

Darkness



POEM TEXT

1 I had a dream, which was not all a dream.
 2 The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars
 3 Did wander darkling in the eternal space,
 4 Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth
 5 Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;
 6 Morn came and went—and came, and brought no day,
 7 And men forgot their passions in the dread
 8 Of this their desolation; and all hearts
 9 Were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light:
 10 And they did live by watchfires—and the thrones,
 11 The palaces of crowned kings—the huts,
 12 The habitations of all things which dwell,
 13 Were burnt for beacons; cities were consum'd,
 14 And men were gather'd round their blazing homes
 15 To look once more into each other's face;
 16 Happy were those who dwelt within the eye
 17 Of the volcanos, and their mountain-torch:
 18 A fearful hope was all the world contain'd;
 19 Forests were set on fire—but hour by hour
 20 They fell and faded—and the crackling trunks
 21 Extinguish'd with a crash—and all was black.
 22 The brows of men by the despairing light
 23 Wore an unearthly aspect, as by fits
 24 The flashes fell upon them; some lay down
 25 And hid their eyes and wept; and some did rest
 26 Their chins upon their clenched hands, and smil'd;
 27 And others hurried to and fro, and fed
 28 Their funeral piles with fuel, and look'd up
 29 With mad disquietude on the dull sky,
 30 The pall of a past world; and then again
 31 With curses cast them down upon the dust,
 32 And gnash'd their teeth and howl'd: the wild birds
 shriek'd
 33 And, terrified, did flutter on the ground,
 34 And flap their useless wings; the wildest brutes
 35 Came tame and tremulous; and vipers crawl'd
 36 And twin'd themselves among the multitude,
 37 Hissing, but stingless—they were slain for food.
 38 And War, which for a moment was no more,
 39 Did glut himself again;—a meal was bought
 40 With blood, and each sate sullenly apart

41 Gorging himself in gloom: no love was left;
 42 All earth was but one thought—and that was death,
 43 Immediate and inglorious; and the pang
 44 Of famine fed upon all entrails—men
 45 Died, and their bones were tombless as their flesh;
 46 The meagre by the meagre were devour'd,
 47 Even dogs assail'd their masters, all save one,
 48 And he was faithful to a corse, and kept
 49 The birds and beasts and famish'd men at bay,
 50 Till hunger clung them, or the dropping dead
 51 Lur'd their lank jaws; himself sought out no food,
 52 But with a piteous and perpetual moan,
 53 And a quick desolate cry, licking the hand
 54 Which answer'd not with a caress—he died.
 55 The crowd was famish'd by degrees; but two
 56 Of an enormous city did survive,
 57 And they were enemies: they met beside
 58 The dying embers of an altar-place
 59 Where had been heap'd a mass of holy things
 60 For an unholy usage; they rak'd up,
 61 And shivering scrap'd with their cold skeleton hands
 62 The feeble ashes, and their feeble breath
 63 Blew for a little life, and made a flame
 64 Which was a mockery; then they lifted up
 65 Their eyes as it grew lighter, and beheld
 66 Each other's aspects—saw, and shriek'd, and died—
 67 Even of their mutual hideousness they died,
 68 Unknowing who he was upon whose brow
 69 Famine had written Fiend. The world was void,
 70 The populous and the powerful—was a lump,
 71 Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless—
 72 A lump of death—a chaos of hard clay.
 73 The rivers, lakes and ocean all stood still,
 74 And nothing stirr'd within their silent depths;
 75 Ships sailorless lay rotting on the sea,
 76 And their masts fell down piecemeal: as they dropp'd
 77 They slept on the abyss without a surge—
 78 The waves were dead; the tides were in their grave,
 79 The moon, their mistress, had expired before;
 80 The winds were wither'd in the stagnant air,
 81 And the clouds perish'd; Darkness had no need
 82 Of aid from them—She was the Universe.



SUMMARY

I had a dream—but I don't think it was just a dream. In my dream, the sun went out, and the stars wandered through an infinite blackness, without light or direction. The frozen earth moved helplessly through the darkness, without even the moon for a guide. Morning came and went, but didn't bring daylight with it.

In the midst of all this misery, humanity forgot how to feel: everyone's heart froze, and people were unable to do anything but pray selfishly that light would come back. They saw by the light of little fires—and slowly began to burn every building they could find, from kings' thrones to peasants' huts to entire cities. Finally, people crowded around their own burning houses just to see each other in the light of the fires. People who lived close to volcanoes were considered lucky: they could see by the light of the mountains' fires.

There were no feelings in the world but a terrified kind of hope. People began to set the forests on fire, but they quickly burned out; the last trunks fell to the ground, and there was no light left at all. In the last flickers of the firelight, people's faces looked eerie and strange. Some people lay down on the ground to cry helplessly, while some just hunkered down and smiled awful smiles. Meanwhile, other people scurried around, trying to burn the corpses of the dead, and looking up uneasily at the dark sky, which looked like the coffin cover of the dead earth. Eventually, though, they'd always give up and throw themselves on the ground to curse, grind their teeth, and weep.

Meanwhile, the birds cried out, and flailed around on the ground in terror, unable to fly. Even the most vicious animals became shaky and frightened. Snakes crawled hissing through the crowds, but didn't even bite anyone, they were so disoriented; people killed them and ate them.

And War, which had paused for a moment, began to feast on humanity again. People killed each other for food and ate alone in sullen silence. There was no such thing as love anymore: all that anyone could feel was a longing for a swift and humble death. As everyone got hungrier and hungrier, the picked-over bones of the dead lay out in the open; one scrawny, starving person ate another.

Even the dogs began to attack their masters—all but one of them, who remained faithful even to his master's dead body. He drove away all the animals and starving people who tried to eat the corpse, until they fell dead from hunger or went hunting for some other body to eat. The loyal dog himself didn't eat anything: he just whined pitifully, until he gave a final, sorrowful bark, licked his master's unresponsive hand, and died.

Bit by bit, everyone on earth starved except for two people, the last survivors from a whole huge city. This pair happened to be enemies. They ran into each other next to the ashes of a temple, where sacred objects had been piled up and burned. They

scraped the last embers of this fire together with their bony hands and used the last of their weak breath to start a tiny, pathetic fire. In that fire's light, they looked at each other, saw each other's faces, and died immediately from shock over each other's horrific ugliness. They had both become so horrible to look at that they didn't even recognize each other: they only saw the faces of starved devils.

Finally, the world had come to nothing. A planet that had bustled with life and power was just a mass of dirt, without seasons, plants, trees, people, or life. It was only a dead lump of baked earth. All the world's waters became stagnant and motionless, with nothing alive even in their deepest places; empty ships slowly decomposed on the water, and their masts toppled into the water where they, too, lay still, unmoved by waves. There were no more waves and no more tides, because the moon, who controls these forces, had died long ago. The winds shriveled up in the still air, and the clouds died. Darkness didn't need their help, anyway: she was all that existed in the entire universe.



THEMES



HUMAN GREED AND SELFISHNESS

In Byron's "Darkness," the speaker dreams a terrible dream in which humanity rips itself to shreds after the sun burns out and leaves the world without light. Desperate and starving in an eternal night, the survivors of this disaster almost immediately turn to murder and cannibalism. The real horror of this apocalypse, the poem suggests, isn't just the literal darkness of a sunless world. It's the [metaphorical](#) darkness inside people's souls: the greed, violence, and selfishness lurking just beneath civilized surfaces, ready to emerge the moment that people feel that their own survival is threatened.

In the speaker's dream, when the sun burns out, society breaks down almost immediately. As people start to get hungry in a world where crops no longer grow, chaotic warfare breaks out. People desperately slaughter whatever (and whoever) they can get their hands on, "gorging" on everything from "vipers" to human corpses just to keep themselves alive. What's more, they hoard what little food they can find, sitting "apart" from each other and jealously defending their own turf. This instinctive, selfish will to live at any cost, the poem suggests, is never really too far away: people will turn on each other in a heartbeat to preserve their own lives.

Human greed and selfishness ruins not just lives, but the environment. Running out of fuel, the survivors set all the world's buildings forests on fire for the sake of some temporary light and warmth. As soon as people feel endangered, the poem suggests, they'll speedily destroy everything around them as

they scramble to survive.

It's only fitting, then, that the last two people on earth—old “enemies”—die together, not in a fight, but in sheer horror at the sight of each other's shriveled, devilish faces. The end of the world has exposed the “fiend[ish]” evil barely contained by civilization—and that recognition is too much for anyone to bear.

And the fact that the whole poem takes place in the speaker's “dream” suggests that the speaker recognizes just this kind of evil and selfishness inside themselves. The real horror, this poem suggests, isn't so much any external apocalypse, but the terrible “darkness” that lurks in every person.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-69



HUMAN WEAKNESS AND THE FRAGILITY OF CIVILIZATION

“Darkness” makes a stark, uncompromising point about humanity's ultimate powerlessness. In the speaker's dream of a postapocalyptic planet under a burnt-out sun, not one human institution, from monarchy to religion, survives the great “darkness.” Civilization, this poem suggests, is much more fragile than anyone would like to believe; the vast emptiness of the universe will eventually defeat all human powers.

Almost as soon as the sun goes out in the poem, humanity has to reckon with its weakness and vulnerability. Without the sun, people are forced to burn their own homes for heat and light—an image that [symbolizes](#) the total collapse of civilization. Notably, even the “thrones” of kings and the “holy” relics of temples aren't spared. Even grand human institutions like monarchies and religions, the poem suggests, are actually powerless in the grand scheme of things.

Human dignity, like civilization, also crumbles almost immediately under the pressure of starvation and desperation. Under the burnt-out sun, the people in this poem become mere animals, attacking each other to survive: starving, the “meagre” devour the “meagre” as indiscriminately as hyenas. In fact, people become *worse* than animals. All of humanity proves itself less loyal and constant than one faithful dog, who defends his master's corpse from scavengers until he too dies of hunger.

What's more, all human attempts to *regain* power ultimately play right into the hands of the “darkness.” When, for instance, humanity torches the world's forests for the sake of some temporary warmth, they only leave the earth even more “lifeless” than it already was.

Ultimately, the poem suggests, “Darkness” is the very substance of the “Universe.” The infinite, lightless emptiness of the cosmos will always swallow up and defeat even the most

awe-inspiring human powers—and people forget just how small and powerless they really are at their own peril.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-82



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

*I had a dream, which was not all a dream.
The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars
Did wander darkling in the eternal space,
Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;*

The poem's speaker begins with an ominous warning: the terrible “dream” they're about to recount “was not all a dream.” In other words, this dream's “Darkness,” in this speaker's view, isn't just a nightmare, but a revelation of terrible truths. This will be a poem about the darkness that lurks just under society's civilized surfaces.

The poem's form underlines the speaker's claim to a kind of prophetic seriousness. Written in grand, rumbling [blank verse](#)—that is, lines of unrhymed [iambic pentameter](#)—“Darkness” takes the same shape as, for example, Milton's [Paradise Lost](#), another tale of humanity's doom (though a considerably less bleak one).

As the speaker's dream begins, the sun itself has burnt out for no apparent reason, leaving the earth bereft, lifeless, and dark. Take a look at the speaker's language here:

*The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars
Did wander darkling in the eternal space,
Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;*

That first line delivers a catastrophe in just a few words. Without explanation or warning, the sun is simply “extinguish'd,” gone for good. The speaker's vivid [imagery](#) here invites readers to imagine a world without light through their sense of touch as well as sight: not just “darkling,” but “icy,” frozen and lifeless. And the [personification](#) of the stars as aimless “wander[ers]” and the earth as “blind” makes it feel as if the sudden darkness leaves the whole universe stunned, lost, and helpless.

The intense emotion of these first lines—and the fact that this tale is framed as a dream—suggests that the speaker is considering a more than literal darkness here. The rest of the poem will explore a world of [symbolic](#) darkneses: the darkness of an infinite and uncaring universe, and the darkness of human nature.

LINES 6-9

*Morn came and went—and came, and brought no day,
And men forgot their passions in the dread
Of this their desolation; and all hearts
Were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light:*

In lines 6-9, the poem's perspective zooms in, moving from outer space to the surface of the earth. Here, humanity panics under a lightless sky.

Take a look at the speaker's dramatic [caesura](#) here:

Morn came and **went**— || and came, and brought no day,

That breathless dash in the middle of the line captures the agonized suspense of all the world's people, waiting desperately for a "day" that never arrives.

This realization hits hard. Almost immediately, the speaker observes, people "forg[et] their passions"—that is, forget all about whatever they used to care about—out of sheer "dread." All that anyone can do is make a "selfish prayer for light."

Consider that turn of phrase. In one sense, a "prayer for light" doesn't sound that "selfish" at all: if the sun came back, it would benefit everyone. But the dreaming speaker seems able to see into every person's heart, and know that their desire for the sun is purely to do with their own "desolation" and fear.

That's a pretty bad sign. Even on the very first day of the new sunless world, people seem to be focused exclusively on their own survival. And things aren't about to get any better. Not only people's physical bodies, but their hearts—here a [metonym](#) for their feelings—are "chill'd." Fear and dread, the poem suggests, make people lose contact with their sense of meaning and their empathy almost immediately.

LINES 10-15

*And they did live by watchfires—and the thrones,
The palaces of crowned kings—the huts,
The habitations of all things which dwell,
Were burnt for beacons; cities were consum'd,
And men were gather'd round their blazing homes
To look once more into each other's face;*

As the speaker's terrible dream continues, it doesn't take long for people's desperation to turn destructive. Needing warmth and light, the survivors build "watchfires"—and then, bit by bit, feed entire "cities" to those life-preserving flames. No building is spared, from the lowliest "hut" to the loftiest "throne[.]".

This passage evokes the destruction, not just of buildings, but of civilization itself. When the speaker describes the "thrones" and "palaces" that fall to the sheer need for fuel, the poem suggests that, [symbolically](#) speaking, even the grandest displays of human power come to nothing pretty fast. Even the mightiest earthly powers—"crowned kings," dynasties,

nations—can't survive the terrible "darkness."

Again, there's a sense that this dream isn't just about what would literally happen if the sun went dark. It's about the inherent fragility of civilization itself. In this poem, it only takes one day of darkness—and four short lines—for every building of every city to burn.

In the light of their own "blazing homes," humanity gathers round to "look once more into each other's face." What they see there, the speaker leaves up to the reader's imagination. But a parallel event later in the poem will suggest that the answer is: nothing pretty. Keep an eye out for the return of this image of people seeing each other by firelight.

LINES 16-21

*Happy were those who dwelt within the eye
Of the volcanos, and their mountain-torch:
A fearful hope was all the world contain'd;
Forests were set on fire—but hour by hour
They fell and faded—and the crackling trunks
Extinguish'd with a crash—and all was black.*

Once the desperate people have burnt all their cities, they turn to nature for shelter and warmth—but only end up ruining nature, too. Under the threat of destruction, the poem suggests, humanity itself becomes peerlessly destructive.

These lines present the natural world as something a lot like the fallen "thrones" of "crowned kings" in lines 10-11: it's both powerful and ultimately defenseless against the ravages of the "darkness."

The natural world still has vestiges of what the human world has lost: heat and light. "Happy were those," the speaker recalls, who lived near the blazing "eye" of an active volcano, whose "mountain-torch" could keep them warm. These [personified](#) volcanoes feel rather like elemental gods, with the power of fire at their disposal—figures around whose dangerous, temperamental feet humanity can huddle.

But nature can't hold out against fear and despair for any longer than people can. Once people are finished burning their cities, they turn to the forests, torching all the world's trees in a "fearful hope" for some temporary warmth.

Listen to the poem's [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) here:

Forests were set on fire—but hour by hour
They fell and faded—and the crackling trunks
Extinguish'd with a crash—and all was black.

These /f/, /cr/, /k/, and /sh/ sounds here work with the [onomatopoeia](#) of "crackling" and "crash" to evoke the harsh and horrible sounds of blazing forests.

This burning is, of course, a bit of an own goal. In a greedy, self-destructive panic, humanity destroys natural resources they could have used slowly over years.

LINES 22-26

*The brows of men by the despairing light
Wore an unearthly aspect, as by fits
The flashes fell upon them; some lay down
And hid their eyes and wept; and some did rest
Their chins upon their clenched hands, and smil'd;*

As cities and forests burn, the survivors begin to look like something out of Dante's *Inferno*: forsaken souls, their "unearthly" faces lit by a "despairing light," strewn about on the ground in misery. Truly, the world has become a hellscape—and not only because of the burned-out sun. It's not just the "darkness," but the horrible "flashes" of human-made firelight that make this scene so terrible.

There's also something more than a little sinister about the way the speaker describes people's different reactions to this catastrophe. Some people merely collapse to the ground, "hid[e] their eyes and we[ep]"—which seems only reasonable. But others show their distress differently:

[...] some did rest
Their chins upon their clenched hands, and smil'd;

The speaker's [understatement](#) here makes this image all the more disturbing. The simple word "smil'd" (that is, "smiled") is unsettling precisely because the speaker doesn't elaborate any further: these smiles don't have to be, say, "manic" or "ghoulish" to seem completely insane. The mere [juxtaposition](#) of a smile with a flaming hellscape makes it clear that these smilers have lost their minds.

The verse sounds increasingly frantic, too. Every line in this passage is [enjambéd](#), giving the poem a driving momentum. The poem sounds as out-of-control as humanity: everything here seems to be rolling swiftly towards doom.

LINES 27-32

*And others hurried to and fro, and fed
Their funeral piles with fuel, and look'd up
With mad disquietude on the dull sky,
The pall of a past world; and then again
With curses cast them down upon the dust,
And gnash'd their teeth and howl'd:*

A moment ago in lines 22-26, the speaker described people lying around in utter despair, weeping or madly smiling. Here, the poem examines another possible human reaction to catastrophe: futile effort.

In these lines, those people who aren't collapsed or mad are frantically feeding "funeral piles with fuel"—that is, burning the bodies of the dead. Perhaps these "funeral piles" are less about body disposal and more about keeping those fires going at any cost.

At any rate, the whole world seems to be attending its own

funeral. The busy fire-makers sometimes pause in their efforts to look up:

With mad disquietude on the dull sky,
The pall of a past world;

The sky, in this [metaphor](#), has become the cloth draped over a coffin. Even the people who are still trying to keep those fires going, these lines suggest, are already in their graves; the whole earth has become a tomb.

The sight of this "dull sky" finally breaks the will of the people who still hold out some kind of hope that they can survive. Finally, they join all the other miserable souls rolling around on the ground.

Listen to the sounds in this passage:

With curses cast them down upon the dust,
And gnash'd their teeth and howl'd [...]

The /c/ [alliteration](#) feels sharp as a "curse"; the /d/ alliteration lands with the dull thump of a body hitting the "dust." And the /st/ [consonance](#) hisses and stings like a snakebite. Meanwhile, the [onomatopoeia](#) of "gnash'd" and "howl'd" forces the sounds of this scene right into the reader's ears.

There's some grim relish in these sounds! The speaker seems to take a kind of horror-movie pleasure in depicting all this agony. Like the flailing, writhing survivors, the poem absolutely wallows in misery here.

LINES 32-37

*the wild birds shriek'd
And, terrified, did flutter on the ground,
And flap their useless wings; the wildest brutes
Came tame and tremulous; and vipers crawl'd
And twin'd themselves among the multitude,
Hissing, but stingless—they were slain for food.*

It's not just the human world that suffers under the darkness: the animal kingdom does too. In these lines, birds "flutter on the ground," unable to fly; even the "wildest brutes" (that is, the most ferocious beasts) cower in fear.

Perhaps most eerily, "vipers" wriggle through the crowds and writhe around aimlessly. They're so frightened and disoriented they're "stingless," not biting anyone. And that makes this scene even creepier than if they *were* biting. Just as that out-of-place "smil[e]" back in line 26 was more unsettling than any grimace of horror, these lost, panicking snakes suggest that what's happening is far, far worse than snakebite. The darkness has upended the order of nature.

Take a look at what the poem does with a strongly [end-stopped line](#) in line 37:

[...] and vipers crawl'd
 And twin'd themselves among the multitude,
 Hissing, but stingless—they were slain for food.

This end-stop is the first firm period in 16 lines. The speaker's whole horrible portrait of people and animals reacting to the darkness has been one continuous, snaky sentence. By closing this section firmly here, the speaker asks readers to spend an extra moment or two really envisioning the sights of this postapocalyptic world: crowds at once tangled up in snakes and gnawing snaky bodies. The rare [end rhyme](#) between "multitude" and "food" grabs even more attention.

Again, there's a mood here of both ghoulish glee and helpless horror. The speaker is really insisting: *look at just how awful this world of darkness is! No, look even closer!* But the speaker is also a dreamer, trapped in a nightmare that they themselves can't look away from.

LINES 38-41

*And War, which for a moment was no more,
 Did glut himself again;—a meal was bought
 With blood, and each sate sullenly apart
 Gorging himself in gloom: no love was left;*

In all the horror and chaos of the darkness, these lines reveal, people briefly stopped killing each other: "for a moment," there was no war. But of course, that truce couldn't last. As people polish off the last of the snakes and get hungry again, they begin to kill each other for food. War makes a roaring comeback.

The speaker [personifies](#) "War" here, presenting him as a bloodthirsty god "glut[ting]" himself on the bodies of the dead. This personification, with its implications of cannibalism, makes it perfectly clear that the speaker sees war as a very human thing: it takes people to make war, and this monstrous god only does what humanity is doing.

The ugly sounds of this passage reflect the speaker's disgust with humanity's greed, selfishness, violence, and cruelty:

[...]—a meal was bought
 With blood, and each sate sullenly apart
 Gorging himself in gloom: no love was left;

The dense [alliterative](#) /b/ and /g/ sounds here evoke the murderers' selfish [gobbling](#)—whether of food they've stolen, or the bodies of the dead. The [sibilant](#) /s/ sounds hiss with disgust. But one sound here isn't like the others: the gentle /l/ of "no love was left," which feels like a quiet lament in the midst of horror.

By this point, readers may have the sense that this poem's speaker is a bit of a cynic—or at least, that their dream is a cynical one. In this vision of the world, society collapses as

quickly as a sandcastle under a wave, and people are only ever a couple of rough days away from devouring each other.

But, like a lot of cynics, this poem's speaker also seems to be a person with a vivid sense of how much better things *could* be. They bid the world's last vestiges of "love" goodbye with deep sorrow.

LINES 42-46

*All earth was but one thought—and that was death,
 Immediate and inglorious; and the pang
 Of famine fed upon all entrails—men
 Died, and their bones were tombless as their flesh;
 The meagre by the meagre were devour'd,*

The darkened earth might have descended into constant warfare, and its people might all "[sit] sullenly apart," selfishly hoarding food, but everyone still has a few things in common. The whole planet has "but one thought": a longing to die and get it over with. Once again, the speaker pulls no punches here. It's not just "death" the earth longs for, but an "immediate and inglorious" death, a kind of mercy killing, without any sense of meaning.

But death is taking its sweet time. In these lines, people are still dying from starvation; in fact, they're being preyed on by "the pang / of famine," which, [personified](#), rips at their "entrails" (that is, guts). Just as in the lines that personified War, there's a sense that Famine is an all-too-human figure.

These lines might also [allude](#) to the biblical Book of Revelation, in which four terrible horsemen—usually glossed as War, Famine, Pestilence, and Death, though only Death is named outright—rampage across the dying world. Again, the poem suggests that most of the things that torment humanity don't assail them from outside. War and famine come across as part of humanity's own inner darkness.

And the consequences are dire:

[...] men
 Died, and their bones were tombless as their flesh;
 The meagre by the meagre were devour'd,

Those "tombless" bones get picked clean. The speaker's [diacope](#) on the word "meagre" here emphasizes the mood of universal misery: one starving, miserable creature devours another.

LINES 47-54

*Even dogs assail'd their masters, all save one,
 And he was faithful to a corse, and kept
 The birds and beasts and famish'd men at bay,
 Till hunger clung them, or the dropping dead
 Lur'd their lank jaws; himself sought out no food,
 But with a piteous and perpetual moan,
 And a quick desolate cry, licking the hand*

Which answer'd not with a caress—he died.

Everything in this poem so far has given the reader the impression that the speaker has a pretty low opinion of humankind—or, at the very least, some serious fears and doubts about human nature. In these lines, the poem suggests that the only living creatures the speaker really puts faith in are dogs.

In fact, here, it's just *one* dog. While all the other dogs attack their "masters," just as their masters attack each other, this single dog remains "faithful to a corpse," guarding his master's dead body from "birds and beasts and famish'd men" alike. Even as those starving creatures and their "lank," dangling jaws get "lur'd" away by other, worse-protected bodies, this lone dog stays faithful—until he, too, starves to death.

This episode gives the poem a new kind of [pathos](#). This is the first time that the poem has followed the tale of any particular character, and the speaker lays the emotions on thick. Take a look at the detailed [imagery](#) around the dog's death:

[...] himself sought out no food,
But with a piteous and perpetual moan,
And a quick desolate cry, licking the hand
Which answer'd not with a caress—he died.

The poem spends exactly as many lines describing this dog's piteous whimperings as it spent on the sudden death of the sun itself. Where previous lines invited readers to marvel at humanity's degradation the way they might watch a horror movie, these lines seem to ask the reader to feel sincere pity.

This episode also feels like the real end of any love in the world. There was already no love "left" between humans back in line 41. Now, the world's last flicker of stalwart, doggish loyalty is gone, too.

LINES 55-64

*The crowd was famish'd by degrees; but two
Of an enormous city did survive,
And they were enemies: they met beside
The dying embers of an altar-place
Where had been heap'd a mass of holy things
For an unholy usage; they rak'd up,
And shivering scrap'd with their cold skeleton hands
The feeble ashes, and their feeble breath
Blew for a little life, and made a flame
Which was a mockery;*

From the sad tale of the loyal dog, the poem at last turns to the story of particular *people*—not just any people, but the last two people on earth. They're the last survivors of a whole "enormous city," and, in a bleakly [ironic](#) coincidence, they're also "enemies." But when they find each other beside the ruins of an "altar-place" in a church or a temple, it's too dark for them to see each other. They have to rake together the "feeble ashes" of

the burned building to try to make a little light and heat.

Readers here might think back to lines 14-15, when people looked each other in the face by the light of their burning cities. Then, the speaker withheld whatever it was those people saw on each other's faces. Here, the poem creates a sense of mounting tension: what's going to happen when these "enemies" manage to get a fire going and recognize each other? Everything that's happened to this point suggests: nothing good.

As in the anecdote of the dog, the poem really draws out the reveal here. Along the way, the speaker observes that:

[...] they met beside
The dying embers of an altar-place
Where had been heap'd a mass of holy things
For an unholy usage [...]

In other words, as the highlighted moment of [polyptoton](#) here makes clear, all the religious objects once held sacred have become nothing more than fuel for more fires, as "unholy" as once they were "holy." Much as the burning of the "thrones" in line 10 suggested that political power is ultimately meaningless, these lines suggest that *spiritual* power ends up being empty, too. It takes human belief, the speaker hints, to give religious artifacts their meaning—and human belief fades pretty fast.

The two "enemies" clearly don't have any gods on their minds as they build their "feeble" little fire. "Feeble" themselves, with "skeleton hands" revealing their starvation, they're interested only in staying alive just a little longer—even though, by now, death might almost seem preferable!

The speaker's [metaphorical](#) language here insistently connects these doomed figures with their doomed world. The "embers" of the burnt temple are "dying" just as those skeletal people are. There's not a flicker of hope for them or the earth itself: even the flame they manage to eke out is a "mockery."

And readers get the distinct sense that nothing is going to get one bit more cheerful when, in the next lines, the "enemies" see each other at last.

LINES 64-69

*then they lifted up
Their eyes as it grew lighter, and beheld
Each other's aspects—saw, and shriek'd, and died—
Even of their mutual hideousness they died,
Unknowing who he was upon whose brow
Famine had written Fiend.*

By this point, as the two last people alive finally look at each other's faces in the light of their "feeble" fire, readers are likely dreading whatever's about to happen next. Nothing in this poem so far, after all, has encouraged readers to hope that

anything pleasant might come of this encounter. If even former friends have murdered each other for food, these "enemies" will surely kill each other on sight.

And so they do. But perhaps not in the way the speaker has led readers to expect. Rather than attacking each other, the pair fall dead at the sight of each other's hideous, shriveled faces—without even recognizing each other.

Take a look at the speaker's dramatic [repetition](#) here:

[...] then they lifted up
Their eyes as it grew lighter, and beheld
Each other's aspects—saw, and shriek'd, and died—
Even of their mutual hideousness they died,

That [diacope](#) on the word "died" feels like a double-take: yes, really, they died just from the sight of each other.

The explanation the speaker gives here is that "Famine ha[s] written Fiend" on this pair's faces. In other words, starvation has made them look like terrifying demons, unrecognizable. But there are deeper implications here.

Remember, the speaker was careful to point out that these two were "enemies" even before the sun went out. In seeing "Fiend[s]" in each other's faces, perhaps the pair are really only seeing what seems to have been there in humanity all along: terrifying hatred and violence.

That idea is underscored by the fact that both of the pair are equally hideous and equally unrecognizable. What's happened to them, the poem suggests, is only the same thing that has happened to everyone on the earth. They die, not from recognizing each other as individuals, but from recognizing the soul-deep "darkness" just beneath the surface of civilization.

LINES 69-72

*The world was void,
The populous and the powerful—was a lump,
Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless—
A lump of death—a chaos of hard clay.*

And with that, it's all over for the world: everyone and everything is dead. As the speaker [alliteratively](#) points out, this "populous and powerful" planet could count on neither its population nor its power to save it. It's now a mere "lump," a meaningless "chaos of hard clay."

Here, the speaker drives their point home with a change in the poem's [meter](#). Up until now, the poem has mostly used a relatively stable [iambic](#) pentameter—that is, lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Listen to what happens now:

Seasonless, | herbless, | treeless, | manless, | lifeless—

There are still five strong stresses here. But now, they've all

migrated to the front, making most feet here [trochees](#), which are the opposite of iambs and have a DUM-da rhythm. ("Seasonless" is a forceful [dactyl](#), DUM-da-da.) Every one of these terrible words lands like a slap in the face.

That effect is only strengthened by the [repeated](#) "-less" suffix, which over and over raises and destroys the image of some form of life that used to exist on earth. Think how different it would feel if the speaker had just said the planet was "cold, bleak, dead, empty, dark." That would certainly be vivid—but there would be much less of a sense of loss.

And notice how the speaker orders these words. Starting on a grand scale with "seasonless," a word that takes in the whole planet, the speaker then zooms right in to "herbless" (that is, without any plants)—then looks up higher and sees "treeless"—then looks around and sees "manless." At last, the line concludes that the planet is "lifeless" altogether, summing up all those losses in one awful word.

LINES 73-77

*The rivers, lakes and ocean all stood still,
And nothing stirr'd within their silent depths;
Ships sailorless lay rotting on the sea,
And their masts fell down piecemeal: as they dropp'd
They slept on the abyss without a surge—*

Staring around at a dead world, the poem's eye now looks out to the waters, which have fallen completely still and silent, as corpse-like as the rest of the planet.

For a moment, the ocean is the only place that preserves some record of human life. "Ships" still "[lie] rotting on the sea," a decaying record of civilization. But these, too, begin to crumble. Here, it's as if the poem's timescale has sped up: with no one there to observe what's happening but the dreamer, it takes a mere line or two for the ships' masts to rot and fall into the water. Those masts, [personified](#), "sle[ep] on the abyss" (that is, the terrifying depths of the ocean)—an image that might evoke the dead earth itself floating in the infinite blackness of space.

These images of destruction at the end of the poem start to reveal a meaningful pattern. In lines 69-81, there are many subtle [allusions](#) to the first chapters of the biblical book of Genesis, in which God methodically creates the world through step-by-step commands: first creating light, then the sun and moon, then the land and the water, etc.

The poem *reverses* this process, bringing darkness where there was light, sterility where there was fertility, stillness where there was motion, and "chaos" where there was form. If Genesis was a creation narrative, this is a destruction narrative. (It's worth noting, too, that the poem's images of a motionless, rotting sea bear a debt to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous ["Rime of the Ancient Mariner"](#)!)

LINES 78-81

*The waves were dead; the tides were in their grave,
The moon, their mistress, had expired before;
The winds were wither'd in the stagnant air,
And the clouds perish'd;*

As the poem draws to a close, the speaker methodically [personifies](#) natural forces, only to kill them off. Everything from the waves to the wind to the moon is dead as a stone; not one flicker of breath or movement remains on earth.

Take a look at the way that [parallelism](#) drives the last nails into the world's coffin:

The waves were dead; the tides were in their grave,
The moon, their mistress, had expired before;
The winds were wither'd in the stagnant air,
And the clouds perish'd;

The insistent [anaphora](#) here makes it feel as if the speaker is making sure not to leave a single death undescribed. The wide variety of synonyms for "died" has a similar effect: each of these deaths gets recounted in slightly different language, but they all amount to the same thing.

The personification here makes these lines even more melancholy. The image of the "moon" as the "mistress" of waves and tides might suggest old myths about moon goddesses—beliefs that remind the reader the planet was once full of people who, well, believed in things! By killing off natural forces one by one, the speaker makes it clear that the world is frozen and dead; by personifying those forces before killing them, the speaker insists that all *meaning* is dead, too. There's not even anyone around to mourn this cataclysm; only the dreaming speaker, helpless, looks on.

LINES 81-82

*Darkness had no need
Of aid from them—She was the Universe.*

After the death of absolutely everything in the world—and the death of the world itself—a dark goddess comes on the scene. The "Darkness" that has smothered this whole poem is here [personified](#), presented as an all-powerful queen. She "ha[s] no need" of help from any natural force to rule the universe; in fact, "She [is] the Universe" itself.

In other words: in this poem's view, a meaningless, all-consuming, all-powerful, and inevitable darkness is the very substance of reality. Whatever humanity might like to believe about the power of its "crowned kings," its mighty "cities," or its "holy" relics, all these fall to darkness in the end.

And that darkness doesn't just press in from the outside, but erupts from the inside. Remember, in this speaker's terrible vision, it's not long at all before people are cannibalizing each other in order to survive.

That the speaker presents this grim tale as a dream might suggest that the speaker is confronting their *own* darkness and despair. Perhaps they're worried that they, too, might be a selfish, violent, greedy monster, deep down (or not so deep down). Or perhaps the real horror is simply the *feeling* that this might be true: believing that the universe might be ultimately empty, meaningless, cold, and uncaring is itself a pretty bracing experience.

But then, the speaker also claims this dream "was not all a dream." Relentlessly and [hyperbolically](#) bleak this poem's perspective might be—but it also has a certain grim realism about human cruelty, greed, and hubris.



SYMBOLS



DARKNESS

The poem's terrible, apocalyptic darkness can be read as a [symbol](#) of blind instinct, evil, death, and hopelessness.

The poem begins with the sun going out and leaving the whole world "darkling." In this darkness, people begin to attack each other like animals—a vision that suggests it's only the "light" of reason that keeps humanity from reverting to its brutal nature. The outer darkness, in this reading, is a manifestation of humanity's *inner* darkness: its cruelty, selfishness, and greed.

By the end of the poem, it's not just the world that's in the dark: the universe itself *is* a personified "Darkness," a terrible goddess. This idea reflects a pretty bleak worldview, a picture of a cosmos in which death and emptiness eventually and inevitably swallow up all life and meaning.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-6:** "The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars / Did wander darkling in the eternal space, / Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth / Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air; / Morn came and went—and came, and brought no day,"
- **Lines 19-21:** "but hour by hour / They fell and faded—and the crackling trunks / Extinguish'd with a crash—and all was black."
- **Lines 28-30:** "look'd up / With mad disquietude on the dull sky, / The pall of a past world;"
- **Lines 81-82:** "Darkness had no need / Of aid from them—She was the Universe."



THE DOG

The dog in lines 47-54 [symbolizes](#) loyalty, friendship, and love—qualities that, alas, can't outlast the terrible "darkness."

Lord Byron was a dog-lover all his life, and sometimes spoke of trusting dogs far more than people. It's no coincidence, then, that a loyal pooch is the only caring figure in this entire poem. As the rest of the world rips itself to shreds, this dog defends its master's rotting corpse against all scavengers. Alas, this good boy, too, dies of hunger in the end.

This dog's heroic-but-tragic story thus represents the doom of all goodness in a cruel world.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 47-54:** "Even dogs assail'd their masters, all save one, / And he was faithful to a corse, and kept / The birds and beasts and famish'd men at bay, / Till hunger clung them, or the dropping dead / Lur'd their lank jaws; himself sought out no food, / But with a piteous and perpetual moan, / And a quick desolate cry, licking the hand / Which answer'd not with a caress—he died."



POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

Horrific [imagery](#) forms this poem's backbone. By submerging readers in a nightmarish vision of a world without a sun, the speaker insists on a confrontation with humanity's dark side.

Much of the imagery here evokes the sheer physical terror of complete darkness. Take these early lines, for example:

The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars
Did wander darkling in the eternal space,
Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;

The images of the dark here present it as an assault on the senses of both sight and touch: the earth without the sun becomes both "icy" and "blind," frozen and groping through the void of space. And the word "bright" in line 2 is the only truly luminous word in the whole poem: all the later fires only "blaze" and "flash" briefly before fading into dull embers.

Imagery also won't let readers look away from the misery of the survivors on the lightless earth:

[...] the wild birds shriek'd
And, terrified, did flutter on the ground,
And flap their useless wings [...]

The imagery here (underlined by the [onomatopoeia](#) of "shriek'd," "flutter," and "flap") stabs readers with pity for the helpless, panicking birds. It's as if, everywhere one turns, one can hear the screams of dying animals.

And by the end of the poem, when all life is finally extinguished,

the speaker's imagery evokes complete nothingness. The world becomes a mere "lump of death—a chaos of hard clay." That "hard clay" feels cold, unforgiving, and deadly; speakers can almost feel the impact as this lifeless "lump" hits the poem.

All this imagery doesn't just help readers to feel what it would be like to live in a dying world. It also underlines the poem's bigger [metaphorical](#) point: that the inner "darkness" of evil, selfishness, greed, and despair are never really that far from the surface. Imagery makes the consequences of human evil concrete.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-5:** "The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars / Did wander darkling in the eternal space, / Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth / Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;"
- **Lines 8-9:** "all hearts / Were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light:"
- **Lines 19-21:** "Forests were set on fire—but hour by hour / They fell and faded—and the crackling trunks / Extinguish'd with a crash—and all was black."
- **Lines 22-37:** "The brows of men by the despairing light / Wore an unearthly aspect, as by fits / The flashes fell upon them; some lay down / And hid their eyes and wept; and some did rest / Their chins upon their clenched hands, and smil'd; / And others hurried to and fro, and fed / Their funeral piles with fuel, and look'd up / With mad disquietude on the dull sky, / The pall of a past world; and then again / With curses cast them down upon the dust, / And gnash'd their teeth and howl'd: the wild birds shriek'd / And, terrified, did flutter on the ground, / And flap their useless wings; the wildest brutes / Came tame and tremulous; and vipers crawl'd / And twin'd themselves among the multitude, / Hissing, but stingless—they were slain for food."
- **Lines 40-41:** "each sate sullenly apart / Gorging himself in gloom:"
- **Lines 50-51:** "Till hunger clung them, or the dropping dead / Lur'd their lank jaws;"
- **Lines 52-54:** "But with a piteous and perpetual moan, / And a quick desolate cry, licking the hand / Which answer'd not with a caress—he died."
- **Lines 57-64:** "they met beside / The dying embers of an altar-place / Where had been heap'd a mass of holy things / For an unholy usage; they rak'd up, / And shivering scrap'd with their cold skeleton hands / The feeble ashes, and their feeble breath / Blew for a little life, and made a flame / Which was a mockery;"
- **Line 72:** "A lump of death—a chaos of hard clay"
- **Lines 73-77:** "The rivers, lakes and ocean all stood still, / And nothing stirr'd within their silent depths; / Ships sailorless lay rotting on the sea, / And their masts fell down piecemeal: as they dropp'd / They slept on the

abyss without a surge—”

- **Line 80:** “The winds were wither'd in the stagnant air,”

PERSONIFICATION

Most of the [metaphor](#) in this poem takes the form of [personification](#)—a choice that makes the poem's whole universe feel as if it's either consciously suffering, or consciously cruel.

For instance, after the sun dies, the speaker imagines how:

[...] the stars
Did **wander** darkling in the eternal space,
Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth
Swung **blind** and blackening in the moonless air;

Depicting the stars as helpless, “pathless” “wander[ers]” and the earth as “blind” and fumbling in a void, the speaker suggests that the death of the sun leaves everything in shock and horror, groping through the darkness.

And things are no better down on the surface of that “blind” earth. There, all the forces of nature—the “waves,” the “tides,” the “clouds”—are “dead” and “in their grave.” These moments of personification make the world's stillness feel, not just eerie, but tragic: the end of these natural rhythms is something to mourn, just like the end of any life.

The people on earth, meanwhile, are beset by a personified “War,” who “glut[s] himself” on blood—feasting on murder and chaos. Depicting War as a kind of cannibalistic monster, the speaker might also subtly [allude](#) to the biblical Book of Revelation, in which the four horsemen of the apocalypse—of whom War is one—charge mercilessly over the earth.

All of these horrors are presided over by a terrible queen: “Darkness” herself. Presenting Darkness as a “she” who is also the “Universe” itself, the poem presents a pretty bleak vision of a cosmos controlled by an unfeeling and empty-hearted goddess. Darkness might be personified, but she's hardly human; like the starving, warring people who die under her reign, she seems to have no “passions,” no feelings at all.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-5:** “the stars / Did wander darkling in the eternal space, / Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth / Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;”
- **Lines 16-17:** “Happy were those who dwelt within the eye / Of the volcanos, and their mountain-torch:”
- **Lines 38-39:** “And War, which for a moment was no more, / Did glut himself again;”
- **Lines 76-79:** “as they dropp'd / They slept on the abyss without a surge— / The waves were dead; the tides were in their grave, / The moon, their mistress, had expired

before;”

- **Line 81:** “And the clouds perish'd”
- **Lines 81-82:** “Darkness had no need / Of aid from them—She was the Universe.”

ONOMATOPOEIA

Moments of vivid [onomatopoeia](#) bring this nightmarish tale to life. By evoking not just the sights, but the sounds of this apocalyptic vision, the poem forces readers to get uncomfortably close to the action.

For instance, when the “**crackling** trunks” of the burning trees hit the ground with a “**crash**,” readers can hear both the flames of the massive forest fires and the terrible, final impact as all the world's trees die one by one. The [alliterative](#) /cr/ sound helps to underline that effect, suggesting that the burning and the falling create a continuous wall of horrible sound.

There's a similar unpleasant vividness in these lines:

[...] and vipers crawl'd
And twin'd themselves among the multitude,
Hissing, but **stingless**—they were slain for food.

The [sibilant](#) word “hiss” is famously onomatopoeic—there's no way to say it without hissing a little oneself! Meanwhile, the word “stingless” plays an interesting trick. The word “sting” itself is onomatopoeic, suggesting the sudden sharpness of a snakebite. By calling these vipers “stingless,” the speaker observes that they're too confused and frightened to bite anyone—but also gives readers the sense that the *threat* of bites is still there. It's the “don't think of an elephant” principle: calling the vipers “stingless” makes one think of being stung!

Onomatopoeia creates moments of pathos, too. The poor loyal dog, for example, dies with a “**moan**” and a “**cry**”—words that evoke both a low, continuous groan and a pitiful whimper.

Where Onomatopoeia appears in the poem:

- **Lines 20-21:** “and the crackling trunks / Extinguish'd with a crash”
- **Line 32:** “gnash'd their teeth,” “shriek'd”
- **Line 33:** “flutter”
- **Line 34:** “flap”
- **Line 37:** “Hissing, but stingless”
- **Line 39:** “glut”
- **Line 52:** “moan”
- **Line 53:** “cry”

ENJAMBMENT

[Enjambments](#) help to make this poem's storytelling feel hypnotic. By continuing sentences over line breaks—sometimes many line breaks!—the speaker creates a mood of horrified

fascination, and prepares some unpleasant surprises for the reader.

For example, take a look at the enjambments in this climactic moment:

[...] they rak'd up,
And shivering scrap'd with their cold skeleton hands
The feeble ashes, and their feeble breath
Blew for a little life, and made a flame
Which was a mockery; then they lifted up
Their eyes as it grew lighter, and beheld
Each other's aspects—saw, and shriek'd, and died—

As the two old enemies build a fire together, readers can already feel that something terrible must be about to happen. The continuous enjambments here create a mood of breathless suspense, hurrying readers along to find out what new atrocity is about to strike.

But the story doesn't come to the conclusion readers might expect! Rather than fighting when they recognize each other, the old enemies die of shock at the mere sight of each other's shriveled, "fiend[ish]" faces. And the speaker caps that nasty surprise with the first [end stop](#) in six lines, breaking the chain of enjambments and bringing readers up short.

Enjambments thus help to create drama and tension—and a feeling that the horrors are just going to keep on coming.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "stars / Did"
- **Lines 4-5:** "earth / Swung"
- **Lines 7-8:** "dread / Of"
- **Lines 8-9:** "hearts / Were"
- **Lines 14-15:** "homes / To"
- **Lines 16-17:** "eye / Of"
- **Lines 19-20:** "hour / They"
- **Lines 20-21:** "trunks / Extinguish'd"
- **Lines 22-23:** "light / Wore"
- **Lines 23-24:** "fits / The"
- **Lines 24-25:** "down / And"
- **Lines 25-26:** "rest / Their"
- **Lines 27-28:** "fed / Their"
- **Lines 28-29:** "up / With"
- **Lines 30-31:** "again / With"
- **Lines 34-35:** "brutes / Came"
- **Lines 35-36:** "crawl'd / And"
- **Lines 39-40:** "bought / With"
- **Lines 43-44:** "pang / Of"
- **Lines 44-45:** "men / Died"
- **Lines 48-49:** "kept / The"
- **Lines 50-51:** "dead / Lur'd"
- **Lines 53-54:** "hand / Which"

- **Lines 55-56:** "two / Of"
- **Lines 57-58:** "beside / The"
- **Lines 59-60:** "things / For"
- **Lines 61-62:** "hands / The"
- **Lines 62-63:** "breath / Blew"
- **Lines 63-64:** "flame / Which"
- **Lines 64-65:** "up / Their"
- **Lines 65-66:** "beheld / Each"
- **Lines 68-69:** "brow / Famine"
- **Lines 76-77:** "dropp'd / They"
- **Lines 81-82:** "need / Of"

METAPHOR

Moments of [metaphor](#) give a little extra spice to the poem's apocalyptic visions.

For instance, take a look at this vivid image:

Happy were those who dwelt within the eye
Of the volcanos, and their mountain-torch:

Here, the "volcanoes" are [personified](#) like fire gods, with glaring "eyes" providing an uneasy kind of "happ[iness]" (which in this context means "luck"): it might be handy to live near an active volcano after the sun burns out, but it's also still dangerous! These volcano gods also hold metaphorical "mountain-torch[es]"—that is, the "lanterns" of their oozing, red-hot lava. Those torches are, of course, made of the same stuff as the "eye[s]," again suggesting the volcanoes' perilous glare.

The poem's other metaphor is grimmer and more muted:

And others hurried to and fro, and fed
Their funeral piles with fuel, and look'd up
With mad disquietude on the dull sky,
The pall of a past world [...]

Presenting the "dull sky" as the "pall of a past world," the speaker imagines the empty, black heavens as a heavy cloth covering a coffin—a metaphor that also suggests the world, and everything in it, is soon to be dead as a doornail.

Metaphor thus helps to evoke both the unease and the despair of this poem's nightmare-world.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 16-17:** "the eye / Of the volcanos, and their mountain-torch"
- **Lines 28-30:** "look'd up / With mad disquietude on the dull sky, / The pall of a past world"

REPETITION

Different flavors of [repetition](#) help to make this poem's

apocalyptic world feel inescapable.

For instance, consider the [diacope](#) in the very first line:

I had a **dream**, which was not all a **dream**.

That first "dream" sets the scene for a story that's safely contained in the world of the imagination. The second "dream" undermines that comforting thought: the things the speaker saw in this dream, the poem suggests, might be all too real.

Not only are this dream's visions nightmarish and uncomfortably truthful, they're inescapable. Take a look at this line:

Morn came and went—and came, and brought no day,

Here, a [chiasmus](#) suggests that, no matter how many mornings come and go, the sun is gone for good. And as the survivors of this catastrophe begin to come to terms with this fact, [anaphora](#) evokes their all-consuming desperation:

[...] the thrones,
The palaces of crowned kings—the huts,
The habitations of all things which dwell,
Were burnt for beacons;

Consider how the [parallelism](#) works here. By moving from "thrones" and "palaces"—the homes of grand monarchs—to "huts"—the homes of peasants—to all the "habitations" in the world, the speaker makes it clear that absolutely every building, from the highest to the lowest, gets burned in humanity's panicked quest for heat and light.

Later in the poem, repetition underlines an [ironic](#) surprise:

[...]then they lifted up
Their eyes as it grew lighter, and beheld
Each other's aspects—saw, and shriek'd, and died—
Even of their mutual hideousness they died,

As the last two humans on earth die of horror at the sight of each other's faces, diacope on the word "died" also produces an identical rhyme—one of the very few end rhymes in the poem. That repetition underlines this shocking moment. Having expected that these "enemies" would kill each other—already an ugly way for the last humans to go out!—readers must now, instead, deal with the even more disturbing thought that humanity has become too corrupt and terrible to bear the sight of its own evil. The repetition here slows this moment down, forcing readers to stay with the poem's bleak vision.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dream," "dream"
- **Line 6:** "Morn came and went—and came,"
- **Lines 10-12:** "the thrones, / The palaces of crowned kings—the huts, / The habitations of all things which dwell,"
- **Line 46:** "The meagre by the meagre"
- **Line 62:** "feeble," "feeble"
- **Line 66:** "died"
- **Line 67:** "died"
- **Line 70:** "a lump,"
- **Line 71:** "Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless"
- **Line 72:** "A lump"
- **Line 78:** "The waves were dead; the tides were in their grave,"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration gives the poem some macabre music and draws attention to particularly dramatic moments.

For instance, take a look at the strong alliteration in this passage:

Forests were set on fire—but hour by hour
They fell and faded—and the crackling trunks
Extinguish'd with a crash—and all was black.

The harsh /f/ and /cr/ sounds here mimic what they're describing: the nightmarish fires that destroy all the world's forests. These sounds invite the reader to imagine not just the sights, but the sounds of this catastrophe. That effect is only strengthened by the [assonant](#) /a/ of "crash" and "black," and by the [consonant](#) /r/ and /k/ sounds that travel all through the passage.

Something similar happens a few lines later:

And War, which for a moment was no more,
Did glut himself again;—a meal was bought
With blood, and each sate sullenly apart
Gorging himself in gloom: no love was left;

Some of the alliterative sounds the poem chooses here feel ugly and brutal: the explosive /b/ of "bought" and "blood," the gulping /g/ of "gorging" and "gloom." Some feel whispery and sinister, like the [sibilant](#) /s/ of "sate sullenly." And some feel quietly mournful, like the muted /m/ of "moment" and "more" and the lilting /l/ of "love" and "left."

Alliteration thus helps to set the poem's horrified [tone](#), and invites the speakers to imagine the apocalyptic scene with their ears as well as their eyes.

(Note that we've only highlighted alliteration in the first half of the poem here—there's much more to find.)

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** “blind,” “blackening”
- **Line 7:** “dread”
- **Line 8:** “desolation”
- **Line 11:** “huts”
- **Line 12:** “habitations”
- **Line 13:** “burnt,” “beacons”
- **Line 19:** “Forests,” “fire”
- **Line 20:** “fell,” “faded,” “crackling”
- **Line 21:** “crash”
- **Line 23:** “fits”
- **Line 24:** “flashes fell”
- **Line 27:** “fro,” “fed”
- **Line 28:** “funeral,” “fuel”
- **Line 29:** “disquietude,” “dull”
- **Line 30:** “pall,” “past”
- **Line 31:** “curses cast,” “down,” “dust”
- **Line 33:** “flutter”
- **Line 34:** “flap”
- **Line 35:** “tame,” “tremulous”
- **Line 36:** “twin'd”
- **Line 37:** “stingless,” “slain”
- **Line 38:** “moment,” “more”
- **Line 39:** “bought”
- **Line 40:** “blood,” “sate sullenly”
- **Line 41:** “Gorging,” “gloom,” “love,” “left”

ASSONANCE

Like [alliteration](#), [assonance](#) helps to give the poem its sinister music.

For instance, listen to the sounds in this creepy passage:

[...] vipers crawl'd
And twin'd themselves among the multitude,
Hissing, but stingless—they were slain for food.

The dense assonance here makes the hellish image of crowds writhing with bewildered snakes jump right off the page. Notice, too, the way that the long /oo/ of “multitude” and “food” creates the poem’s only perfect [end rhyme](#)—an effect that stops readers in their tracks for a moment, forcing them to linger over that slithery dinner.

(Note that we’ve only highlighted assonance in the first half of the poem here—there’s much more to find!)

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “stars”
- **Line 3:** “wander,” “darkling,” “space”
- **Line 4:** “Rayless”
- **Line 6:** “came,” “day”

- **Line 28:** “funeral,” “fuel”
- **Line 32:** “teeth,” “shriek'd”
- **Line 34:** “useless,” “brutes”
- **Line 35:** “Came tame”
- **Line 36:** “twin'd,” “multitude”
- **Line 37:** “Hissing,” “stingless,” “they,” “slain,” “food”
- **Line 38:** “War,” “moment,” “no,” “more”
- **Line 40:** “blood,” “sullenly”

**VOCABULARY**

Darkling (Line 3) - In the dark.

Rayless, and pathless (Line 4) - That is, without light or direction.

Passions (Line 7) - Deep feelings, beliefs.

Desolation (Line 8) - Deep, lonely misery.

Watchfires (Line 10) - Small signal fires.

Consum'd (Line 13) - Burnt up.

Mountain-torch (Line 17) - That is, the light and heat of the volcanoes' magma.

Aspect (Line 23, Line 66) - Looks, faces.

By fits (Line 23) - In jerks or spasms.

Disquietude (Line 29) - Unease, anxiety.

Pall (Line 30) - The cloth that covers a coffin or a corpse—here used [metaphorically](#) to suggest the darkness overhead.

Gnash'd (Line 32) - Ground, violently clenched.

Brutes (Line 34) - Beasts, animals.

Tremulous (Line 35) - Shaking, trembling, nervous.

Vipers (Line 35) - Venomous snakes.

Twin'd (Line 36) - That is, “twined”—twisted or interwove.

Stingless (Line 37) - Not biting.

Glut (Line 39) - Gorge, stuff.

Sate (Line 40) - An old-fashioned spelling of “sat.”

Gorging (Line 41) - Greedily eating as much as possible.

Inglorious (Line 43) - Dishonorable, ignominious.

The pang of famine fed upon all entrails (Lines 43-44) - In other words, hunger pains gnawed at everyone's guts.

Meagre (Line 46) - Scrawny, painfully thin.

Assail'd (Line 47) - Attacked.

Corse (Line 48) - A corpse, a dead body.

Famish'd (Line 49) - Starving.

Clung (Line 50) - In this context, this word means that starvation shriveled or withered people; “clung” suggests the

way their skin was stretched tight over their bones.

Lank (Line 51) - Drooping, flopping.

Beheld (Line 65) - Saw.

Fiend (Line 69) - Devil, monster.

Herbless (Line 71) - Without plants or vegetation.

Piecemeal (Line 76) - Bit by bit.

Abyss (Line 77) - The depths of the ocean.

Surge (Line 77) - Tide, waves.

Stagnant (Line 80) - Motionless, utterly still—with connotations of bad smells and dirtiness.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Darkness" is written in one long, continuous stanza: 82 lines of [blank verse](#).

Blank verse—lines of unrhymed [iambic](#) pentameter—is a flexible, dramatic, and popular form. It's most famous from the great plays and narrative poems of [Shakespeare](#) and [Milton](#): because blank verse poems can go on just as long as the author cares to string them out, it's great for telling stories.

That's likely why Byron chose this form for his terrible tale. This long, hypnotic, relentless stanza has the quality of a nightmare one just can't wake up from.

METER

"Darkness" is written in rumbling [blank verse](#). That means that it doesn't use a [rhyme scheme](#), but does use a consistent [meter](#): [iambic](#) pentameter. In other words, every line contains five [iamb](#)s, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in line 1:

I had | a dream, | which was | not all | a dream.

This is a form with a grand history. Both [Shakespeare](#) and [Milton](#) often wrote in blank verse. In writing this poem, Byron might well have been thinking of Milton's [Paradise Lost](#), with its terrifying descriptions of Hell's "darkness visible."

As in many blank verse poems, the iambic pentameter doesn't remain perfectly constant here; the speaker often varies the rhythm for effect. Take this grim description of the earth after the last people die, for instance, lines 71-72:

Seasonless, | herbless, | treeless, | manless, | lifeless—
A lump | of death— | a cha- | os of | hard clay.

In this relentless passage, the speaker first switches from iambs to [trochees](#)—the opposite foot, with a DUM-da rhythm—and even uses an initial [dactyl](#), a foot with a DUM-da-da rhythm.

Then, line 72 starts out with a familiar iambic rhythm, but lands on a hard [spondee](#)—two stresses in a row, DUM-DUM. The overall effect is shocking, striking, and harsh—only appropriate, considering what the speaker is describing.

RHYME SCHEME

Since "Darkness" is written in [blank verse](#), it doesn't use a [rhyme scheme](#). But it does introduce spots of [internal rhyme](#), [alliteration](#), and other sonic devices to create its macabre effects.

For instance, listen to the patterns of sound in lines 50-51:

Till hunger clung them, or the dropping dead
Lur'd their lank jaws; [...]

Here, the near-rhyme of "hunger" and "clung" evokes the brutish grunts of the starving crowds. And the alliterative /d/ and /l/ sounds land as heavily as blows. There might not be full rhymes here, but these sounds give the poem its own kind of grim music.



SPEAKER

The reader learns very little about the poem's speaker. They make their one and only appearance in the very first line, introducing their "dream." This dream sounds more like a nightmare, and it suggests that the speaker is deeply troubled. Perhaps they're not just worried about humanity's propensity for cruelty and greed, or terrified of natural disasters, but uneasy about how much evil might lurk in their own hearts: read [metaphorically](#), this poem might express the speaker's own despair, fear, and cruelty.

For the most part, though, this poem's speaker is less a character and more a storyteller.



SETTING

The poem is set in a dystopian version of Earth, in a time after the sun has burnt out and left the world in the cold and the dark. In this terrible blackness, lit only by fading "watchfire[s]," the red "mountain-torch[es]" of volcanoes, and counterproductive forest fires, humans and animals writhe, brawl, and bite, struggling to survive. All that violence and cruelty only ends when the last two remaining humans die of shock at the sight of each other's shriveled, "fiend[ish]" faces.

In short: this poem is set in the grimmest, most apocalyptic vision of the future one could possibly devise! The only kernel of hope here appears in the form of a loyal dog, who starves to death defending his master's corpse from scavengers.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824) might have had complicated feelings about his posthumous reputation as the very icon of Romanticism. Byron didn't think much of most of the other poets readers now class as Romantics: he felt a lordly disdain for [Wordsworth](#), [Coleridge](#), and [Keats](#), seeing himself more as the descendent of witty, caustic Enlightenment writers like [Alexander Pope](#). Besides, he much preferred to think of himself as one of a kind—and the world was eager to agree.

Byron is often considered the first modern celebrity. A dashing young lord, as famous for his scandalous love affairs as for his poetry, he was a literal pinup: young men and women sighed over tinted prints of his portrait. He was the model for the "Byronic hero," a passionate, tormented, idealistic figure with a self-destructive streak. One of his many, many lovers, Caroline Lamb, [famously described him](#) as "mad, bad, and dangerous to know"—an opinion she probably didn't revise when he summarily dumped her.

But Byron was much more than his celebrity or his passions. He was an innovative (and often [very funny](#)) poet, whose close friendship with [Mary](#) and [Percy Shelley](#) was a source of inspiration for them all. And he was a man of conviction: he died in the Greek War of Independence, a conflict he joined out of [sheer idealism](#). As this poem reflects, he even had a softer side: he was a lifelong dog-lover, and built his beloved dog Boatswain [a grand tomb](#), decorated with a tribute poem.

And, whether he liked it or not, Byron was also a textbook Romantic—a writer moving away from 18th-century literary ideals of order, rationality, and clarity, and into a kind of poetry founded on deep, stormy feeling. This poem in particular reflects a Romantic interest in both the uncontrollable human "passions" and the awe-inspiring, mysterious, and terrifying "darkness" of the universe.

It's hard to overstate Byron's impact on the world of art and literature. A major inspiration to writers from Alexander Pushkin to [Emily Brontë](#), he continues to influence [all kinds of art](#) to this day.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Byron wrote "Darkness" during 1816, the infamous "Year Without a Summer." This dark period began with the 1815 eruption of Mt. Tambora in Indonesia. The vast clouds of ash and smoke the volcano spewed into the atmosphere deflected sunlight, creating a worldwide "volcanic winter": the weather became chilly and gloomy, crops failed, and sunsets were stained an eerie red. Perhaps worst of all, nobody really understood exactly why this was happening; many began to harbor bleak thoughts about the end of the world.

Those thoughts would have fit right in with the English

Romantic poets' concerns about what was happening to nature and society in the 19th century. As the Industrial Revolution kicked into gear, English rural life began to wane; people moved into cities and made their livings in dangerous, dirty factories. The Romantics worried that this kind of progress severed people from nature's wisdom and beauty—and, in particular, that humanity might well bite off more than it could chew through all this rapid development and change.

It's also worth noting that Byron's apocalyptic vision is only one of the many works to respond to this period: the Year Without a Summer influenced everything from [paintings](#) to [music](#). In fact, Byron wrote "Darkness" on the very same legendary holiday that inspired easily the most famous of that dark year's artworks: Mary Shelley's [Frankenstein](#).



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Byron the Bad Boy](#) — Read an article about Byron's complex legacy as a major poet, an iconoclast, and a celebrity. (<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/lord-byron-19thcentury-bad-boy>)
- [The Poem Aloud](#) — Listen to a dramatic reading of the poem. (<https://youtu.be/5uN5btgxsfl>)
- [A Short Biography](#) — Visit the Poetry Foundation to learn more about Byron's life and work. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/lord-byron>)
- [The Year Without a Summer](#) — Read about the dark, cold summer of 1816, which inspired not only this poem, but a number of major works of literature, including Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. (<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/jun/16/1816-year-without-summer-dark-masterpieces-beethoven-schubert-shelley>)
- [Byron and Dogs](#) — Learn about Byron's special fondness for dogs, and especially his beloved Lyon, who has a cameo in this poem as the lone representative of loyalty and hope! (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/gallery/2013/dec/03/byron-dogs-pictures>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LORD BYRON POEMS

- [On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year](#)
- [Prometheus](#)
- [She Walks in Beauty](#)
- [So We'll Go No More a Roving](#)
- [The Destruction of Sennacherib](#)
- [When We Two Parted](#)



HOW TO CITE

MLA

Nelson, Kristin. "Darkness." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 31 Aug 2021.
Web. 13 Sep 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "Darkness." LitCharts LLC, August 31, 2021.
Retrieved September 13, 2021. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/lord-byron/darkness>.