply shadowed that it never sees much sun, and its few leaves are a wan yellow. But it still "flings" itself across the waterfall, "arching like a bridge," growing in spite of its limits. In the moment Coleridge pictures that arching ash tree, he's *also* building a metaphorical bridge between where he sits in the lime-tree bower (like the ash, he's stuck in one shady spot) and where his friends wander. The ash tree *in* his imagination becomes a symbol *of* his imagination, putting all its energy into a creative leap.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-16:** "Where its slim trunk the ash from rock to rock / Flings arching like a bridge;—that branchless ash, / Unsunn'd and damp, whose few poor yellow leaves / Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still, / Fann'd by the water-fall!"

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

Much of this poem is framed as an apostrophe to Charles Lamb, Coleridge's long-time friend. One of the greatest essayists in English, Charles was also a notably kindhearted, patient, and self-effacing guy. His many affectionate literary buddies often punned on his surname, calling him "Lamb, the frolic and the gentle" and similar (to his mild, good-natured annoyance).

Charles was a lifelong and loyal Londoner, and though he probably didn't feel quite as "pent" in the "great city" as Coleridge imagines—Coleridge himself was the one who felt fidgety in London—he might still have needed a holiday pretty badly:

- In 1796, the year before Coleridge wrote this poem, the Lamb family suffered a great tragedy. Charles's beloved sister Mary experienced what we might now diagnose as a psychotic break and stabbed their mother to death.
- The family managed to keep Mary out of prison. But for the rest of his life, Charles would be Mary's caretaker. When she was well, the two of them would collaborate on writing projects (like their famous *Tales From Shakespeare*, retellings of Shakespeare's plays aimed at children). When she felt a bad spell coming on, Charles would walk her to a mental hospital. One anecdote records both of them weeping as they made this bleak journey.

Coleridge wrote this poem not so very long after "strange calamity" struck the Lambs, and his apostrophes to his "gentle-hearted Charles" overflow with tenderness. Addressing his friend from a distance, Coleridge suggests that the *spiritual* distance between the pair is small indeed. Coleridge's imaginative empathy with Charles and his affectionate understanding of Charles's sensitivity make it feel as if he's right there with his friend.

Coleridge also apostrophizes the world *around* Charles, egging it on: he tells the flowers to glow purple in the beams of the setting sun, the clouds to glow even "richlier," and the woods to "live" in the light—to spring to a delighted consciousness, as awake to their own beauty as the people who look at them. These apostrophes see Coleridge not just rejoicing in imagined beauty, but *creating* it, conducting a symphony of sunset colors in his own mind. The imagined view he conjures for Charles is an ideal one—the most intense version of an already intensely beautiful sight.

This direct communication with the landscape reflects Coleridge's spiritual worldview, too. As he records in this poem, he sees nature and humanity as all wrapped up together, part of a unified soul that is also encompassed by God. As his spirit and Charles's communicate with each other, so his spirit and the landscape interpenetrate.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 28-38:** "but thou, methinks, most glad, / My gentle-hearted Charles! for thou hast pined / And hunger'd after Nature, many a year, / In the great City pent, winning thy way / With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain / And strange calamity! Ah! slowly sink / Behind the western ridge, thou glorious Sun! / Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb, / Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds! / Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves! / And kindle, thou blue Ocean!"
- **Lines 70-78:** "My gentle-hearted Charles! when the last rook / Beat its straight path along the dusky air / Homewards, I blest it! deeming its black wing / (Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light) / Had cross'd the mighty Orb's dilated glory, / While thou stood'st gazing; or, when all was still, / Flew creeking o'er thy head, and had a charm / For thee, my gentle-hearted Charles, to whom / No sound is dissonant which tells of Life."

IMAGERY

Through vivid imagery, Coleridge approaches an imagined landscape as if he were there himself—and thus lets readers feel as if they're there, too.

For instance, when Coleridge directs his friends to a particular little valley, he introduces it as "the roaring dell"—language that lets readers hear a clamor of water before they see the waterfall itself, just as they might in life.

For it takes some clambering to get to the water. This valley is "o'erwooded, narrow, deep / And only speckled by the mid-day sun": it's a shadowy, dark, out-of-the-way spot. Besides conjuring up cool green shade dotted with light, these images stress that Coleridge plays a part in getting his friends here, even if he can't lead them himself. This dell, "of which [he] told" them, might be tricky to find your way into if someone hadn't given you directions.

As he pictures his friends descending into the dell, Coleridge's focus narrows. He pictures a single tree, a "slim," frail ash that looks as if it's "fling[ing]" itself across the water. "Unsunn'd and damp," it's eking out an existence down here in the shadows—and while its "few poor yellow leaves" are never touched by the wind down in this sheltered valley, they "tremble still" in the little breeze from the falling water.

This intense, specific imagery presents this tree as an individual being, one tree in particular out of all the trees in the world. Coleridge has clearly gazed at this tree for some time—and his past careful attention to its movements and form now gives his imagination room to work. Knowing the specific ash tree his friends will see, imaginatively inhabiting its leaves as they're "fann'd by the water-fall," Coleridge also knows something exact about what it's like to be in the dell, making the ash tree a genuine "bridg[e]" between one place and another, one person and another.

Coleridge pays similar meticulous attention to the "dark green file of long lank weeds" that all drip together under the rocks of the waterfall, to the single boat that he imagines traversing a "slip of smooth clear blue" between two islands of purple cloud-shadow on the ocean, and to the "yellow light" that makes "distant groves" seem to come alive. In these images, the poem's eye moves from the minute to the sweeping, finding the same beauty and life at every level of magnification.

At the end of the poem, Coleridge realizes that he's been soaking up the beauty of the natural world not just in his imagination, but right where he sits in the lime-tree bower. His images here are no less precise: he describes a single "broad and sunny leaf" as it captures the imprinted shadow of a leaf above it, the "gleam" of elm branches pale through twilit ivy, and the sound of a "solitary humble-bee" as it "sings in the bean-flower"—all visions that suggest quiet, careful attention, an attunement to things that one might easily overlook.

The poem's intensely specific imagery ultimately suggests that, if you sit outside and look carefully at what's in front of you, you'll find it full of meaning, consolation, even wisdom. Coleridge's attention to apparently ordinary sights brings them—and him—to life.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-16:** "The roaring dell, o'erwooded, narrow, deep, / And only speckled by the mid-day sun; / Where its slim trunk the ash from rock to rock / Flings arching like a bridge;—that branchless ash, / Unsunn'd and damp, whose few poor yellow leaves / Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still, / Fann'd by the water-fall!"
- **Lines 17-20:** "the dark green file of long lank weeds, / That all at once (a most fantastic sight!) / Still nod and drip beneath the dripping edge / Of the blue clay-stone."
- **Lines 23-27:** "The many-steepled tract magnificent / Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea, / With some fair bark, perhaps, whose sails light up / The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles / Of purple shadow!"
- **Lines 33-38:** "Ah! slowly sink / Behind the western ridge, thou glorious Sun! / Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb, / Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds! / Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves! / And kindle, thou blue Ocean!"
- **Line 40:** "Silent with swimming sense"
- **Lines 49-61:** "Pale beneath the blaze / Hung the

transparent foliage; and I watch'd / Some broad and sunny leaf, and lov'd to see / The shadow of the leaf and stem above / Dappling its sunshine! And that walnut-tree / Was richly ting'd, and a deep radiance lay / Full on the ancient ivy, which usurps / Those fronting elms, and now, with blackest mass / Makes their dark branches gleam a lighter hue / Through the late twilight: and though now the bat / Wheels silent by, and not a swallow twitters, / Yet still the solitary humble-bee / Sings in the bean-flower!"

- **Lines 70-76:** "the last rook / Beat its straight path along the dusky air / Homewards, I blest it! deeming its black wing / (Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light) / Had cross'd the mighty Orb's dilated glory, / While thou stood'st gazing; or, when all was still, / Flew creeking o'er thy head,"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism shapes a dramatic climax toward the end of the poem's second stanza. As Coleridge pictures the glorious vista he imagines his friends must be gazing at even now, he stage-directs it in his mind:

> [...] Ah! slowly sink
> Behind the western ridge, thou glorious Sun!
> Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb,
> Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds!
> Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!
> And kindle, thou blue Ocean!

All those powerful verbs tell the natural world to be the most intense version of itself possible: to blaze with color and beauty and life. And lining up these instructions one after the other, Coleridge sounds like a cross between a magician and a conductor. Fed by his memories of this landscape, he *re-creates* it in his mind, imaginatively orchestrating the loveliest possible version of a lovely scene.

The parallelism here thus shapes a heightened moment of imaginative generosity. Coleridge is inspired by the remembered beauty of nature, excited by his own creative power, and full of love as he conjures the best possible sunset for his friends.

After he returns from this imaginative height, he finds himself still in the humble lime-tree bower—and realizes that the soothing sights and sounds of the garden around him have played a part in his slow movement from self-pity to empathy, too. He concludes:

> [...] Henceforth I shall know
> That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure;
> No plot so narrow, be but Nature there,
> No waste so vacant, but may well employ
> Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart
> Awake to Love and Beauty! [...]

This forceful anaphora on "no" (alongside broader parallelism) frames a statement of deep faith in nature's power. One doesn't need to be looking at a glorious vista to draw wisdom and consolation from the natural world: a weed in a "waste," carefully enough examined, offers the same gifts as a hillside at sunset.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 33:** "sink"
- **Line 35:** "Shine"
- **Line 36:** "burn"
- **Line 37:** "Live"
- **Line 38:** "kindle"
- **Line 63:** "No plot so narrow"
- **Line 64:** "No waste so vacant"

SIMILE

A single unobtrusive simile sits at the poem's heart.

When Coleridge begins to get outside his self-pity and imagine what his friends must be seeing now, he envisions the little "dell" he directed them to. What he sees isn't just the dell in general—though he does paint a vivid picture of its deep, sun-dappled shadow and its "roaring" waterfall. No, he looks even more closely, singling out an ash tree that grows near the water:

> [...] its slim trunk the ash from rock to rock
> Flings arching like a bridge;—that branchless ash,
> Unsunn'd and damp, whose few poor yellow leaves
> Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still,
> Fann'd by the water-fall! [...]

Coleridge has clearly spent some time contemplating this one frail little tree, which never sees enough sunlight to grow green leaves or branches. Nevertheless it *grows*, arching across the waterfall "like a bridge."

That simile, like the ash tree itself, might seem unremarkable at first. To "arch like a bridge" is almost a commonplace; arching is just what bridges do. Here, though, this tree's arching bridge is also the bridge between Coleridge and his friends. As Coleridge pictures the scene, what stands out to him is a stunted, not-very-healthy plant that nonetheless takes on a connective shape; he's found, in his memory of the dell, an image for exactly what he's doing right now. Injured, limited, held in one place, he still flings his imagination "like a bridge" to the place he'd rather be. Those few trembling leaves become images of his own acute senses, "fann'd by the water-fall" that

they only imagine.

The simile of the arching ash bridges the gap between the *reader* and Coleridge, too. As Wordsworth put it in his great Immortality Ode, "there's a tree, of many, one": Coleridge treats this tree as an individual, distinct from all others. He thus fixes the reader's eye on an exact, shared point.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** "its slim trunk the ash from rock to rock / Flings arching like a bridge"

REPETITION

Coleridge's repetitions often help to create the impression that he's musing to himself, following a spontaneous train of thought. Listen, for instance, to the moment when his imagination lifts off:

> [...] They, meanwhile,
> Friends, whom I never more may meet again,
> On springy heath, along the hill-top edge,
> Wander in gladness, and wind down, perchance,
> To that still roaring dell, of which I told;
> The roaring dell, o'erwooded, narrow, deep,

Up until this point, Coleridge has been feeling rather self-pitying. The thought of "the roaring dell," though—and perhaps the imagined *sound* of that dell, whose roaring waterfall one hears before one sees it—lifts him out of the pleasant, leafy "prison" where he sits and transports him to the place he imagines his friends must be now.

A similar effect appears in the final stanza when he *returns* to where he sits:

> A delight
> Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad
> As I myself were there! Nor in this bower,
> This little lime-tree bower, have I not mark'd
> Much that has sooth'd me. [...]

Here, it's as if he's awaking from a dream, his vision getting clearer and clearer. What at first is just a "bower" becomes the familiar "little lime-tree bower" as his eyes refocus—or, perhaps, as his mind's eye gives way to his body's.

In between these moments of liftoff and touchdown, other repetitions quietly mirror the work of the imagination. When Coleridge pictures the skinny little ash tree that "flings arching like a bridge" across the waterfall, for instance, he notes that it leaps from "rock to rock"—a moment of diacope that also reflects the leap *Coleridge* is making between imagined rock and physical rock.

That tree's leaves "Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still"; nearby, "long lank weeds" grow under the waterfall, where they "nod and drip beneath the dripping edge / Of the blue clay-stone." Such repetitions subtly reinforce images of doubling and simultaneity. The leaves that don't tremble in the wind, but *do* tremble in the breeze of the waterfall are also rather like the leaves that tremble in Coleridge's imagination: the wind has never touched those, either, but they're still trembling. And the polyptoton that makes the weeds and the stone drip together present an image of different things caught up in the same stream—an image that reflects Coleridge's larger philosophy, in which all life is one.

Another meaningful repetition appears in Coleridge's frequent apostrophes to Charles Lamb, who's always "my gentle-hearted Charles." "Gentle-hearted" practically becomes a Homeric epithet, an echoing tag that tells you something important about what it describes. Both Lamb's sweetness and Coleridge's affection for his friend shine through whenever these words appear.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "roaring dell"
- **Line 10:** "roaring dell"
- **Line 12:** "rock to rock"
- **Line 15:** "tremble," "tremble"
- **Line 19:** "drip," "dripping"
- **Line 22:** "wide wide"
- **Line 29:** "My gentle-hearted Charles!"
- **Lines 32-33:** "evil and pain / And strange calamity!"
- **Lines 47-48:** "this bower, / This little lime-tree bower"
- **Line 69:** "joy," "joys"
- **Line 70:** "My gentle-hearted Charles!"
- **Line 77:** "gentle-hearted Charles"

HYPERBOLE

As the poem begins, Coleridge is feeling pretty sorry for himself. The pleasant, leafy "lime-tree bower" in which he sits might as well be a "prison," he declares, in the first of several hyperbolic moments of gloom.

Not only is he jailed here in the garden, he complains, he's missing out on a day with friends whom he "never more may meet again": what if this were the very last time he were ever to see them, huh? And what if the "beauties and feelings" he's lost by missing this hike would have been memories he'd treasure for a lifetime, comforts he would have been able to turn to in his old age? Truly, his plight is dreadful.

All this melodramatic self-pity sets up Coleridge's gradual reorientation from self toward other. At first wrapped up in his own discontent and sulking like a grounded teenager, Coleridge gradually finds himself reaching out to the friends he so much wants to be with, then inhabiting them imaginatively, then sincerely wishing them well—and then realizing that his

predicament isn't so very terrible after all. His initial hyperbole offers the opportunity for a transformation.

While Coleridge's worries are certainly hyperbolic, they're not ludicrous. It's *unlikely* that he'll never see his friends again, but not impossible—and perhaps the thought that he might just have unwittingly waved goodbye to them forever is part of what helps him to reorient himself later on. While much of Coleridge's attitude in these early lines is over the top and self-pitying, there's also sincere feeling here: a sense that it would be truly disastrous never to see such great friends again and a genuine conviction that time spent in their company might furnish a guy with lifelong memories.

In a biographical light, Coleridge's hyperbole might even respond to the recent tragedy in Charles Lamb's family. For "gentle-hearted Charles" is much on Coleridge's mind here. The year before Coleridge wrote this poem, Lamb had returned home to discover that his beloved sister Mary had suffered what we might now diagnose as a psychotic break, stabbing their mother to death. Such horrific "calamity," Coleridge and Lamb were both very well aware, could descend without warning. Less gravely, even the injury that kept Coleridge at home that day was the effect of unhappy chance: Coleridge's wife Sara accidentally spilled boiling milk on his foot.

Coleridge's hyperbole, then, works on two levels. On the one hand, it's gently self-mocking, painting an honest picture of a rather self-centered, melodramatic, and sulky side of Coleridge's personality. On the other, it introduces a philosophically serious fear of loss. Any time you see a friend *may* be the last time—and in that light, Coleridge's eventual surrender to imagination and to empathy becomes a quiet act of faith, a decision to trust in the joy he trusts his friends are feeling.

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-6:** "This lime-tree bower my prison! I have lost / Beauties and feelings, such as would have been / Most sweet to my remembrance even when age / Had dimm'd mine eyes to blindness! They, meanwhile, / Friends, whom I never more may meet again,"

VOCABULARY

Bower (Line 2) - A sheltered place overhung with plants, usually containing a bench or sitting place.

Perchance (Line 8) - Perhaps.

Dell (Line 9, Line 10) - A little wooded valley.

O'erwooded (Line 10) - Overgrown with trees.

Fantastic (Line 18) - Strange, magical, uncanny.

Many-steepled (Line 23) - Full of church towers.

Bark (Line 25) - Sailboat.

Methinks (Line 28) - I think.

Pined (Line 29) - Poignantly longed.

Calamity (Line 33) - Misfortune, disaster.

Richlier burn (Line 36) - That is, glow with even richer colors.

Kindle (Line 38) - Catch fire. (Coleridge is using the word metaphorically, encouraging the ocean to gleam even brighter.)

Gross (Line 42) - Crudely material.

Hues (Line 42) - Colors.

Ting'd (Line 54) - A contraction of "tinged," tinted.

Usurps (Line 55) - Overthrows (or, in this case, overgrows).

Plot (Line 63) - Spot of ground.

Faculty of sense (Line 65) - That is, each of the senses.

'Tis well (Line 67) - It's good or fortunate.

Bereft (Line 67) - Deprived.

Blest (Line 72) - An old-fashioned spelling of "blessed."

Deeming (Line 72) - Judging, reckoning, deciding.

The mighty Orb's dilated glory (Line 74) - That is, the glory of the sun as it sets, seeming to spread out wide (or "dilate") on the horizon.

Creeking (Line 76) - The sound of this word evokes the caw of the rook (a bird in the crow family).

Dissonant (Line 78) - Discordant, unharmonious.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" is part of a series that critics have dubbed Coleridge's "conversation poems." While Coleridge didn't formally group these eight poems himself, later readers see them as related by both the philosophy Coleridge explores in them—the idea of the world as a manifestation of a unifying, loving God—and by their voice. Coleridge always speaks as himself in these poems, and he often addresses a loved one, from his little son Hartley to his unrequited beloved Sara Hutchison to his friend and collaborator William Wordsworth. But the poems are also conversations with himself, and they're full of his fervent personality. A dazzling talker and a brilliant thinker, Coleridge used these verses to both explore and declare his beliefs.

This meditative poem, like a number of the conversation poems, is written in blank verse—that is, unrhymed iambic pentameter. Over the course of the poem's 78 lines, Coleridge makes this august old form his own: the poem sounds, well, conversational, full of musing repetitions and joyous outbursts.

This form also elegantly tracks a developing line of thought.

When Coleridge breaks a line in the middle to mark a new phase in the poem (breaks that divide the poem roughly into three stanzas), readers can *see* how his mind, like the bridging ash tree, has flung itself between one place and another, letting him cross to somewhere new.

METER

"This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" is written in blank verse—lines of unrhymed iambic pentameter. That means that each line uses five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in line 9 for example:

To that | still roar- | ing dell | to which | I told;

This is a familiar meter in English-language poetry, and its steady flow almost fades into the background, like the constant roar of the waterfall in the poem's dell. Presented in this hypnotic rhythm, Coleridge's thoughts feel conversational and spontaneous.

Iambic pentameter's flexibility helps create that effect, too. There's room for variation in this meter, and Coleridge doesn't have to stick rigidly to iambs all the way through. Listen to the very first line, for instance:

Friends, whom | I nev- | er more | may meet | again,

The trochee that begins the line (the opposite of an iamb, with a DUM-da rhythm) adds some extra sulky force to the lines in which Coleridge laments all he's missing: Old Sam will just have to sit here *all alone* rather than making *lifelong memories* with his friends whom he may *never see again*, I *guess*!

RHYME SCHEME

Written in blank verse, "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" doesn't use a rhyme scheme. That's part of what gives this "conversation poem" its conversational tone. Coleridge's voice here is certainly musical, but more subtly so than it would have been in a rhyming poem. Readers seem to be getting a glimpse at Coleridge's thoughts as they unfurl organically as leaves.

Of course, that's all part of Coleridge's purpose, a careful and crafty choice. This poem is meant to feel immediate, as if it were a moment-by-moment record of Coleridge's experience, and the lack of rhyme helps to create that impression.

Blank verse has its own grandeur too, though. Coleridge may have been thinking of no less majestic predecessor than John Milton when he turned to the form. Milton used blank verse in his epic *Paradise Lost* to "justify the ways of God to man"—a daring and ambitious project, to put it mildly. Coleridge, innovatively, uses this august form to trace the movements of one man's mind as it moves through the everyday world, tiptoeing toward the sublime by way of the ordinary.

SPEAKER

"This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" records a real incident in the poet's life, and the speaker is Coleridge himself. While Coleridge's friends Charles Lamb, William Wordsworth, and Dorothy Wordsworth were visiting him in Devon, an unfortunate kitchen mishap (Coleridge's wife Sara spilled a pan of boiling milk on his foot) meant that Coleridge couldn't join the group for their favorite activity: a long stride through the countryside. Left sulking under a lime tree in his friend Thomas Poole's back garden, Coleridge passed the time by writing the first draft of this poem.

Coleridge's distinctive voice, irrepressible personality, and philosophy are all on display here. He has his moments of emotional hyperbole and self-pity; his fascinated, precise, almost hypnotic attention to the natural world; his big-hearted sympathy and enthusiasm; and, last but far from least, his fervent belief in the unity of all life.

SETTING

There's a clear and specific setting in this poem: Somerset, the region of southwestern England where Coleridge and his family lived in the early years of his marriage. More specifically than that, it's set near the Quantocks, a beautiful, hilly part of the countryside. More specifically than that, it's set in a garden; more specifically than that, it's set under the lime trees that grow in that garden. (Though Coleridge doesn't mention it in the poem proper, scholars even know which garden this was: it belonged to Coleridge's friend Thomas Poole, who often invited Coleridge over to have a sit and a scribble.) The setting here isn't just precise, but personal, laden with memory and feeling.

While Coleridge's body never leaves his spot under the lime trees, his mind goes out rambling with his friends. Borne along on Coleridge's imagination, readers take in not just the gentle beauty of the garden where he sits, but a wide view of sea, hill, and wood—the view he knows his friends must be delighting in even now. Envisioning these sights, to Coleridge, becomes as joyous an experience as seeing them: he finds himself taking part in nature's beauty and his friends' pleasure from afar, spiritually present if physically remote.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) was one of the most brilliant, inspired, and troubled of the English Romantic poets. A big personality and bigger talker, Coleridge privately suffered from self-doubt, bone-deep loneliness, and (eventually) opium

addiction. For a time, he found balance and friendship with the more grounded and temperate William Wordsworth; the inspired collaboration between these two poets would produce *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), a book often credited as the founding text of English Romanticism.

In *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge and Wordsworth took on two sides of the Romantic coin. Wordsworth's poetry focused on everyday country life and the wisdom of the natural world; Coleridge's work was wild and magical, populated by strange spirits. Both of these attitudes were deeply Romantic in their way: the Romantic poets believed both that poetry should be plainspoken and down-to-earth, and that it should also explore the outer reaches of the imagination.

"This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" similarly unites a humble, familiar setting with lofty metaphysics. Critics group this poem with eight others Coleridge wrote between 1795 and 1807, calling them the "conversation poems." Though Coleridge didn't formally link these poems himself, they share meaningful similarities: all are narrated by Coleridge, all address an important player or symbol in Coleridge's life (like his unrequited love Sara Hutchison and his baby son Hartley), all combine close attention to everyday life with philosophical grandeur—and all are, in a sense, Coleridge's conversations with himself, explorations of his own consciousness. Coleridge first drafted "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" in 1797, enclosing it in a letter to his buddy Robert Southey; this, the best-known and final version, was published in Coleridge's 1834 collection *Poetical Works*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This poem records a moment in a real-life friendship: the warm lifelong connection between Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Charles Lamb. The two met as undergraduates, and both became notable writers. Both, too, endured some serious troubles.

Some of Coleridge's struggles were (arguably) his own fault. Seized by enthusiasm for a utopian community he planned to found with his friend Robert Southey, he married Sara Fricker, a lady he didn't especially love, because Southey was marrying her sister and it seemed convenient. Neither the Coleridge marriage nor the utopian community panned out. Coleridge and Fricker fought almost from the start, and would eventually separate—a scandalous choice in early 19th-century England.

At the time this poem was written, the couple were still not-very-happily living together near the Quantocks (a lovely range of hills in southwestern England). The injury that kept Coleridge at home on the day he wrote this poem was due to a domestic accident: Sara spilled a pot of boiling milk on his foot.

Charles Lamb's troubles, meanwhile, were just plain cruel misfortune. Both Charles and his beloved sister Mary, with whom he lived and collaborated on writing projects, endured serious bouts of mental illness. Mary's were considerably more severe, however, and out of them grew a family tragedy. In 1796, the year before this poem was written, she had what modern medicine might call a psychotic break and fatally stabbed her mother. Mary would spend the rest of her life in and out of mental institutions; when she felt a bad spell coming on, Charles would walk her to a hospital, brother and sister both in tears.

When Coleridge speaks of the "evil and pain / And strange calamity" that Charles has suffered of late, then, he's really not kidding: the man very much needed a break from London and the dreadful things he and his loved ones had endured there. Coleridge was only one of the Lambs' many friends to remark on Charles's dauntlessly kind and gentle spirit in the face of terrible tragedy.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem in Manuscript — See some early versions of the poem in Coleridge's own hand. (https://www.themorgan.org/blog/lime-tree-bower-my-prison-coleridge-isolation)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to Ian McKellen performing the poem. (https://youtu.be/Ta6Y8x33v-8)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Coleridge's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/samuel-taylor-coleridge)
- Portraits of Coleridge — Admire some portraits of Coleridge, both as a passionate young man and an older, sadder, wiser one. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp00966/samuel-taylor-coleridge)
- Coleridge and Lamb — Learn about the long friendship between Coleridge and his "gentle-hearted Charles." (https://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/MembersOnly/CB19Wedd.html)
- Coleridge's Legacy — Read a short appreciation of Coleridge's conversation poems that discusses their lasting effect on poetry. (https://agnionline.bu.edu/blog/its-just-us-talking-here-coleridges-conversation-poems/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SAMUEL COLERIDGE POEMS

- Dejection: An Ode
- Frost at Midnight
- Kubla Khan
- The Eolian Harp
- The Pains of Sleep

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Nelson, Kristin. "*This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 1 Jul 2019. Web. 11 Apr 2023.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "*This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison.*" LitCharts LLC, July 1, 2019. Retrieved April 11, 2023. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/samuel-taylor-coleridge/this-lime-tree-bower-my-prison.