

# A Child's Sleep



## SUMMARY

The speaker hovered by her daughter's bedside as she slept, listening to the sound of the child's breath. The child was separated from her mother in sleep, but the speaker found herself unable to walk away.

The speaker envisioned the world that her daughter inhabited while sleeping as a dark little forest filled with sweet-smelling flowers, a calm, holy place that stretched on and on.

The child herself, the speaker continues, was that forest's heart and soul, suspended in the middle of those woods with no sense of time passing or of anything that came before her, pure and silent.

The speaker softly said her daughter's name aloud, which felt like dropping a little rock to the ground in the middle of a calm, quiet night. The child moved a little in response, seeming to hold the gentle light coming in through the window in the upturned palms of her hands.

The speaker went to stand in front of the glass and gazed out the darkness of the night, which was broader and deeper than within the room. The night itself seemed to look right back at her with its knowing, motherly expression.

peaceful rest, the poem thus implies, is the province of *childhood*, not adulthood. Calling her daughter "the spirit that lives / in the heart of such woods," the speaker suggests that this "sacred," serene rest belongs to the realm of childhood innocence. It's a holy place where "time" and "history" don't matter—a place where the present "good[ness]" of childhood has no end in sight.

In a way, then, her daughter's sleep reminds the speaker of their *separation* from each other—and of the fact that the innocence of the speaker's own childhood has given way to the loving wisdom of motherhood. Now, the speaker watches over her daughter, "hearing her breathe" and softly saying "her name," as if out of reverence.

Finally turning away from her child at the poem's end, the speaker looks out the window only to see the gentle, "maternal" darkness of the night "gaze back" at her. She seems to sense a kinship with this "wise" presence looking down over the world much like she gazes down on her daughter. The world itself seems to reflect the protective love she feels toward her child—the kind of love that allows for her child to rest in a place that is always "good."

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20



## THEMES



### CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE AND MATERNAL LOVE

"A Child's Sleep" presents a comforting portrait of a slumbering child whose parent watches over them through the night. In sleep, the speaker envisions her young daughter as the "spirit" of a lovely, tranquil forest that seems to go on forever. The fact that the speaker can't "enter" this forest alongside her daughter suggests that such deep, unburdened rest is something experienced only by children. And yet, the speaker also can't bring herself to leave her watchful post at her bedside. In this way, the poem at once shows great reverence for childhood innocence and vulnerability while also honoring the comforting, protective power of a mother's love.

The speaker presents children's sleep as something intensely peaceful and harmonious, describing her daughter's slumber as "a small wood," or forest, "perfumed with flowers." This tranquil, soothing image suggests just how deep and happy this sleep is. The speaker also says the child's "wood" is "acred in hours"; the forest of her "sleep" stretches on for miles.

Though the speaker stands right next to her daughter, she cannot "enter" the woods of her slumber. Such thoroughly



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-4

*I stood at ...  
... could not leave.*

The poem begins with the speaker standing next to her sleeping child. Right away, the poem treats this sleep as a kind of physical place or space: the speaker doesn't say that she's next to her daughter's crib or bed, but rather "at the edge of my child's sleep," as though this sleep is a kind of bubble enveloping the child. The speaker stands outside this realm, "hearing her breathe." Notice the use of soft /h/ [alliteration](#) here, which might subtly evoke the sound of the sleeping child's breath.

The speaker then builds on the idea of this "sleep" as a place by saying that she can't "enter" it alongside her daughter. The speaker can't literally enter her daughter's dreams, of course, but on a more figurative level, this line emphasizes the separation between childhood and adulthood. The speaker longs to be close to her daughter, but this line also suggests that she longs for the peace and innocence of childhood itself.

Despite being inherently separate from her child, the speaker

can't "leave" her daughter's side. Perhaps this is because she feels the need to protect her while she is in this vulnerable state. The [anaphora](#) of lines 3-4 (the [repetition](#) of "I could not") calls readers' attention to this sense of being stuck in place, separate from her child but unable to walk away.

The poem isn't written in [formal verse](#) and therefore does not use a set [meter](#). As this opening [quatrain](#) reveals, however, it does follow a very simple ABCB [rhyme scheme](#): every second and fourth line rhyme. This rhyme scheme gives the poem the cadence of a nursery rhyme or lullaby.

## LINES 5-8

*Her sleep was ...  
... aced in hours.*

The speaker builds on the idea of her child's "sleep" as an actual place. Here, the speaker says that this sleep is "a small wood perfumed with flowers." In other words, it's a small, sweet-smelling patch of forest. This [metaphor](#) presents the child's sleep as something natural and idyllic. Indeed, the speaker continues to describe it as "dark, peaceful, sacred, / aced in hours"—it's quiet and tranquil, and it seems to stretch on and on.

The use of the word "sacred" even suggests that there is something holy or divine about children's sleep. Perhaps this is because it's the sleep of the innocent—a place untouched by the burdens and cares of the adult world (which is another reason why the speaker can't "enter" this sleep alongside her daughter).

The use of [asyndeton](#) (the lack of coordinating conjunction between "sacred" and "aced in hours") grants the poem a pleasant rhythm while also eliminating any sense of hierarchy between these words. The fact that the child's sleep is "peaceful" is directly tied up with it being "aced in hours"—or spacious, without constraint. It is all of these things at once.

Notice, too, the use of sonic devices in this passage. For example, crisp /k/, thick /r/, and drumming /d/ [consonance](#) in lines 7-8 lend intensity to this moment, highlighting how captivated the speaker is by her daughter's perfect, uninterrupted sleep:

dark, peaceful, sacred,  
aced in hours.

[Sibilance](#) ("Her sleep was a small wood," "peaceful, sacred") evokes the hush of the night as well as the near-reverence of the speaker. And the quick [assonance](#) of "sacred" and "aced" turns these words into an [internal rhyme](#), adding yet more soothing music to the poem.

## LINES 9-12

*And she was ...  
... wordlessly good.*

The speaker's daughter isn't just a passing visitor in the lovely, calm forest in sleep. On the contrary, the child is "the spirit that lives / in the heart of such woods," the speaker says. In other words, the child is the very heart and soul of this [metaphorical](#) forest. This place can't exist without her.

While sleeping, the child is also "without time, without history, / wordlessly good." The [anaphora](#) here (the [repetition](#) of "without") calls attention to what childhood sleep lacks: there's no *past* in this forest of sleep, and there's no sense of time moving *forward* either (and thus inching the child closer to adulthood). The poem suggests that the thing that makes children's sleep so pure and refreshing is that they haven't accumulated all the experiences that adults have. They are still innocent, "good" without trying to be.

The [asyndeton](#) (the lack of coordinating conjunction between "history" and "wordlessly good") once again adds a soothing rhythm to the poem, and it also seems to suggest that the speaker could say much more about her daughter's sweetness and goodness (that this list could go on and on).

Notice the use of /w/ [alliteration](#) in lines 10-12 as well:

[...] woods;  
without time, without history,  
wordlessly good.

The /w/ sound is gentle and airy, evoking the peace of this sleepy world.

## LINES 13-16

*I spoke her ...  
... their soft light;*

The speaker interrupts the quiet scene by saying her daughter's name out loud. She [metaphorically](#) compares this action to dropping a "pebble [...] in the still night." This metaphor implies that the speaker has disrupted the peacefulness of the scene; saying her daughter's name was like dropping a little rock to the ground, its echo ringing out clearly against the otherwise quiet night.

The sounds of this stanza evoke the plop of that pebble, with /p/ and /d/ [consonance](#) puncturing the lines like a small stone bouncing along the ground. These percussive sounds contrast with the broader [sibilance](#) of the stanza, suggesting how speaking the daughter's name echoes through the silence:

I spoke her name, a pebble dropped  
in the still night,  
and saw her stir, both open palms  
cupping their soft light;

It's possible that part of the speaker *wants* to make her daughter "stir"—to reaffirm that her child is alive and well, and

to bring her back from a place that the speaker can't enter (i.e., the world of a child's sleep). And yet, the fact that the speaker compares saying her child's name to dropping a tiny "pebble"—as opposed to a larger, heavier stone—implies that she doesn't actually want to wake her daughter. She seems to say her name out of reverence, almost like a prayer.

In response, the child moves slightly. Her small palms are open at her side, "cupping" the "soft light" (probably a reference to moonlight seeping into the room) as though it were water. Light is a common [symbol](#) of purity, truth, and goodness. That the speaker's daughter holds this light in the palms of her hands thus reflects her sweetness and innocence.

Notice, too, the use of the pronoun "their" in line 16: the child's palms aren't "cupping the soft light"; they're "cupping **their** soft light." This suggests that the moonlight streaming in through the window *belongs* to the child. Light is also often linked with the divine; the speaker has already said that her child's sleep is a "sacred" space, and here she again implies that there's something holy about her daughter in this vulnerable state.

### LINES 17-20

*then went to ...  
... face of moon.*

In the poem's final stanza, the speaker steps away from her sleeping child for the first time. She moves toward "the window" in order to look out into the night—that "greater dark / outside the room."

Darkness often [symbolizes](#) fear, anxiety, and the unknown. On the one hand, the fact that the world outside the room is so dark suggests that the room itself is a kind of safe haven, a holy sanctuary in the middle of a frightening world.

At the same time, however, the speaker has already characterized the [metaphorical](#) forest of her daughter's sleep as "dark." The "greater dark / outside the room" might also be read as an extenuation of the "dark, peaceful, [and] sacred" state the child occupies in her sleep. In other words, this darkness isn't necessarily frightening or threatening; on the contrary, the speaker seems to feel calmed and reassured by this serene, vast darkness before her.

She even sees this darkness as being motherly. She [personifies](#) the night by saying that it "gazed back" at her with a "maternal" and "wise" expression. It's as if she feels a sense of kinship with the night, which seems to be watching over her the way she is watching over her daughter. In other words, she sees her own love and protectiveness mirrored back to her; the world "outside the room" provides her the same "still[ness]" and quiet that she herself provides for her daughter.

The fact that the night is looking at her kindly, "with its face of moon," also seems to imply that perhaps the speaker is not so far removed from childhood after all. Her connection to her daughter has made her aware of the way she is still a child of

the world, looked after by something "greater" than herself. The "good[ness]" of childhood has permeated the whole night, making everything feel safe and consecrated under the "light" of the watchful "moon."



## SYMBOLS



### DARKNESS AND LIGHT

Darkness often [symbolizes](#) the unknown, while light represents innocence and purity. On one level, the poem draws on this traditional symbolism: the child holds "soft light" in the palms of her hands, for example, which symbolically reflects her pure goodness, while the "greater dark / outside the room" might make the sleeping child's room itself sound like a warm, safe space in the middle of the unknown.

At the same time, however, the poem symbolically links darkness with the wonder and idyllic beauty of childhood. The child's sleep is "dark, peaceful, [and] sacred," for example—a description that places darkness right alongside tranquility and holiness. Darkness here suggests a haven from the burdens and cares of adult/waking life; it allows for quiet and peace.

Indeed, the speaker goes on to describe the vast darkness outside this room as both "maternal" and "wise, as though the night is a watchful mother gazing down on the earth. Darkness is thus ultimately linked not with fear and uncertainty, but with maternal wisdom and love—things that, like the darkness of night itself, allow for the child's comfortable uninterrupted sleep. Darkness is the backdrop against which the child's innocent light shines.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-7:** "Her sleep was a small wood, / perfumed with flowers; / dark, peaceful, sacred,"
- **Lines 17-20:** "The greater dark / outside the room / gazed back, maternal, wise, / with its face of moon."



## POETIC DEVICES

### ASYNDETON

[Asyndeton](#) adds to the poem's gentle, soothing rhythm and to the speaker's meditative [tone](#). In lines 7-8, for example, the speaker uses asyndeton while describing the [metaphorical](#) "wood" of her daughter's sleep:

dark, peaceful, sacred,  
acred in hours.

The lack of any coordinating conjunction ("and") between "sacred" and "acred in hours" speeds the poem up a little, and it

also suggests that this list isn't necessarily a *complete* one. It's as if the speaker could go on and on describing the wonderful characteristics of her child's sleep. The lack of conjunctions also eliminates any sense of hierarchy between the different parts of the sentence; it's just as important that the child's sleep is "dark" as it is "acred in hours"—or that she has as much time to sleep as she needs.

There's more asyndeton in lines 11-12. While sleeping, the speaker's daughter is:

without time, without history,  
wordlessly good.

Again, the lack of coordinating conjunction between "history" and "wordlessly good" speeds up the poem, making it feel as though the speaker is just thinking aloud while she watches her sleeping daughter. Asyndeton also makes this list feel very similar to the previous one so that even though there is no actual [repetition](#) between those lines and these, the *rhythms* of the poem feel familiar and therefore soothing.

The speaker turns to asyndeton one last time in the poem's closing lines:

gazed back, maternal, wise,  
with its face of moon.

Again, the lack of any conjunctions here helps the poem feel more soothing and contemplative.

#### Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "dark, peaceful, sacred, / acred in hours."
- **Lines 11-12:** "without time, without history, / wordlessly good."
- **Lines 19-20:** "gazed back, maternal, wise, / with its face of moon."

## ANAPHORA

There are two examples of [anaphora](#) in the poem. These, much like [asyndeton](#) and [rhyme](#), lend the poem a familiar, soothing rhythm. Listen to the repetition of "I could not" in lines 3-4, for example:

although I **could not** enter there,  
I **could not** leave.

On one level, this anaphora simply adds a pleasing cadence to the poem. The [parallelism](#) between these two statements also emphasizes the fact that the speaker is, in a sense, stuck right where she is—unable to join her daughter but also unable to turn away. The speaker's vigil is really the only thing she *can* do while her daughter sleeps, and the hypnotic repetition here

evokes the hold that her daughter's peaceful state has over her. Later, in line 11, there's more anaphora as the speaker describes her daughter in this tranquil dream world. She says she is:

without time, without history,

This again adds a soothing, hypnotic rhythm to the poem. The repetition of the word "without" also emphasizes what it is that makes this "child's sleep" so special, even "sacred": it is untouched by, *without*, the burdens of the world. One day this child will grow up, but, for now, she exists in a seemingly timeless state, reveling in the precious "hours" of childhood.

#### Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "I could not enter there, / I could not leave."
- **Line 11:** "without time, without history,"

## IMAGERY

The poem uses [imagery](#) in the fourth stanza to illustrate the absolute tranquility of the night and the close connection shared by the speaker and her daughter:

I spoke her name, a pebble dropped  
in the still night,  
a saw her stir, both open palms  
cupping their soft light;

The night is so quiet, so utterly motionless, that the smallest sound is like a "pebble" being "dropped" to the ground, or perhaps into a still pond; the speaker's word causes a ripple to spread through the night. The daughter "stir[s]" in response to this sound, slightly changing positions so that her hands seem to "cup[]" the moonlight coming in through the window.

On one level, this image suggests a strong, instinctual connection between mother and daughter: even though the child doesn't wake up, she responds to her mother's voice and her body language is "open" and receptive. This seems to comfort the speaker, given that she walks away toward the "window" in the next line. Perhaps she only spoke her daughter's name to make sure that her child was still within reach, that she hadn't disappeared entirely into the "woods" of her slumber.

Also note that light is usually a [symbol](#) of truth and purity. Here, then, the image of a sleeping child gently "cupping" light in her "open palms" speaks to her innocence.

#### Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-16:** "I spoke her name, a pebble dropped / in the still night, / and saw her stir, both open palms /"

cupping their soft light;"

## METAPHOR

The poem uses [metaphors](#) to paint a vivid picture of the child's "peaceful" slumber. In the second stanza, for example, the speaker metaphorically describes her daughter's sleep as "a small wood, / perfumed with flowers." In other words, in sleep, it's like her daughter has entered a little flower-filled forest. With this metaphor, the speaker presents her daughter's sleep as something natural, tranquil, and idyllic.

The speaker goes on to say that her daughter is "the spirit that lives / in the heart of such woods." This metaphor implies that these beautiful woods of sleep can't exist without a child to inhabit them; the child is the heart and soul of "such woods," giving them life. And while sleeping, that child seems almost otherworldly—disconnected entirely from "time" and "history." She is almost too "good" to be human at all; there is something "sacred" about her in this state, the speaker says. (In watching over her, perhaps the speaker feels connected to something sacred as well.)

In lines 13-14, the speaker uses the metaphor of a falling "pebble" to describe the speaker's speech, implying that the night is so utterly "still" and quiet that even a single word feels disruptive, out of place.

The final stanza contains one final metaphor, as the speaker describes the "greater dark" of the night as "gaz[ing] back" upon the speaker with a "maternal, wise" look. The speaker is [personifying](#) the night here, treating it as a motherly figure that looks down upon the earth (and the speaker herself) with a knowing gaze. Through this, the poem suggests that the speaker feels a certain kinship with the night: that she sees her own motherly love for her daughter being mirrored back to her by her environment. The steadfast "face of [the] moon" reminds her of her own vigilance and "wis[dom]" as she cares for her child. It might even make her feel as if she, too, is being watched over with love and care by something "greater" than herself.

### Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "Her sleep was a small wood, / perfumed with flowers;"
- **Lines 9-10:** "And she was the spirit that lives / in the heart of such woods;"
- **Lines 13-14:** "I spoke her name, a pebble dropped / in the still night,"
- **Lines 17-20:** "The greater dark / outside the room / gazed back, maternal, wise, / with its face of moon."

## CONSONANCE

The poem uses gentle [consonance](#) throughout, which makes its language sound soothing and lyrical. For example, listen to the

breathy /h/ sounds (which are also an example of [alliteration](#)) in line 2:

hearing her breathe;

These sounds evoke the very breath being described. Readers might also pick on the soft repetition of the /r/ sound in all three words, which, while less obvious than that /h/ alliteration, lends a certain cohesiveness to the line.

The second stanza has even more consonance. Listen to the /p/, /r/, /f/, /d/, and /k/ sounds in lines 6-8:

perfumed with flowers;  
dark, peaceful, sacred,  
acred in hours.

There's even a subtle [internal rhyme](#) here, thanks to the [assonance](#) of "sacred" and "acred." Altogether, the rich, intricate sounds of this stanza make the language more musical and memorable while also evoking the endless beauty of childhood. The heightened, intensely lyrical language here reflects the speaker's reverence for her child's deep, innocent sleep.

In the fourth stanza, crisp /p/ and delicate /t/ consonance mixes with soft, soothing [sibilance](#):

I spoke her name, a pebble dropped  
in the still night,  
and saw her stir, both open palms  
cupping their soft light;

That sibilance casts a gentle hush over the scene—which the bright /p/ sounds briefly threaten to interrupt; when the speaker says her daughter's "name," for just a second it seems as if the night's "peaceful" spell will be broken and the child's rest disturbed.

### Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "hearing her breathe"
- **Line 5:** "sleep was," "small wood"
- **Line 6:** "perfumed," "flowers"
- **Lines 7-8:** "dark, peaceful, sacred, / acred"
- **Line 8:** "hours"
- **Line 10:** "woods"
- **Line 11:** "without," "without"
- **Line 12:** "wordlessly"
- **Line 13:** "spoke," "pebble dropped"
- **Line 14:** "still night"
- **Line 15:** "saw," "stir"
- **Lines 15-16:** "open palms / cupping"
- **Line 16:** "soft light"

- **Line 17:** “went,” “window”

## SIBILANCE

**Sibilance** (a specific type of **consonance**) evokes the quietness of the night and the speaker's tenderness as she watches her sleeping child. Take a look at lines 5-7, for example:

Her sleep was a small wood  
[...]  
dark, peaceful, sacred,

The /s/ sounds aren't overwhelming here; instead, they're just prevalent enough to add a soothing hush to the poem that suggests peace and tranquility of the child's rest.

The poem's fourth stanza features plenty of sibilance as well, with the /s/ sounds of "spoke," "still," "saw," "stir," and "soft." The fact that the sibilance appears at the start of each of these words (i.e., the words are all **alliterative**) makes those /s/ sounds stand out even more clearly. Even when the speaker nearly disrupts the child's sleep by saying her name aloud, sibilance keeps the stanza feeling quiet and tender.

### Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** “sleep,” “small”
- **Line 7:** “peaceful,” “sacred”
- **Line 9:** “spirit”
- **Line 10:** “such,” “woods”
- **Line 11:** “history”
- **Line 12:** “wordlessly”
- **Line 13:** “spoke”
- **Line 14:** “still”
- **Line 15:** “saw,” “stir”
- **Line 16:** “soft”

## ALLITERATION

In addition to **consonance** and **sibilance**, the poem uses **alliteration** to fill its lines with gentle music. The breathy /h/ sounds in "hearing her" in line 2, for example, evoke the sound of the child's breath as she's sleeping.

Later, /w/ sounds help to build a sense of momentum across lines 10-12:

in the heart of such woods;  
without time, without history,  
wordlessly good.

The alliteration here overlaps with **anaphora** and **asyndeton**; altogether, these rhythmic devices grant the lines speed and power, as though they're ramping up in intensity. The breathy /w/ sounds might also evoke the vast, peaceful expanse of the

**metaphorical** "woods" being described here.

### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “hearing,” “her”
- **Line 5:** “sleep,” “small”
- **Line 10:** “woods”
- **Line 11:** “without,” “without”
- **Line 12:** “wordlessly”
- **Line 15:** “saw,” “stir”
- **Line 17:** “went,” “window”

## ENJAMBMENT

The poem uses a mix of **enjambement** and **end-stopped** lines to create its unhurried, reflective pace. Listen to lines 1-2, for example:

I stood at the edge of my child's sleep  
hearing her breathe;

Some readers might consider line 1 end-stopped, given the implied grammatical pause after the word "sleep." Still, the lack of a comma where readers expect one encourages them to move swiftly past the line break. Through this subtle enjambment, the poem evokes both the closeness of and distance between the speaker and her daughter: there's no punctuation separating line 1, where the speaker stands, from line 2, where her daughter "breathe[s]."

At other moments, the enjambment is more pronounced. Take line 9, where the lack of any pause between "lives / in" reflects the child's closeness with the woods. And in the fourth stanza, a balanced mix of enjambement and end-stopped lines creates a start and stop, push and pull feel:

I spoke her name, a pebble dropped  
in the still night,  
and saw her stir, both open palms  
cupping their soft light;

The reader is pushed forward from the first line to the second, then given a chance to pause with the word "night"; they're likewise pushed from the third line to the fourth and then again given the chance to pause with the word "light." Through this rhythm, readers might get the sense of the speaker inching closer to wake her daughter and then holding herself back.

Lines 17-19 are the only lines in the poem where there are more than a single enjambement line in a row:

then went to the window. The greater dark  
outside the room  
gazed back, maternal, wise,

These two enjambments lend a little momentum to the final stanza and perhaps even evoke a sensation of the world expanding as the speaker turns to look "outside the room."

Do note that, for the most part, the end-stops throughout the poem are subtle; many lines feature only the slight pauses of commas and semicolons. Some readers might even call the comma-stopped line 7 enjambment, given that line 8 is simply a continuation of the same list:

dark, peaceful, sacred,  
acred in hours.

However readers interpret these lines, the poem maintains the sensation of slowly, steadily moving deeper into the daughter's dream world without ever rushing recklessly forward. (By contrast, note how firm the full stops after "leave" or "hours" feel: these periods leave no room for argument, emphasizing that the speaker is stuck in place and that the daughter's sleep will not be interrupted.)

#### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "sleep / hearing"
- **Lines 9-10:** "lives / in"
- **Lines 13-14:** "dropped / in"
- **Lines 15-16:** "palms / cupping"
- **Lines 17-18:** "dark / outside"
- **Lines 18-19:** "room / gazed"

## CAESURA

[Caesurae](#) slow the poem down at important moments, in turn adding to the speaker's calm, quiet [tone](#). The speaker is never rushing here; rather, she is thoughtfully, reverently reflecting on what it's like to watch her child sleep. Take a look at line 7, for example, where the speaker describes her child's sleep as:

dark, peaceful, sacred,

The subtle caesurae break the line up into three distinct parts, encouraging the reader to pause between each adjective. The poem moves slowly and steadily. (The commas in the middle of 19 have a similar feel: "gazed back, maternal, wise").

Later, caesura splits line 11 in half—place "time" on one side of the comma and "history" on the other:

without time, without history,

The speaker is adding more depth to her description of her child's sleep; it's not just a place where "time" holds still, but where the past—with all its burdens and baggage—doesn't exist. The comma here adds to the line's slow but steady momentum; the description of this sleep is building in intensity,

but that build itself remains controlled.

In line 13, the caesura creates a moment of suspense:

I spoke her name, a pebble dropped

Given all the peace and quiet so far, readers might wonder, in the brief pause of this caesura, what's about to happen now that the speaker has spoken out loud.

Finally, in line 17, the full stop after "window" grants a pause right before the poem's gaze changes and expands: the speaker has moved from watching over her daughter to looking out at the "greater dark" of the night sky.

#### Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "dark, peaceful, sacred"
- **Line 11:** "time, without"
- **Line 13:** "name, a"
- **Line 15:** "stir, both"
- **Line 17:** "window. The"
- **Line 19:** "back, maternal, wise"



## VOCABULARY

**Wood** (Line 5) - A forest.

**Sacred** (Line 7) - Holy; associated with God or divinity.

**Acres in hours** (Line 8) - To be "acred" means that one owns many acres of land (an acre is equivalent to 4,840 square yards). The speaker is [metaphorically](#) saying that her daughter's dream world is measured in vast units of *time* rather than plots of land.

**Cupping** (Lines 15-16) - Curving one's hands so that they form a cup. The speaker is saying that her daughter's hands seem to hold the "soft light" that filters into the room.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"A Child's Sleep" consists of 20 lines divided into five [quatrains](#), or four-line stanzas. The regular stanza length adds to the poem's calm, reassuring [tone](#). There are no surprises in the poem that would shake the child fully awake, and its form is likewise steady and predictable. Quatrains are also extremely common in poetry, and their use here adds to the overall feeling of comfort and safety. The poem is written for children, and its form is appropriately simple and accessible.

### METER

Like the majority of contemporary poetry, "A Child's Sleep" doesn't follow a set [meter](#). Yet it's not quite a [free verse](#) poem

either, given that does follow a regular [rhyme scheme](#) (more on that in the next section of this guide!). The poem's lack of any strict meter allows the speaker's language to flow naturally. It keeps things feeling intimate and conversational, which makes sense given that the speaker is simply describing the experience of watching her child sleep—she isn't making a big production out of it!

At the same time, there is a general sense of rhythm here: though the syllable number varies throughout, the poem very often alternates between longer and shorter lines. Just look at the first stanza:

I stood at the edge of my child's sleep  
hearing her breathe;  
although I could not enter there,  
I could not leave.

This creates a sensation of moving in and out or back and forth, perhaps evoking the gentle flow of the child's breathing or even the rocking of a cradle.

## RHYME SCHEME

Each quatrain of the poem follows a [rhyme scheme](#) of ABCB. For example:

[...] sleep A  
[...] breathe; B  
[...] there, C  
[...] leave. B

This is a very common rhyme scheme in poetry, which helps make this poem feel comforting and familiar. It lends the poem a sense of steady, soothing music that might feel a bit like a lullaby.

While the majority of the poem's rhymes are exact, the first and last ("breathe" / "leave," and "room" / "moon") are actually [slant rhymes](#). Interestingly, these two slightly imperfect rhymes correspond with the two points in the poem when the contrast between childhood/adulthood and the world inside the room/outside the room and are most explicit. The lack of exact rhymes in these two places might subtly draw attention to the ways in which a parent's experience differs from their child's.



## SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is someone watching her daughter while she sleeps. She perhaps feels a little envious of her daughter's ability to sleep so soundly—to "enter" the kind of deep, peaceful slumber that seems to belong to the innocence of childhood. At the same time, she's clearly protective of her daughter and stays close by her side, seemingly entranced by her breathing and the way her small "open palms" cup the "soft light" that

filters into the room.

Based on the speaker's identification with the "maternal" moon shining in through the window, it makes sense to interpret the speaker as herself being a mother. In fact, it wouldn't be a stretch to think of the speaker as a projection of Duffy herself, whose own daughter was born only a few years before this poem was written. However, the poem doesn't actually gender its speaker or refer explicitly to Duffy's life, so other interpretations are also valid.



## SETTING

The poem takes place inside a room at night while the speaker's young daughter sleeps. It doesn't get a whole lot more specific than that; it could be any room in any house anywhere in the world, although it's safe to say it's probably meant to be a child's bedroom. In any case, the lack of specificity leaves room for the reader to connect the poem to their own experiences.

The night itself is described as "still" and the world "outside the room" is "dark" and "wise." The implication is that the child is utterly safe and cared for. This is fitting for a poem that was written for a young readership; it feels reassuring, a reminder to children that as long as their parents are looking after them, they have nothing to be concerned about.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Scottish poet Carol Ann Duffy (b. 1955) grew up reading poetry. Perhaps it's no wonder then that, in addition to her great success as a poet for adults, she has written over a dozen books for children.

"A Child's Sleep" was first published as the final poem in *Meeting Midnight*, a collection of Duffy's poems written specifically for kids. While her children's poetry is often simpler and more playful than her work for adults, it doesn't shy away from tackling serious subjects. In fact, her children's poetry [has been praised](#) for its willingness to confront issues not typically broached in literature written for younger audiences. Topics such as love, death, and sexuality are not hidden from view but rather handled with delicacy and care. In "[The Maiden Names](#)," for example, the speaker learns that the women in her family all had different names before they were married, while [the title poem](#) from *Meeting Midnight* depicts two female characters kissing "full on the lips."

Duffy has said that one of her biggest influences was the American poet Sylvia Plath, who, along with other so-called "Confessional" poets, wrote frankly about intimate, even taboo subjects in their work. In Plath's poetry, Duffy found a reflection of many of her own thoughts and feelings as a



woman raised in a patriarchal society.

The love poems of Chilean poet Pablo Neruda had a huge impact on Duffy (who is likewise best known for her love poems). Duffy has also written a great deal about childhood, innocence, and the relationships between parents and kids (see: "[We Remember Your Childhood Well](#)," "[In Mrs Tilchers Class](#)," "[Before You Were Mine](#)"). Finally, she draws frequently from fairy tales and mythology in her writing for both children and adults; for example, her poem "[Medusa](#)" borrows from Greek mythology, while "[Little Red Cap](#)" is a retelling of the fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood*.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"A Child's Sleep" doesn't make any references to a historical context outside the poem, but it almost certainly draws from Duffy's own experiences as a mother: she gave birth to her daughter, Ella, in 1995, only a few years before this poem was published in 1999.

Indeed, Duffy said in a 2016 [interview with the Belfast Telegraph](#) that she has been "inspired" by her own daughter, and that "[w]hen you become a parent, you are not only sharing a new childhood, but it reminds you of your own." She has also [said](#) that "[c]hildhood is like a long greenhouse where everything is growing, it's lush and steamy. It's where poems come from."

Duffy, who identifies as a lesbian, made history in 2009 when she became the first woman, mother, and openly LGBT person appointed Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom.

inspired by her own daughter.

<https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/life/books/carol-ann-duffy-ive-written-more-for-kids-than-for-adults-as-i-was-totally-inspired-by-my-own-daughter-34811225.html>

- [Duffy's Childhood Nostalgia](#) — In this 2002 Guardian article, Duffy talks about her path to literary stardom and the ways in which she is still nostalgic for, and inspired by, childhood. (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/aug/31/featuresreviews.guardianreview8>)

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- [Before You Were Mine](#)
- [Death of a Teacher](#)
- [Education For Leisure](#)
- [Head of English](#)
- [In Mrs Tilscher's Class](#)
- [Little Red Cap](#)
- [Medusa](#)
- [Mrs Midas](#)
- [Originally](#)
- [Prayer](#)
- [Stealing](#)
- [The Darling Letters](#)
- [Valentine](#)
- [Warming Her Pearls](#)
- [War Photographer](#)
- [We Remember Your Childhood Well](#)



## HOW TO CITE

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## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poet's Life and Work](#) — Learn more about Duffy in this biography from the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy>)
- [Duffy on Writing for Young Audiences](#) — In this 2016 interview with the Belfast Telegraph, Duffy discusses writing poetry that engages kids and how she's been