The Pains of Sleep

POEM TEXT

Ere on my bed my limbs I lay,
It hath not been my use to pray
With moving lips or bended knees;
But silently, by slow degrees,
My spirit I to Love compose,
In humble trust mine eye-lids close,
With reverential resignation,
No wish conceived, no thought exprest,
Only a sense of supplication;
A sense o'er all my soul imprest
That I am weak, yet not unblest,
Since in me, round me, every where
Eternal strength and Wisdom are.

But yester-night I prayed aloud
In anguish and in agony,
Up-starting from the fiendish crowd
Of shapes and thoughts that tortured me:
A lurid light, a trampling throng,
Sense of intolerable wrong,
And whom I scorned, those only strong!
Thirst of revenge, the powerless will
Still baffled, and yet burning still!
Desire with loathing strangely mixed
On wild or hateful objects fixed.
Fantastic passions! maddening brawl!
And shame and terror over all!
Deeds to be hid which were not hid,
Which all confused I could not know
Whether I suffered, or I did:
For all seemed guilt, remorse or woe,
My own or others still the same
Life-stifling fear, soul-stifling shame.

So two nights passed: the night's dismay
Saddened and stunned the coming day.
Sleep, the wide blessing, seemed to me
Distemper's worst calamity.
The third night, when my own loud scream
Had waked me from the fiendish dream,
O'ercome with sufferings strange and wild,
I wept as I had been a child;
And having thus by tears subdued
My anguish to a milder mood,
Such punishments, I said, were due
To natures deepliest stained with sin,—
For aye entempesting anew
The unfathomable hell within,
The horror of their deeds to view,
To know and loathe, yet wish and do!
Such griefs with such men well agree,
But wherefore, wherefore fall on me?
To be beloved is all I need,
And whom I love, I love indeed.

SUMMARY

Before I lie down in bed, I don't usually say my prayers out loud or get down on my knees. Instead, I slowly attune my soul to Love and close my eyes, full of simple trust in God—feeling a worshipful willingness to accept whatever comes my way. My prayers aren't wishes for anything in particular, or thoughts about anything special: I just ask for whatever God wants to give me. This always makes me feel, deep in my soul, that though I'm not perfect I'm still blessed—for I can count on finding God's power and wisdom wherever I look, inside me or around me.

But last night, I found myself praying out loud in awful pain, waking up with a jolt from a demonic mob of visions and ideas that tormented me in my sleep. I saw an ugly light, a swarming crowd—and felt that something was unbearably wrong. Only the people who I despise most had power in this dream! I dreamed of vengeance, but found I had no power to do anything about it—only to passionately long to act. In my dream, I both longed for and despised all kinds of loathsome things. Oh, the crazed emotions I felt! Oh, the tormenting battles I fought! And spread over all this was a persistent feeling of shame and fear. I saw terrible acts that should have been secrets committed right out in the open—and felt so dazed that I couldn't tell whether I was the victim or the perpetrator. Everything around me reminded me of guilt, regret, or sorrow, whether I felt them about my own behavior or about the behavior of others: my life seemed choked by fear, my soul seemed choked by shame.

I spent two nights like this, and both times, the misery of my nightmares left me sad and dazed the next day. The everyday

blessings of sleep felt more like the worst symptom of an awful illness. On the third night, after I woke screaming from my nightmares, I was so overwhelmed by my misery that I cried like a little kid. Once I'd wept out the worst of my pain and found myself a little calmer, I reflected that punishments like these nightmares would be the right ones for the very worst and most sinful people. They'd have to take a fresh look at the storms of their hellish souls, confronting their crimes, understanding that these acts were awful, but that they'd freely chosen to do them. Sufferings like these would be justice, for evil men—but why oh why must *I* go through them? All I need is to be loved—and the people I love, I love truly.

THEMES

THE HELPLESSNESS OF SLEEP AND THE POWER OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

The speaker of "The Pains of Sleep" is having terrible nightmares. Every time he goes to bed, he's confronted by visions of evil deeds. Worst of all, his dreams give him the sense that he's both the victim *and* the perpetrator of the crimes he sees. His dreams reflect deep guilt and fear, suggesting that, with his conscious guard down, he's unwillingly meeting the scariest parts of his own mind. The poem illustrates how sleep puts the speaker at the mercy of his darkest feelings, memories, and desires—and how that sense of helplessness can be the most nightmarish thing of all.

Sleep, the speaker reflects, demands that people give up all kinds of conscious power, from the control of their bodies to the control of their thoughts. The speaker thus usually gets ready for bed by praying for "resignation"—that is, the ability and willingness to accept whatever God brings his way, knowing that God's "Eternal Strength and Wisdom" will guide whatever happens in both his waking and his dreaming life. In the past, this surrender has given the speaker a gentle sense of safety and protection, making him feel that he's "not unblest" in spite of his own "weak[ness]." That is, though he can't control what happens to him, he can take comfort in his trust in God.

The problem is, surrendering control this way also leaves the speaker at the mercy of his unconscious mind. When he sleeps, he finds himself tormented by dreams of misery and guilt, in which shameful "deeds to be hid" are done right out in the open, and he "desire[s]" the very things that he "loath[es]" (or despises).

Perhaps the worst part of these dreams is that he can never tell whether he "suffer[s]" the crimes he sees or commits them—or both. A crushing sense of "shame and terror" pervades these dreams, suggesting that the speaker is being forced to face his own fear that he's done something awful or *is himself* something awful. In sleep, he has no choice but to accept the agony of these visions.

The speaker even seems to dream *about* his helplessness. His "will" to act, in these nightmares, is destroyed: he's "powerless" to affect anything he sees. His nightmares, in other words, are also partly *about* his nightmares!

The surrender of sleep, the poem thus suggests, is a double-edged sword. The same helplessness that can feel like a comforting "blessing" and expression of trust can just as easily feel like "distemper's worst calamity" (that is, the most terrible symptom of an illness): an out-of-control encounter with the sickest parts of one's own soul.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-40

FAITH, PUNISHMENT, AND DIVINE JUSTICE

The speaker of "The Pains of Sleep" has always taken comfort in the thought of a loving God watching out for him. But now, as he endures awful nightmares, he can't help but feel that God might be sleeping on the job: he just doesn't deserve this much suffering. The agonies he's going through, he reflects, would be a fit punishment for truly terrible men, but they feel out of proportion to his own bad behavior. His agonized questions about the reasons for his suffering suggest that it can be difficult to maintain one's faith in God in the face of apparently senseless pain—and that there are some kinds of suffering that no human being can find reasons for.

The speaker's usual bedtime ritual suggests that he places great faith in a God who has a plan for him. Saying his prayers, he doesn't ask for anything in particular: he just silently closes his eyes with "humble trust," believing that God's "Eternal Strength and Wisdom" always surround him. Faith, to this speaker, means believing that God knows what's right much better than he, the speaker, does. And there's comfort in this "resignation" to God's will: feeling himself to be "weak" and error-prone, the speaker is relieved to be able to trust in a higher power.

But the speaker's nightmares shake this faithful "resignation." His nightly dreams of "shame and terror" are so unendurable that he finds himself praying out loud "in anguish and in agony," begging God to put an end to his torments; he just can't resign himself to pain like this, and he can't figure out why God would put him through it.

This question leads the speaker to thoughts of divine justice: perhaps, he reasons, nightmares like these are God's punishment for sin. But that idea just doesn't hold up. Even though the speaker's dreams fill him with "shame," suggesting he feels he might deserve to suffer, his pain seems disproportionately severe to him.

Such bad nightmares (including those deep feelings of shame!) strike him as a fitting medicine for "natures deepliest stained with sin"—that is, the most unapologetically sinful souls. Though the speaker knows he's sinned in his time, he doesn't feel that his own nature is so bad as all that; his suffering feels way out of proportion to his crimes. He's thus left to helplessly wonder "wherefore, wherefore" (that is, "why, why") *he* has to go through this.

The speaker's feeling that his sufferings are unfair leaves him in a theological bind. If he believes in a just and kind God, then he has to accept that these nightmares somehow fit into God's plan. But his suffering feels so disproportionately deep that he just can't see *how* that could be true. Pain, the poem suggests, can't be explained away as a reasonable punishment for the sinful. But it can still *feel* like a punishment—and enduring terrible pain can thus shake one's faith in a just and benevolent God.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-52

ADDICTION, DESIRE, AND SHAME

"The Pains of Sleep" describes not just nightmares in *general*, but the nightmare of addiction in *particular*. Coleridge wrote this autobiographical poem during a time when he was trying to wean himself off opiates, and he enclosed it in a letter to a friend in which he described his own withdrawal nightmares. While the poem doesn't directly say so, this speaker's exploration of nightmarish helplessness is also a portrait of the mingled "desire" and "shame" of addiction: the horror and guilt of craving something that hurts you.

One of the worst parts of the speaker's nightmares is his sense that he's both the victim and the perpetrator of some terrible crime. It's impossible for him to tell whether he "suffered" or "did" the awful things he sees in his dreams: he's at war against himself. Worse still, some part of him *wants* to hurt himself. With his "desire and loathing" (that is, longing and disgust) "strangely mixed," his dream-self craves the very experiences that horrify him. "To know and loathe, but wish and do" seems to be a central feature of his pain: part of what's so agonizing about his nightmares is his sense that, in them, he repeats the same awful acts over and over in spite of the fact that he knows they're deeply "wrong."

That feeling of helplessly doing something harmful was all too familiar to Coleridge, who, as noted above, suffered from a severe opium addiction. Part of the pain of addiction, the poem suggests, is the shame of being out of control: addicts are often well aware that their addiction is hurting them, but still can't resist their cravings. The speaker's dream-self feels choking "guilt" and "fear" over this inner conflict. Continually doing something that he knows he shouldn't do, he feels humiliated by his loss of control, and by the terrifying sense that his better self is always losing a battle against his worst instincts.

The nightmare of addiction, the poem thus suggests, is built on a self-destructive cycle of helplessness and shame—one that only spins faster as addiction strengthens its grip.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-52

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Ere on my bed my limbs I lay,
It hath not been my use to pray
With moving lips or bended knees;
But silently, by slow degrees,
My spirit I to Love compose,

"The Pains of Sleep" begins with a bedtime routine that doesn't sound painful at all: the speaker describes the way he usually says his prayers before he goes to sleep.

Or, rather, he describes how he *doesn't* pray. "It hath not been my use," he says, to pray "with moving lips or bended knees." In other words, it's not his custom to get down on his knees or say a formal prayer, as many people would.

Instead, he performs a quiet little ritual of his own. Listen to his sibilance in these lines:

> [...] silently, by slow degrees,
> My spirit I to Love compose,

The mixture of hushed /s/ and /z/ sounds here suggests both his outer silence—no "moving lips" here—and his inner stillness. All he has to do to pray, he says, is to "compose" himself, to quiet his "spirit" down. Noiselessly, gradually, he orients his soul toward "Love." The capital "L" there suggests that this speaker is thinking of Love, not as an abstract principle, but as a name for God.

In these lines, the speaker presents himself as a man with a deep, quiet, and personal faith in a loving deity. He doesn't need to make any special gestures or mouth any particular words to feel as if God is right there with him; all he has to do is open his mind to the spirit of "Love."

But the poem's title, with its "Pains," foreshadows a change: all will not remain well for this faithful speaker. His trust in God, he'll discover, can't save him from suffering. Coleridge knew this all too well: this autobiographical poem will reflect on his own experiences.

LINES 6-9

In humble trust mine eye-lids close,
With reverential resignation,
No wish conceived, no thought exprest,
Only a sense of supplication;

Once the speaker has "compose[d]" his spirit so that he can feel the presence of "Love," he shuts his eyes in "humble trust" and "reverential resignation." These words are, in essence, two ways of saying the same thing (the first down-to-earth, the second fancier): his version of prayer just means being willing to accept whatever God brings his way, "resign[ing]" himself to God's will and "trust[ing]" that a God of "Love" will only do what's best.

In this "resignation," too, his ritual sounds different from a lot of familiar images of prayer. When people think of prayer, they often first imagine what's known as "petitionary prayer": the kind of prayer that involves asking God for protection, guidance, or gifts. But this speaker insists that, when he prays, he doesn't have any "wish[es]" or "thought[s]" in mind. All he has is "a sense of supplication," a feeling that he is asking only for whatever God wants to give him.

In other words: to this speaker, prayer is all about humility and acceptance. Trusting God means trusting that God has a plan that the speaker could never guess. He doesn't ask for anything in particular because he believes that God knows better than he does what will be good for him.

Once again, sibilance gives these lines a bedtime hush:

> No wish conceived, no thought exprest,
> Only a sense of supplication;

The /s/ and /sh/ sounds here feel calm and gentle, evoking the speaker's peaceful mood as he attunes his "spirit" to "Love." This kind of prayer seems to feel, to him, like a breeze in his window or a parent's soothing whispers to a baby.

The changed meter in these lines is meaningful, too. So far, the poem has been written in perfect iambic tetrameter: that is, lines of four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds:

> No wish | conceived, | no thought | exprest,

It's a steady, lulling rhythm, like a heartbeat. But listen to what happens in line 9:

> Only | a sense | of sup- | plication;

The first foot here isn't an iamb, but a trochee—the opposite of an iamb, with a DUM-da rhythm. (The line also closes on what's known as a feminine ending, with an extra unstressed syllable, but that's less attention-grabbing.) This emphatic stress at the beginning of the line reflects the speaker's fervor: truly, he "*on*ly" feels that "sense of supplication," the rhythm seems to insist.

LINES 10-13

A sense o'er all my soul imprest
That I am weak, yet not unblest,
Since in me, round me, every where
Eternal strength and Wisdom are.

Part of the blissful peace of his prayers, the speaker goes on, is his sense that "I am weak, yet not unblest." In other words, his being "weak"—a word that might suggest both powerlessness and moral failings—doesn't mean God doesn't love him. God, this speaker feels, doesn't demand that he be perfect or strong to earn blessings; God loves him as he is.

This belief is of the deepest importance to the speaker. He doesn't just give the idea of a loving God lip service: he feels it "o'er all my soul imprest," imprinted on his very spirit like a pattern pressed into clay.

Listen to his voice as he makes this stanza's closing declaration of faith:

> Since in me, round me, every where
> Eternal strength and Wisdom are.

The parallelism of "in me, round me" stresses the speaker's feeling that God's "eternal strength and Wisdom" are absolutely "every where," inside him and outside him. Again, the capitalization matters here: if "Wisdom" is another name for God, just as "Love" was, then God can be trusted to make not just the most loving, but the wisest possible decisions. God, to this speaker, *is* "Wisdom" itself.

But as this stanza comes to a close on these peaceful, faithful words, the reader might have the slightest sense that something is... off. One reason for that might be the strange *number* of lines in this stanza: a 13-line stanza doesn't even have a name like the quatrain (four lines) or sestet (six lines), it's so unusual.

And in a rhymed poem, 13 lines is an especially awkward number to juggle: there's inevitably going to be an odd word out. That's just what happens here:

- Readers might have noticed that the poem starts out using rhymed couplets: "lay" and "pray," "knees" and "degrees."
- Then, the poem shifts smoothly into a pattern of alternating rhyme in lines 7-10.
- There's a hitch, though: line 10's "imprest" (which rhymes with both line 8's "exprest" and line 11's "unblest") both closes the pattern of alternating rhyme and opens a new couplet. The odd word out, it's tugged in two directions at once.

In other words, both the stanza form and the rhyme scheme here are a bit off-kilter—an odd choice for a stanza that's all about the speaker's stable trust in a loving God. The poem's unbalanced shape works like subtle foreshadowing: in the next stanza, all that calm and stability is about to come crashing down.

LINES 14-17

But yester-night I prayed aloud
In anguish and in agony,
Up-starting from the fiendish crowd
Of shapes and thoughts that tortured me:

The second stanza begins with an ominous word: "But." Something has shattered the speaker's usual ritual of calming bedtime prayer.

As the previous stanza informed readers, the speaker doesn't usually say his prayers aloud or ask God for any favor in particular. "But yester-night," he says now, he found himself "up-starting" (or jumping up with a jerk) from the midst of a "fiendish crowd"—that is, a mob of nightmarish demons. Jolting awake like this, he couldn't *help* but "pray[] aloud," begging God to make the horror stop. This nightmare was apparently so bad that it spooked his trust in God's plan right out of him. These, then, are the "pains of sleep" the poem's title warned of.

Take another look at the specific language the speaker uses to describe his nightmares:

> Up-starting from the fiendish crowd
> Of shapes and thoughts that tortured me:

If this "crowd" is "fiendish," it's like a gathering of devils, tormenting the speaker as if he were St. Anthony in Michelangelo's famous painting. But it's made, not just from ugly demonic shapes, but ugly "thoughts": his own subconscious mind seems to have turned against him.

LINES 18-20

A lurid light, a trampling throng,
Sense of intolerable wrong,
And whom I scorned, those only strong!

Now, the speaker launches into a description of the "fiendish crowd" of torments his nightmare inflicted on him. Take a look at his imagery here:

> A lurid light, a trampling throng,

These visions feel at once precise and disorienting. That "lurid light" suggests an ugly, hellish glow—and the "trampling throng," a swarming crowd, paints a picture of an out-of-control mob, ready to crush to death anyone who falls underfoot. The speaker seems to be seeing a chaotic hellscape, full of frightening figures rushing here and there in aimless rage, lit by smoldering fires.

But the speaker's next words evoke, not a dream-vision, but a full-body sensation, a "sense of intolerable wrong" that pervades everything else the speaker sees. It almost doesn't *matter* what the speaker's seeing: that feeling of "intolerable wrong" might make even an innocuous image seem like a vision of pure evil. Perhaps readers can relate. Sometimes, a dream feels terrifying for reasons it's impossible to explain when breakfast time rolls around!

The speaker will go on being vague about what he *sees* or *does* in his dreams; line 18 is one of the poem's only moments of imagery. This nonspecificity might seem strange. But in fact, it serves two evocative purposes at once:

- It characterizes the speaker, suggesting that he's too frightened or ashamed to unveil exactly what his dreams show him.
- It also allows the reader to insert their own worst nightmares into the gaps in the speaker's descriptions—or to imagine something so terrible it can't even be pictured.

But the speaker does drop a hint or two about what happens in his sleep. In the next line, he relates one of the worst parts of his nightmare: the people whom he "scorn[s]," or despises, are in charge in this world. Only they are "strong"; only they have power. The speaker has no way to keep them from doing whatever they want. So far, then, the speaker's dreamscape is marked by fear, confusion, hatred, and helplessness. He's trapped in a "lurid," ugly world, under the power of the worst people he knows.

Before moving deeper into the speaker's terrible nightmare, take a moment to note the rhyme scheme here. Just like in the first stanza, there's no regular pattern of rhyme here. Instead, the rhyme makes herky-jerky changes, as if mirroring the speaker's tossing and turning in bed. These three lines form a rhymed triplet: "throng," "wrong," and "strong," all in a row, feel like a one-two-three punch of misery, an introduction to everything that's making the speaker's nights a living hell.

LINES 21-22

Thirst of revenge, the powerless will
Still baffled, and yet burning still!

As the speaker delves deeper into his nightmares, he introduces a new metaphor, helping readers to imagine his emotional pain in physical terms. He's already described feeling helpless, as if he were under the spiteful power of the enemies he once "scorned." Now, he imagines feeling a:

> Thirst of revenge, the powerless will
> Still baffled, and yet burning still!

In other words:

- He so longs to avenge himself on his enemies that revenge sounds as good as a cool drink of water in a desert.
- But he finds he's "powerless": all his efforts to act are "baffled" and thwarted, and that thirst for revenge keeps on "burning" away inside him.

The speaker's chiasmus on "still baffled, and yet burning still" evokes his frustration: discovering he's paralyzed doesn't mean he feels any less desire for revenge.

Again, there's a common dream-feeling here: wanting or needing to act, and discovering you can't move. But the particular metaphor of *thirst* might also put readers in mind of the myth of Tantalus, the figure in Greek mythology who spent his afterlife standing eternally in a pool that sank out of his reach whenever he tried to drink from it. The speaker's "thirst of revenge" and his "powerless will" are thus two complementary kinds of torment—the peanut butter and chocolate of hellish suffering.

These lines might feel emotionally familiar to readers, not just from nightmares, but from *childhood*—a time when you're under the power of the grown-ups, and it often feels like there's no way to avenge an injustice. Keep an eye out for references to childlike powerlessness as the poem goes on.

LINES 23-26

Desire with loathing strangely mixed
On wild or hateful objects fixed.
Fantastic passions! maddening brawl!
And shame and terror over all!

Not only does the speaker feel powerless, angry, and frightened in his nightmares, he feels full of:

> Desire with loathing strangely mixed
> On wild or hateful objects fixed.

In other words, he's tormented by a perverse "desire" for "hateful objects": he wants the very things that he finds disgusting.

It's in these lines that "The Pains of Sleep" starts to become plainly autobiographical. Coleridge suffered from an addiction to laudanum, an opiate he started taking for medical reasons. (19th-century doctors prescribed laudanum to treat everything from headaches to melancholy.) In 1803, when he wrote this poem, Coleridge was trying to kick his habit; the kinds of nightmares this poem describes are a common withdrawal symptom.

Even without this historical background, readers might well guess that "desire with loathing strangely mixed" could describe the pain of addiction: the helpless thirst for something that you know is hurting you. Perhaps, too, these words could suggest other kinds of desperate, difficult longings, like taboo or impossible sexual desire.

Once again, the speaker doesn't give any detail about the nature of his "fantastic passions" (that is, strange, "fantastical" passions—not wonderful ones). And it's by *not* revealing them that he evokes the "shame and terror" he feels. Retelling this dream in waking life, he sounds too frightened and ashamed to spell out exactly what he sees in his sleep.

All he reveals is that the tension between "desire and loathing" creates a "maddening brawl" in him, as if that "trampling throng" he pictured back in line 18 had degenerated into fistfights. In his dreams, his mind seems to be metaphorically at war with itself.

LINES 27-30

Deeds to be hid which were not hid,
Which all confused I could not know
Whether I suffered, or I did:
For all seemed guilt, remorse or woe,

The more the speaker reflects on his dreams, the more shame seems like a central theme. Part of what's awful about the speaker's nightmare visions is that "deeds to be hid"—shameful acts—"were not hid." All the unnamed crimes the speaker witnesses happen right out in the open.

What's worse, the speaker "could not know" whether he "suffered" or actually "did" the things he saw. That is, he feels the mingled sensations of a criminal and a victim: rage, guilt, and shame on the one hand; horror, helplessness, and suffering on the other. Or, as the speaker puts it, "all seemed guilt, remorse or woe." Truly, the worst of both worlds!

And the speaker's "confused" inability to tell whether he's the perpetrator or the victim of these shameful dream-crimes adds yet another layer of suffering. Besides enduring two separate flavors of misery at once, he can't even get a handle on what's happening to him; he's so bewildered that he's lost all control even over his own perceptions.

These lines, like lines 23-26, might well be read as an allusion to addiction—a struggle in which people can easily feel that they're repeatedly, helplessly committing crimes against themselves. There could be a hint of sexual guilt here, too: for someone with a strong 19th-century brand of strict sexual morality, desiring sex with an off-limits person might produce similar feelings of "confused" victimhood and criminality.

But again, the speaker leaves these "deeds to be hid" to the reader's imagination—ironically, keeping them "hid" after all! That vagueness only makes the nightmare sound more sordid and ugly: if the speaker can't bear to say what he saw, the reader guesses, it must be truly awful.

LINES 31-32

My own or others still the same
Life-stifling fear, soul-stifling shame.

The speaker closes his description of his nightmare with a couplet that sums up the whole experience. Whether it was he or "others" committing the crimes in his dreams, he concludes, it's all "the same" in the end. It doesn't matter who does what: he's the one who ends up choked by "life-stifling fear, soul-stifling shame."

The metaphor of "stifling" turns the speaker's emotions into visceral sensations. His "shame and terror," this line suggests, are so overpowering that he feels he can't even breathe. And listen to his diacope here:

> Life-**stifling** fear, soul-**stifling** shame.

This repetition hammers home the speaker's sense that his whole being, body and soul, is choked by unendurable emotional pain.

This line is packed with rising tension. After all, a person can only be "stifled" for so long before they die. Once more, readers might think back to dreams of their own, and notice that the speaker is describing a common nightmare sensation: horror creeping up to an unendurable peak, right up to the point that you startle awake.

The stanza break here thus feels like the moment when the speaker jerks upright in bed, gasping, his nightmare too terrible to endure any longer. His visions of "shame and terror" (but especially shame—note that the word appears twice in this stanza) have made him feel like a criminal and a victim, both the author and sufferer of unspeakable crimes. Now, he'll have to deal with those feelings in the waking world.

LINES 33-36

So two nights passed: the night's dismay
Saddened and stunned the coming day.
Sleep, the wide blessing, seemed to me
Distemper's worst calamity.

As the final stanza begins, the speaker reveals that the bad dreams of "yester-night" weren't just a one-time thing. In fact, he spent "two nights" in the throes of "dismay" so bad that it "saddened and stunned the coming day." (Notice how even the muted /uh/ assonance of "st**u**nned the c**o**ming day" evokes the speaker's d**u**ll misery as he st**u**mbles through his exhausted mornings.)

His nightmares, in other words, are so bad that they spill over into his waking life. Perhaps that makes sense: as readers have seen, there are some hints that these nightmares might be *about* what's going on in his waking life, too. The speaker, then, finds himself in a living nightmare, one that doesn't confine itself to his bed. And if he can't even escape his misery in unconsciousness, there's nowhere he can hide.

His very image of sleep has changed. Before these nightmares, sleep felt like a "wide blessing" to him—language that imagines sleep both as wide*spread*, available to everyone, and as itself "wide," generous and accomodating. Now, in a grim metaphor, it has become "distemper's worst calamity": the nastiest symptom of a nasty disease.

These lines don't just get at the speaker's feeling that his dreams have become a sickness, tormenting him by night and by day. They also suggest that his "shame and terror" have grown all out of proportion to anything he's actually *done*. The idea of sleep turning from a "blessing" to a "calamity" makes a veiled allusion to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*:

- Just after stabbing his supposed friend King Duncan, Macbeth gives a famous speech in which he laments, "Macbeth shall sleep no more!"
- In becoming a murderer, he's deprived himself of sleep's gentle restorative power as the "balm of hurt minds." Either he'll never be able to sleep again, or his dreams will be agonized, guilt-ridden ones.

By indirectly comparing his predicament to Macbeth's, the speaker reminds readers that he feels like a criminal in his nightmares, not just a victim. But whatever he is in his waking life, he's certainly no murderer. This allusion suggests that the speaker's "shame" has gotten out of control. Part of what's so awful about these nightmares is that, besides forcing the speaker to confront his own inner conflict, they persuade him that he's a monster—a much worse man than he really is.

LINES 37-40

The third night, when my own loud scream
Had waked me from the fiendish dream,
O'ercome with sufferings strange and wild,
I wept as I had been a child;

The speaker has already endured "two nights" of the worst dreams of his life. But it's the "third night" that does him in. Awaking from yet another "fiendish dream" to the sound of his "own loud scream," he breaks down and cries as if he were a "child."

This humble simile feels like a moment of real honesty. The speaker is letting readers right into his bedroom here, inviting them to imagine him: a grown man sobbing in the pre-dawn darkness, tangled in sweaty sheets. But perhaps the speaker is also asking for pity. Presenting himself as a crying "child," he seems to ask: *Why won't anybody come and comfort me?*

This image of the speaker as a child might take readers back to lines 20-22, in which the speaker described feeling frozen and "powerless"—feelings that could evoke the helplessness of childhood as much as the symbolic paralysis of a nightmare. Both in his nightmares and outside them, the speaker seems to

feel robbed of adult self-direction and authority. His "sufferings" have, to use an old-fashioned word, unmanned him, turning him into a vulnerable, frightened kid again.

All through stanza 3, the speaker recycles a number of words from the description of his nightmares in stanza 2: "fiendish," "wild," "suffering," "anguish." Those repetitions remind readers of exactly what brought him to this point of helpless weeping. The recurring words mirror his recurring dreams—always the same, always newly horrible.

LINES 41-44

And having thus by tears subdued
My anguish to a milder mood,
Such punishments, I said, were due
To natures deepliest stained with sin,—

Reduced to tears by the ceaseless horror of his dreams, the speaker finally gets a little bit of relief. Crying, at least, helps him to "subdue[]" his "anguish" for a little while, putting him in a "milder mood" than he's enjoyed in days. (Notice how the muted /m/ alliteration of "milder mood" reflects that softer feeling.)

In fact, he calms down enough to make a characteristic Coleridgean move: burying feelings in philosophy. In one of Coleridge's most famous poems, the similarly autobiographical "Dejection: An Ode," the speaker reflects on his habit of using "abstruse research" (that is, obscure studies) to distance himself from emotional pain. The speaker of this poem does just that now, transforming his agony into the beginnings of a philosophical reflection:

> Such punishments, I said, were due
> To natures deepliest stained with sin,—

In other words, when the speaker is able to get a little distance from his own sufferings, he feels as if he can see how they might fit into a system of divine justice. If "punishments" like these nightmares fell on people whose very "natures" were the most deeply "stained with sin," well, that would only make sense!

The introduction of theological language like "sin" might carry readers back to the beginning of the poem, when the speaker described his bedtime prayers in the days before his nightmares began. Back then, he said, he took comfort in placing total "trust" in "Love" and "Wisdom"—that is, in a God who embodies both those virtues. These lines suggest he's no longer quite so much at ease with his former "reverential resignation" to accept whatever God sends his way. Instead, he's going to try to puzzle out what God might be thinking.

LINES 45-48

For aye entempesting anew
The unfathomable hell within,
The horror of their deeds to view,
To know and loathe, yet wish and do!

To the world's worst sinners, the speaker goes on, nightmares like the ones he's been describing would be a just and fitting punishment. Because such nightmares are always "entempesting anew / The unfathomable hell within"—that is, stormily stirring up the depthless hell of the unconscious mind—they would force such sinners to confront "the horror of their deeds."

And the speaker knows what he's talking about! As the previous lines have shown, his nightmares, by playing out all his inner turmoil, leave him with the kind of "soul-stifling shame" that would seem better suited to a murderous Macbeth than to a hapless man with some serious problems. Again, *shame* seems to be the crux of the matter. The worst part of his nightmares, the speaker reminds readers, is "To know and loathe, but wish and do!"—to be all too aware that he *wants* to do terrible, destructive things.

Listen again to the sounds of that line:

> To know and loathe, yet wish and do!

That drawn-out assonant /o/ sounds like a moan of horror. This speaker's philosophical reflections are far from dry and theoretical. He's feeling these ideas out, not just thinking them.

Nightmares like his would be the ideal medicine for people who are "deepliest stained with sin," people who have unrepentantly committed the worst crimes. *Those*, the speaker seems to say, are the people who could really learn something from a horrific nightly dose of shame.

LINES 49-50

Such griefs with such men well agree,
But wherefore, wherefore fall on me?

The speaker has gone ahead and worked out a neat system of justice, in which the world's most evil people are visited by medicinal nightmares—nightmares that will awake their dormant sense of "shame" and force them to confront the "horror of their deeds." "Such griefs with such men well agree," the speaker says, his tidy anaphora reflecting the order and rationality of his system: you do evil deeds, you suffer evil nightmares! It just makes sense!

But of course, that's not how the world works. And this speaker knows that; he might sometimes see himself as a "child," but he isn't naive. That makes the following cry (and its poignant epizeuxis) feel even more agonizing:

> But wherefore, wherefore fall on me?

This rhetorical question is one that people have asked ever since questions existed: *why do innocent people have to suffer?*

And, for that matter: *how does human suffering tally with a belief in a loving God?*

Remember, this speaker started this poem with a deep faith that God embodies "Love" and "Wisdom"—that whatever happens to him, God must have a benevolent reason for it. But now, he finds he just can't fit his nightmares into any system of justice that makes sense to him. He's saying, in essence: *It's not fair!*

This line thus suggests that, on top of everything else, he's going through a crisis of faith. Asking God "wherefore" (that is, why) he has to endure his suffering, he seems to be struggling with his "resignation" to God's will. If God could even give him some sign of *why* or *how* these nightmares fit into a divine plan, it might help him to bear them. But no such sign seems to be coming.

He's left with a few choices, none of them easy:

- He can decide that perhaps he's one of the world's worst sinners after all;
- He can lose his faith;
- Or he can accept that God's plan must be beyond him, incomprehensible to human reason.

LINES 51-52

To be beloved is all I need,
And whom I love, I love indeed.

In line 50, the speaker made a desperate appeal to God: "wherefore, wherefore" must he endure sufferings that would seem like a fit punishment only for the world's worst sinners? These lines bring him right up to a theological brink. He can choose to believe:

1. That God is punishing him;
2. That God's plan is incomprehensible to humanity;
3. Or that there is no God.

None of these options is what you'd call cushy. More than anything, this dilemma shows just how wretched the speaker's nightmares must have been to push him to this point.

But the closing lines suggest that, through struggle and pain, he's choosing option two. The poem's couplet sounds like nothing so much as a childish prayer—the kind of simple words the speaker claimed, back in lines 2-3, that he rarely resorts to. Listen to his polyptoton in this singsong couplet:

To be **beloved** is all I need,
And whom I **love**, I **love** indeed.

Love, love, love: the speaker only needs one thing, and it's the same thing he personified as "Love" back in the first stanza.

There's both a request and a kind of promise in these lines.

Asking "to be beloved," the speaker again sounds like that weeping "child" in line 40, reaching out for comfort and consolation. But he's also making a declaration: his love for others (and for "Love," for God) is true, lasting, and meaningful, even through this pain.

The poignant simplicity of these closing lines suggests that the speaker is hanging on to faith and sanity by the skin of his teeth. Down under his "soul-stifling shame," he clings to love, his only touchstone in a living nightmare. As the poem ends, readers might imagine his "moving lips" as he says this little rhyme aloud, steadying himself for whatever he'll have to face next.

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

Perhaps what's most important about the imagery in "The Pains of Sleep" is how *little* of it there is. In a poem about nightmares, readers might expect to find plenty of sensory details, descriptions of all the horrors that visit the speaker every night. But by holding back on the imagery, the speaker cleverly suggests that the things he sees are too awful even to describe, leaving many of his visions up to the reader's imagination.

Of course, he does introduce *just enough* detail to help make readers uneasy. Remembering how he startled awake to flee from a "fiendish crowd" of mingled "shapes and thoughts," he recalls seeing:

A **lurid light**, a **trampling throng**,

That "lurid light"—ugly, cruel, and glaring—seems to glow sullenly over all the rest of the feelings and experiences the speaker describes. And the "trampling throng" evokes the thunderous sounds of an out-of-control mob, rushing thoughtlessly here and there like a herd of wild animals. In short, these four words alone create what sounds an awful lot like a vision of Hell itself: a place lit by the flicker of evil-smelling fires and populated by senseless, suffering, howling crowds.

No wonder that the whole scene gives the speaker a "sense of intolerable wrong"—or that his "own **loud scream**" wakes him from these visions. The fact that this "loud scream" crosses from the speaker's dream life to his waking life makes one of the poem's central tragedies clear: the "pains of sleep" never stay confined to the speaker's bed, but follow him into his days.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 18:** "A lurid light, a trampling throng,"
- **Line 37:** "my own loud scream"

SIMILE

The poem's lone simile helps readers to feel both the speaker's helpless suffering and his self-pity.

After two nights of awful dreams, the speaker is in a pretty bad state: even his waking life is "saddened and stunned" by the horrors of his nightmares. But it takes a "third night" of agony to break him. He startles himself awake with his "own loud scream"—and then:

> O'ercome with sufferings strange and wild,
> I wept as I had been a child;

In other words, he's so overwhelmed by his misery that he cries like a baby.

This image helps readers to sympathize with the speaker: the thought of this grown adult helplessly sobbing in his pajamas is both harrowing and touching. There's also something humble and vulnerable in this self-portrait. This speaker, readers see, is giving a scrupulously honest report of his experience, even if it makes him sound pitiful.

But this simile also suggests that the speaker has a certain amount of self-pity and irresponsibility threading through his suffering, like caramel through ice cream. Seeing himself as a weeping child, he seems to be inviting some bigger, stronger, more capable person to come look after him: after all, at this moment, he feels that he's only a little boy, a kid who can't take care of himself.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 39-40:** "O'ercome with sufferings strange and wild, / I wept as I had been a child;"

METAPHOR

By translating his emotions into sensations, the speaker's metaphors help readers to imagine (and sympathize with) the hellish torments of his nightmares.

For instance, listen to these lines:

> Thirst of revenge, the powerless will
> Still baffled, and yet burning still!

Here, the speaker's desire to mete out some kind of justice to the criminals of his dreams feels like a desperate "thirst"—one that his "will" is "powerless" to quench. Juxtapositing with the image of the speaker's "burning" desire to do something, these lines almost sound like an allusion to Tantalus:

- Tantalus was a figure from Greek mythology whose eternal punishment in the underworld was to stand in a pool of water that sank out of his reach when he tried to drink, under a bough of apples that sprang away from him when he tried to eat.
- If the dreaming speaker is like Tantalus, then, he's eternally, painfully frustrated—and trapped in Hell.

This image of the speaker's "powerless will" frustrating his "thirst" for revenge might also just plain sound familiar: many readers will have had nightmares in which they find themselves frozen or helpless.

Another intense physical metaphor appears at the end of the second stanza, when the speaker sums up all his nightmarish sufferings with the words, "Life-stifling fear, soul-stifling shame." If fear and shame are "stifling" the speaker, they feel so intense that he can hardly breathe.

No wonder, then, that he feels the "wide blessing" of sleep has become "distemper's worst calamity." Here, he imagines his agonized nightmares as the worst symptom of a disease—a metaphor that becomes even more meaningful when readers remember this poem also describes the agony of opiate withdrawal. Coleridge first took opiates, a common prescription in the 19th century, to treat his aches, pains, and melancholy moods; the cure quickly became much worse than the disease.

So far, the speaker has used metaphors to translate emotional agony into physical agony. Toward the end of the poem, he explores some different kinds of images:

- He reflects that his sufferings would seem like the appropriate punishment for people whose "natures" are "deepliest stained with sin"—in other words, people who are much more *permanently* and *markedly* evil than he is.
- Such people, he goes on, could learn a lesson from watching how their sinful behavior is always "entempesting anew" the "unfathomable hell within."
- These three metaphors in a row present sin as a stain, nightmares as a storm, and the unconscious mind as the bottomless pit of Hell itself.

All these vivid metaphors in a row combine to create a picture of an inner life that might have come straight out of *Macbeth*: bloodstained hands, howling storms, and the murkiness of Hell.

But the most powerful metaphor here, in the end, might be a veiled, extended one. The poem as a whole seems to say that opium addiction, the real-life misery that inspired Coleridge to write this poem, is a nightmare.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-22:** "Thirst of revenge, the powerless will / Still baffled, and yet burning still!"

- **Line 32:** "Life-stifling fear, soul-stifling shame."
- **Lines 35-36:** "Sleep, the wide blessing, seemed to me / Distemper's worst calamity"
- **Lines 44-46:** "To natures deepliest stained with sin,— / For aye entempesting anew / The unfathomable hell within"

ALLUSION

The speaker's sense that sleep has transformed from a "blessing" into "distemper's worst calamity" alludes to a similar idea in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*—a reference that underlines the speaker's guilt and shame.

In the play, Macbeth himself, having murdered King Duncan to clear his own path to the throne of Scotland, makes a famous speech:

> Methought I heard a voice cry, "Sleep no more!
> Macbeth does murder sleep"—the innocent sleep,
> Sleep that knits up the raveled sleave of care,
> The death of each day's life, sore labor's bath, [...]

In other words, Macbeth realizes that, in becoming a murderer, he's ruined his own life; his guilt and horror mean he'll never sleep peacefully again.

The speaker of this poem seems to have a related problem:

> Sleep, the wide blessing, seemed to me
> Distemper's worst calamity.

The "wide blessing" of sleep—that is, a generous blessing, one that comes to everybody—has become, to this speaker, "distemper's worst calamity," the most horrible symptom of an illness. This idea, in combination with the speaker's vague, uneasy references to nightmares full of "shame and terror," suggests that the speaker feels he's done something very wrong.

He's certainly no murderer; later on, he even protests that the nightmares he's suffering would only seem fitting for people who are far more deeply "stained with sin" than he is. But perhaps that's exactly the point. The "life-stifling fear" and "soul-stifling shame" this speaker feels have grown all out of proportion in him: his fears that, deep down, he might be as bad as any Macbeth show that he's in the grips of some truly nightmarish emotions.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 35-36:** "Sleep, the wide blessing, seemed to me / Distemper's worst calamity."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem's climactic rhetorical question is a cry of pain—and one that will probably sound familiar to anyone who has suffered.

Having described his agonizing nightmares, the speaker reflects that such dreams seem like the perfect punishment for truly cruel and sinful people. Those with "natures deepliest stained with sin" might take a lesson from the visions of "shame and terror" the speaker has endured for three nights; perhaps those visions could show them the error of their ways.

Yes, "such griefs with such men well agree," the speaker concludes—"But wherefore, wherefore fall on me?"

With this tortured question—*Why me?!*—the speaker is actually making a point: *this isn't fair*. He's crying out to his God to explain his sufferings, to give some kind of reason for them. Though he does feel "guilt" and "remorse," he's also pretty sure that he hasn't done anything so bad that he deserves to be punished like this; he's not one of the world's "deepliest stained" sinners.

This rhetorical question thus leads readers right up to one of the poem's deepest philosophical points (and one of the religious world's oldest problems). If suffering isn't a reasonable, comprehensible divine punishment for bad behavior—and clearly, it is not—then why does God allow it? How does suffering fit into a world guided by "eternal strength and Wisdom"?

In the end, the speaker concludes, people just can't know: God's plan is beyond human comprehension. But that doesn't mean that people can't feel confused, aggrieved, and indignant when they suffer torments they can't understand.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 49-50:** "Such griefs with such men well agree, / But wherefore, wherefore fall on me?"

REPETITION

The speaker's repetitions help to conjure up his desperation and grief. For example, take a look at the chiasmus he uses in line 22, describing that all-too-familiar dream-feeling of desperately needing to move or act, but finding oneself "powerless":

> Thirst of revenge, the powerless will
> Still baffled, and yet burning still!

By beginning and ending this line with the word "still"—and making it refer both to his "baffled" *ability* to act and his "burning" *desire* to act—the speaker makes it clear that he's frozen in painful tension.

His diacope in line 32 similarly suggests how overwhelmed he

feels in his nightmares. He finds himself engulfed by "Life-**stifling** fear, soul-**stifling** shame"; the repetition of "stifling" evokes the desperate, second-by-second panic of not being able to catch a breath.

Toward the end of the poem, repetitions start to serve a more poignant purpose. Listen to the speaker's epizeuxis in this piteous cry:

> Such griefs with such men well agree,
> But **wherefore, wherefore** fall on me?

That immediate return to the word "wherefore" (that is, "why") evokes the speaker's heartbroken confusion over the reasons for his suffering. To this poor man, one "why" doesn't seem strong enough; only a "why oh why" will capture his bewilderment and sorrow.

He feels especially put-upon because he's sure he's not such a bad guy; he can't believe he deserves this much misery. Polyptoton and epizeuxis help him to make a final, humble prayer:

> To be **beloved** is all I need,
> And whom **I love, I love** indeed.

These repetitions and variations on the word "love" suggest that, harrowed by the loneliness and pain of his nightmares, the speaker feels sure that nothing more than a little affection would cure him—and that he himself is a loving soul, one who both deserves to be loved and *doesn't* deserve to suffer so.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "a sense"
- **Line 10:** "A sense"
- **Line 22:** "Still baffled, and yet burning still!"
- **Line 32:** "Life-stifling fear, soul-stifling shame."
- **Line 50:** "wherefore, wherefore"
- **Line 51:** "beloved"
- **Line 52:** "And whom I love, I love indeed"

PARALLELISM

The poem's parallelism helps the speaker to evoke huge, all-encompassing feelings—for better and for worse. For instance, in the first stanza, the speaker takes comfort in remembering that:

> [...] **in me, round me**, every where
> Eternal strength and Wisdom are.

The parallelism here makes the point that God is truly *everywhere*, inside the speaker and out. Nowhere and no one, the speaker believes, is distant from God.

But that makes his nightmares feel even more terrible:

> A **lurid light**, a **trampling throng**,
> **Sense** of intolerable wrong,
> And whom I scorned, those only strong!
> **Thirst of revenge**, the powerless will
> Still baffled, and yet burning still!
> **Desire with loathing** strangely mixed
> On wild or hateful objects fixed.
> **Fantastic passions! maddening brawl!**

Parallelism also creates an all-encompassing feeling here, piling one awful thing on top of another. It's as if the speaker is running down a horrified checklist of every apparition in his nightmares, looking from one side of his dreamscape to another and seeing misery upon misery. This feeling of being surrounded by evil will later lead him to reflect on what God could possibly be thinking: if God's "strength and Wisdom" are indeed everpresent, how could this misery fit into God's plan?

The speaker will use parallelism again to make this point. Understanding that a big part of the horror of his dreams comes from the feeling that he's doing terrible things against his will—"To **know and loathe**, yet **wish and do**!"—he imagines that having nightmares like these could be a helpful medicine for *truly* nasty characters. "**Such griefs** with **such men** well agree," he points out, in a moment of anaphora that makes his point clear: awful nightmares and awful men are an obvious match.

This anaphora will make his desperate rhetorical question—"But wherefore, wherefore fall on me?"—that much more poignant. He's looked deep into his own heart, and believes he's not one of "such men." And if that's true, he just can't fathom why he should have to suffer so.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "moving lips," "bended knees"
- **Line 12:** "in me, round me"
- **Lines 18-19:** "A lurid light, a trampling throng, / Sense of intolerable wrong,"
- **Line 21:** "Thirst of revenge"
- **Line 23:** "Desire with loathing"
- **Line 25:** "Fantastic passions! maddening brawl!"
- **Line 27:** "Deeds to be hid"
- **Line 48:** "To know and loathe, yet wish and do!"
- **Line 49:** "Such griefs with such men"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration gives the speaker's voice emphasis and music. For example, listen to the sounds in the poem's very first line:

> Ere on my bed my **l**imbs I **l**ay,

That liquid, drawn-out /l/ sound evokes both the heavy length of "limbs" (arms and legs) and the gentle surrender of lying down to sleep—the way it used to feel to the speaker before his nightmares began.

The sounds of the speaker's prayers are similarly relaxed:

> But silently, by slow degrees,
> My spirit I to Love compose,
> In humble trust mine eye-lids close,
> With reverential resignation,
> No wish conceived, no thought exprest,
> Only a sense of supplication;

The sibilant /s/ sounds here create a bedtime hush, while the /r/ sounds feel like the rumble of a purring cat. There's a lot of peace and trust in these sounds.

But when the speaker describes his nightmares, his alliteration takes on a different tone. Describing the "lurid light" of a hellish dreamscape and feeling his "will" both "baffled" and "burning," he uses alliteration for emphasis. These repeated sounds feel like pounding drums, grabbing the reader's attention and daring them to look away from the speaker's nightmarish visions.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "limbs," "lay"
- **Line 4:** "silently," "slow"
- **Line 5:** "spirit"
- **Line 7:** "reverential resignation"
- **Line 9:** "sense," "supplication"
- **Line 10:** "sense," "soul"
- **Line 18:** "lurid light"
- **Line 20:** "scorned," "strong"
- **Line 22:** "baffled," "burning"
- **Line 28:** "confused," "could," "not know"
- **Line 31:** "still," "same"
- **Line 32:** "stifling," "soul-stifling"
- **Line 34:** "Saddened," "stunned"
- **Line 35:** "Sleep"
- **Line 39:** "sufferings strange"
- **Line 42:** "milder mood"
- **Line 44:** "stained," "sin"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, creates emphasis and atmosphere in the poem. For example, listen to the assonance in line 6:

> In humble trust mine eye-lids close,

The muted /uh/ sounds of "humble trust" sound as soft and gentle as the feeling of peaceful surrender the speaker is describing. And the long /i/ of "mine eye-lids" is just plain harmonious, suggesting that the speaker's trusting bedtime ritual used to feel as soothing as a lullaby.

But later, when the speaker describes the horror of waking from his "fiendish dream," the assonant /ee/ sound evokes exactly the way he wakes himself up: with a drawn-out "scream." No more "humble trust" here!

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "humble trust," "mine eye"
- **Line 19:** "intolerable," "wrong"
- **Line 20:** "those only"
- **Line 25:** "Fantastic passions," "maddening"
- **Line 32:** "Life-stifling"
- **Line 34:** "stunned," "coming"
- **Line 35:** "Sleep," "seemed," "me"
- **Line 38:** "fiendish dream"
- **Line 39:** "O'ercome," "sufferings"
- **Line 40:** "I," "child"
- **Line 43:** "Such punishments"
- **Line 48:** "know," "loathe"
- **Line 51:** "be beloved"

SIBILANCE

Dense sibilance can make the speaker's voice sound either like a gentle whisper or a horrified hiss. The device appears throughout the poem, which makes sense: this is a poem about "sleep," and all this sibilance creates an appropriately quiet, and at times eerie, atmosphere.

One particularly vivid example appears in lines 35-36:

> Sleep, the wide blessing, seemed to me
> Distemper's worst calamity.

Here, the gentler, more hushed /s/ sounds of "sleep," "blessing," and "seemed" slide right into the harsh hiss of "distemper's worst calamity." This is sibilance with a point to make: for this speaker, sleep has transformed from a gentle blessing into a fearful curse.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "silently," "slow degrees"
- **Line 5:** "spirit," "compose"
- **Line 6:** "trust," "lids," "close"
- **Line 8:** "conceived," "exprest"
- **Line 9:** "sense," "supplication"
- **Line 10:** "sense," "soul imprest"
- **Line 11:** "unblest"
- **Line 12:** "Since"
- **Line 13:** "strength," "Wisdom"
- **Line 15:** "anguish"
- **Line 16:** "fiendish"

- **Line 17:** “shapes”
- **Line 20:** “scorned,” “strong”
- **Line 21:** “Thirst,” “powerless”
- **Line 22:** “Still,” “still”
- **Line 23:** “Desire,” “strangely”
- **Line 25:** “passions”
- **Line 26:** “shame”
- **Line 29:** “suffered”
- **Line 30:** “seemed,” “remorse”
- **Line 31:** “others,” “still,” “same”
- **Line 32:** “stifling,” “soul-stifling,” “shame”
- **Line 33:** “So,” “nights passed,” “night's dismay”
- **Line 34:** “Saddened,” “stunned”
- **Line 35:** “Sleep,” “blessing,” “seemed”
- **Line 36:** “Distemper's worst”
- **Line 39:** “sufferings strange”
- **Line 41:** “thus,” “tears subdued”
- **Line 44:** “stained,” “sin”
- **Line 45:** “entempesting”
- **Line 49:** “Such griefs”

VOCABULARY

Ere (Line 1) - Before.

Hath (Line 2) - An old-fashioned way of saying "has."

Use (Line 2) - Custom, habit.

Reverential resignation (Line 7) - Worshipful acceptance of whatever comes.

Exprest (Line 8) - Expressed.

Supplication (Line 9) - Asking for something.

O'er (Line 10) - A contraction of "over."

Imprest (Line 10) - Impressed—that is, imprinted or marked.

Unblest (Line 11) - Unblessed, unfavored.

Yester-night (Line 14) - Last night.

Up-starting (Line 16) - Jumping away from, as if startled.

Lurid (Line 18) - Glaring and ugly.

Throng (Line 18) - Crowd.

Baffled (Line 22) - Stunned; thwarted.

Fixed (Line 24) - Attached to, focused on.

Fantastic (Line 25) - Fantastical, imaginary, peculiar.

Brawl (Line 25) - Fighting, battling.

Woe (Line 30) - Sorrow, sadness.

Stifling (Line 32) - Choking, smothering.

So (Line 33) - In this way.

Distemper (Line 36) - Illness, mental disorder.

Calamity (Line 36) - Disaster, catastrophe.

O'ercome (Line 39) - Overcome, overwhelmed.

As I had been (Line 40) - As if I were.

Subdued (Line 41) - Tamped down, muffled.

Deepliest (Line 44) - Most deeply.

For aye (Line 45) - Always.

Entempesting (Line 45) - Making stormy, stirring up.

Loathe (Line 48) - Despise, feel disgust at.

Wherefore (Line 50) - Why.

Indeed (Line 52) - Truly, very much.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Pains of Sleep" has 52 lines broken into three irregular stanzas:

- The first has 13 lines
- The second has 19 lines
- The third has 20 lines

This wild, unpredictable, and unusual form—especially the first two stanzas, with their awkward numbers of lines—make the poem feel as if it's spinning out of control, just like the speaker's nightmarish visions. There's little neat order or comfort in this poem's shape, any more than there is in the speaker's dreams.

Note, too, that the poem's three stanzas mirror the speaker's three nights of terrible dreams—and that each stanza gets a little longer. The longer these nightmares go on, the form suggests, the more consuming and inescapable they feel.

METER

"The Pains of Sleep" is written in iambic tetrameter. That means that each line uses four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in the poem's closing lines:

To be | be|loved | is all | I need,
And whom | I love, | I love | in|deed.

This pulsing rhythm helps to conjure up both the speaker's terror and his efforts to calm himself: depending on the speaker's tone, the same meter can sound like a pounding heartbeat or a soothing rocking motion.

The poem sometimes plays around with this meter for emphasis. For example, listen to the difference in the haunting line 32:

Life-stif- | ling fear, | soul-stif- | ling shame.

Here, the speaker introduces two strong spondees, metrical feet with a DUM-DUM rhythm. Those pounding stresses emphasize the speaker's utter agony.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of "The Pains of Sleep" switches back and forth between two patterns: couplets, and alternating rhymes. For instance, the first stanza runs like this:

AABBCCDEDEEFF

In other words:

- The first six lines use couplets, pairs of matching rhymes (AABBCC).
- Lines 7-10 use alternating rhymes: every other line rhymes (DEDE).
- But line 10 also becomes the first rhyme in a new couplet (EE), and the stanza ends with another (FF). It's as if the rhyme in line 10 is getting dragged in two directions at once.

The poem goes back and forth between couplets (and once even a triplet, in lines 18-20) and alternating rhyme throughout. But no two stanzas use exactly the same pattern.

Lurching unpredictably from one kind of rhyme to another, this off-kilter scheme reflects the speaker's desperation, confusion, and fear. His rhymes are as wild and overpowering as his nightmares.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a version of Samuel Taylor Coleridge himself. Coleridge enclosed an early draft of this poem in a letter to his friend Robert Southey, explaining that this tale of awful nightmares was a record of his own experiences. Coleridge was trying to break an addiction to opiates at the time, and his visions here tally with the accounts of other people who have been through opiate withdrawal.

The speaker feels a complex mixture of bewilderment and anxiety over his tormenting nightmares. On the one hand, he believes that he couldn't possibly be so "stained with sin" as to deserve this agony. On the other, some part of him asks: "wherefore" ("why"), then, does God put him through these sufferings? Torn between anxious guilt and self-pity, this speaker suffers at least as much from his own anxieties *about* his nightmares as he does from the nightmares themselves.

SETTING

The poem is set somewhere between the speaker's bedroom and his nightmares. Unfortunately for the speaker, the distance between the real world and his dream world seems to have collapsed: his awful dreams have gotten so bad that they spill over into his waking life, "sadden[ing] and stunn[ing] the coming day."

In fact, the speaker is so caught up in the "fiendish" agony of his dreams that he never gives a very clear picture of either his physical surroundings or his nightmares themselves. He's distracted enough by the *feelings* of the nightmares, from "shame and terror" to a "sense of intolerable wrong," that he doesn't even tell readers what symbolic shapes those feelings take in his visions. By *not* describing what he sees, the speaker leaves readers to imagine what *they'd* see if they were suffering such tormenting nightmares—or to imagine that the speaker's visions are too fearful even to describe.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

A visionary poet, a huge personality, and a legendary talker, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) was one of the foremost figures of the Romantic movement. He's often said to have launched English Romanticism with the 1798 collection *Lyrical Ballads*, a collaboration with his friend William Wordsworth.

This groundbreaking book moved away from the sharp satire of 18th-century of writers like Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift to pursue a new kind of imaginative, inward-looking art. Wordsworth's poems focused on the lives of humble people in the countryside, while Coleridge's explored wild and magical visions. Both writers, though, were committed to using down-to-earth language and old folk forms like the ballad.

But "The Pains of Sleep" was written in 1803, after the *Lyrical Ballads* glory days. At the time he wrote this poem, Coleridge was struggling with opiate addiction—a much less inspiring part of the Romantic legacy. Coleridge was only one of the era's writers to fall prey to such an addiction and to explore the visions and miseries it produced in art; his friend Thomas de Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* is another famous example. This poem's descriptions of awful nightmares were inspired by Coleridge's withdrawal pains.

Perhaps because this poem was so personal, Coleridge didn't publish it until 1816, when it appeared in a pamphlet alongside "Christabel" and "Kubla Khan"—poems that also deal with dreams, visions, and nightmares.

Today, Coleridge's work remains so influential that some of it has become proverbial: his great poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is the origin of the saying "to carry an albatross around one's neck."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the 19th century, it was pretty easy to become an opium addict by accident: doctors prescribed the drug (usually in the

form of laudanum, a solution of opium and alcohol) as a remedy for everything from pain to low spirits.

Coleridge, a lifelong hypochondriac and depressive, was particularly vulnerable to accidental addiction. Once he started taking laudanum for his aches and pains, it didn't take long for him to develop a serious and compounding dependency: he ended up using laudanum to treat the side effects of laudanum.

Addiction drove a wedge between Coleridge and many of the people who loved him, leaving him lonely and depressed. Though he tried to quit, he never fully recovered. He ended his life under the constant care of James Gillman, a doctor with an unusually sympathetic view of addiction (and of Coleridge, whom he practically adopted).

But Coleridge's addiction also made its mark on literature. Besides working as an anesthetic, opiates can cause vivid dreams and hallucinations. Much of Coleridge's best-known poetry has a wild visionary quality that could well have been influenced by his drug use. He even prefaced his famous "Kubla Khan" with a story describing how the poem came to him in a waking dream (only for him to forget how it ended when some darn "person from Porlock" knocked on his door and startled him back to his senses).

While Coleridge's life fed later stereotypes of the dreamy, drug-addled Romantic poet, the real story is much sadder and more complicated than that. "The Pains of Sleep" records some of the consequences of an all-too-common 19th-century affliction.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Friends of Coleridge — Visit the Friends of Coleridge, a society dedicated to Coleridge's work. (https://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/)
- A Short Biography — Learn more about Coleridge's life and work via the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/samuel-taylor-coleridge)
- Opium and the Romantics — Read an essay about how opium, a commonly prescribed drug in the 19th century, influenced Romantic writers like Coleridge, whose own withdrawal pains inspired this poem. (https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/representations-of-drugs-in-19th-century-literature)
- Coleridge's Legacy — Read biographer Richard Holmes's discussion of what makes Coleridge's poetry special. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jan/27/samuel-taylor-coleridge-richard-holmes)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE POEMS

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

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Nelson, Kristin. "*The Pains of Sleep*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 7 Sep 2021. Web. 18 Nov 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "*The Pains of Sleep*." LitCharts LLC, September 7, 2021. Retrieved November 18, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/samuel-taylor-coleridge/the-pains-of-sleep.