

Evelyn Kardos:

The magical complexity of Coleridge's poetry
represented in "Frost at Midnight"

S. T. Coleridge's aim in the Lyrical Ballads, as agreed between him and William Wordsworth, was to make the readers interested in "persons and characters supernatural", and to make them believe, that these unfamiliar "shadows of imagination" show some resemblance with their everyday lives and feelings (6). However, amongst Coleridge's finest poems we find unique pieces, which differ from his poetic visions. As Kathleen Raine suggests, "many of Coleridge's . . . poems of the second order . . . speak a language common to . . . Wordsworth, the language of feeling and direct communication." (33) In these poems, Coleridge uses a similar poetic approach towards the everyday as Wordsworth, his fellow-poet, who relies on the observation of nature, which is the main source of inspiration for him, and meditates on memories, which are recalled by harmony found in nature. "Frost at Midnight" is a beautiful example of these literary treasures.

The poem "Frost at Midnight" was written in February 1798, and was most probably inspired by the days Coleridge spent with his wife and their first son, Hartley in Nether Stowey. Journalist and author John Cornwell emphasizes that this period in Coleridge's life is known to be calm and pleasant, during which he, often accompanied by William and Dorothy Wordsworth, took long walks in the countryside, observing the surrounding hills, woods and the sea, and enjoying the beauties of nature, which might have provided the setting to many of Coleridge's poems (209–210).

The starting point of "Frost at Midnight" is, thus, a sharp and frosty night, on which Coleridge, surrounded by silence and the warm interior of the cottage where his family sleeps, contemplates on the dark, calm, frozen outside world, which evokes his childhood memories. By linking his past with the present he expresses his hopes in connection with the future life of his son, who "sleep[s] cradled" (line 45) by the speaker's side. Traditionally, "Frost at Midnight" is grouped with the conversation poems of Coleridge. It addresses a figure, the speaker's son, and it speaks to its silent, attentive audience in a simple, kind language and in a

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touching, highly personal tone. In this way Jan Plug suggests the poem is a self-conversation, a meditative monologue rather than a real, two-sided conversation (35).

Coleridge's writings are generally thought to be fragmentary, often resembling a patchwork of events and details of his personal life combined with vivid images of his intuitive mind and imagination, still, he manages to interpret his thoughts and ideas in a coherent and consistent way, forming a whole within the frame of his poems (Raine 29). "Such consistency" claims Kathleen Raine additionally "is the mark of truly creative thinking" (29). Indeed, Coleridge uses several tools and poetic figures to establish and maintain this feature of his poetry.

Coleridge was a master of painting with words and portraying his thoughts by tropes. His most preferred symbols and figures of speech are built in the poem "Frost at Midnight" as well. John Livingston Lowes proposes that in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" the moon means more for Coleridge than just a heavenly body which gives light. By contributing to the perfect dark, deep quietness of the moments of a winter midnight, the Moon with its hazy shine provides the atmosphere of the poem, and gives inspiration to the poet by showing the other side of things. Thus, on a moonlit night the outside world and the familiar landscape with the hills and woods turn into their secret other sides, which cannot be seen during daylight (192–193).

The secrecy of the moon, referring to midnight, becomes complete with the image of ice, and the icicles, which are the products of the "Frost" and its "secret ministry" (line 1). John Bernard Beer observes that these two images, being symbolically present in the title of the poem as well, represent a frightening but perfect harmony, which controls the whole poem (247), and gives its "return-upon-itself structure" (Plug 27) by framing the beginning and the end of the poem.

"Frost at Midnight", however, is not a complete description of the silent harmony of nature in winter. The scene is "so calm, that it disturbs / And vexes meditation with its strange / And extreme silentness" (lines 8–10). Coleridge, being a Romantic poet, feels attraction to extremes, and applies opposites and contrasts in his poem. "Frost at Midnight" contains structural contrasts concerning, for instance, time and space. First, the poem starts in the present, when the speaker gives an account on his momentary "abstruser musings" (line 6) at his cottage, then, looking at the "fluttering film" (line 15), mentally he jumps into the past,

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recalling his childhood memories from his schoolboy years in London. Advancing in his memories, the speaker continues with a more remote remembrance of his birthplace and his life spent in the countryside. After this recollection, the speaker turns back to the closer past and his schoolboy years, and with the memory of his sister he attaches his train of thought again to the present, and turns his attention from himself to his sleeping son. The speaker imagines the future life of the infant and his joyful life in harmony with nature. The shifts between the inside and the outside world, or the contrast between active movements (fluttering) and passive objects (the blue flame which does not quiver), solitude and companionship, freedom and imprisonment, wakefulness and dreaming, silence and disturbance also serve as further examples of discrepancy.

On the other hand, parallels and similarities can also be traced as essential parts of the poem. Coleridge uses many repetitive figures. At the beginning of the poem, he doubles the voice of the owl, the cry of which "came loud" and "again! loud as before" (line 3). Later on, he almost turns into an owl by repeating his vision on "Sea, hill, and wood, / This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood, / With all the numberless goings-on of life" (lines 10–12). The grate of the fireplace is similar to the bar on the school window, both symbolizing the pent-up feeling of the soul, which desires freedom of thought and connection with nature. Parallels are often realized by chiasmuses, which are, as Plug observes, the most dominant rhetorical figures of the poem (32). Such inverted, ABBA schemed parallelism appears, for example, in the memory of the dream at school, when the speaker says: "So gazed I, till the soothing things, I *dreamt*, / Lulled me to *sleep*, and *sleep* prolonged my *dreams*!" (lines 35–36). The repetition is similar in those lines, in which the speaker depicts the vision of "lakes and sandy shores, beneath the *crag*s / Of *ancient mountain*" which are reflected in clouds "in their bulk both lakes and shores / And *mountain crag*s" (lines 56–59), or just like in the famous closing line, in which the secret activity of frost works with the "eave-drops" and hangs them up "in silent icicles, / *Quietly shining* to the *quiet Moon*" (lines 74–75).

Opposites and similarities uniquely unite in the image of the "fluttering film" on the grate, which, as a "speaking subject", becomes almost personified, as it is suggested in Plug's study, who claims, that "by troping the imagination thus, 'Frost at Midnight' shows the imagination at work rhetorically in the plays of the film" by a so-called *mirror identification* (28–29). In the strange, rarely experienced silence, explains Plug, the film seems to be also

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strange because of its restless motion in the calm and still environment. But at the same time, it is familiar to the speaker, and just like a reflection in a mirror it reminds him of another "film" in the past – the young poet himself, who, behind the bars of the school, "pent 'mid cloisters dim" (line 53), wistfully daydreamed about strangers, "townsman, or aunt, or sister more beloved" (line 43), who were, on the contrary, familiar to the speaker again. Thus, continues Plug, the word "stranger" also carries a level of ambiguity in itself. It refers to the expected visitors, who never arrive, and on the other hand, it is the film itself, playing and flapping at work as the speaker's mind and by personification it becomes familiar, as it is the speaker himself (28–31).

This high-level artistry creating such complexity, which nurtures both familiarity and unfamiliarity, allows several interpretations of the poem. Having been greatly influenced by Wordsworth and his appreciation of nature, in the poem "Frost at Midnight" the speaker expresses a deep "faith in the reciprocity of mind and nature" (Plug 31), in which God, as "the Great Universal Teacher" (line 64) is present, and he with the eternally and universally true language is shown to be the "unifying principle in the world" (Plug 36).

This principle, however, was only vaguely and dimly available for Coleridge, who grew up in the city of London, "and saw nought lovely but the sky and stars" (line 54). Consequently, in this poem the poet makes an unselfish, fatherly wish to give his child what he was not able to receive when he was a child: the closeness of nature, which gives the basis of pure thoughts, freedom, harmony and enjoyment, which guides the heart and shapes the spiritual being of his son. The explanation above can also answer the question of why Coleridge surrounded his poem and his heart-warming hopes for his son with a cold, dark, icy "film" in such a wintery poem. As the "secret ministry" of the "Frost" can be understood as a magical, although cold and frigid way of preserving the loveliness of nature, this poem works as the ice of a sudden frost, which marks the green leaves of plants and flowers. Coleridge chills his own wishes and hopes and offers an everlasting, frozen gift, the secret essence of life and happiness.

In conclusion, although "Frost at Midnight" shows similarities with the poetry of Wordsworth, who finds novelty and wonder in the everyday, and overcomes the "lethargy of custom" (Coleridge 6) with "familiar" wonders, Coleridge nevertheless puts his thoughts into an undeniably Coleridgean style, preserving the Romantic traditions, which are so typical of

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his poetry. The poem "Frost at Midnight" catches the moments of deep feelings, terrific and terrifying, deep, dark and quietly shining, embracing past and future with all the opposites and parallels of life, and takes a special and worthy place amongst the most beautiful works of Coleridge.

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