A Slumber did my Spirit Seal

POEM TEXT

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

SUMMARY

A deep sleep closed up my soul. I wasn't afraid of anything people are usually afraid of (like death): my beloved seemed to me like someone who could never be changed by the passage of time.

My beloved is dead now, so she can't move—she has no strength or life force. She also can't hear or see. She just passively goes round and round with the earth's movement, spinning along with the rest of the inert natural world.

THEMES

GRIEF AND MORTALITY

The speaker of "A Slumber did my Spirit Seal" looks back with wonder on a time when his now-dead beloved was alive. Back then, he reflects, he had no "human fears" of death, feeling that his beloved was somehow beyond "the touch of earthly years." Now that she's dead, that's actually true—but not in the way he imagined it to be true. Rather than being an immortal, changeless goddess, his dead love has become an inert, passive, unchanging part of nature. Death, this poem suggests, is a perfectly simple and natural thing—but one that humans "seal" out, preferring to live in illusion. In this light, most of life is like a "slumber," and grief is an awakening to the truth.

The speaker remembers his past life with his beloved as a kind of dream—a "slumber" he didn't even know he was in. This "slumber" was so deep that it "seal[ed]" the speaker's "spirit." In other words, his soul was locked up safe, but also cut off from reality.

Specifically, this "slumber" protected the speaker from the thought of mortality. In his dreamworld, the speaker saw his beloved as "a thing that could not feel / The touch of earthly years": eternally young and alive, someone death could never touch.

This image suggests that people tend to live in a sort of dream. Almost no one really goes about their day-to-day lives truly feeling that the people they love (and they themselves) will one day die. This slumber thus protects the speaker from pain, but he pays a price for that protection. Unable to accept that his beloved is mortal, he's setting himself up for a terrible shock.

After the speaker's beloved dies, he seems to wake up, understanding that his belief in his beloved's immortality was an illusion all along. Grief, this change suggests, forces humans to reckon with a reality they'd rather not face.

In the reality the speaker awakens to, his beloved is certainly past "the touch of earthly years," but only because she's become an object, just like the "rocks, and stones, and trees." This natural imagery suggests that death is as normal as "earth's diurnal course" (that is, the earth's daily rotation).

In a twist, though, it's exactly that normalcy that's so bewildering. The speaker's plain, factual statement of his beloved's deadness—in contrast with his past dream of her—seems to ask: how could she really be dead? How could someone who seemed not to "feel / the touch of earthly years" be inert as a stone now?

Grief, in other words, shakes people awake from the "slumber" they seem to spend most of their lives in, forcing them to confront a simple but bewildering fact: death is at once the most normal and the most mysterious thing there is.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:

The poem opens with the first-person speaker looking back on his past and remembering a time when his life felt like a deep, impenetrable sleep—a sleep in which he was oblivious to danger. His "spirit" was in a dreamworld.

In just these first two lines, the reader might already get the sense that something is going to go wrong with this

metaphorical "slumber." The past tense suggests that, while the speaker might *once* have fearlessly slumbered, he's awake now. And the language the speaker uses feels a little ominous and ambivalent. His slumber didn't, say, *guard* or *embrace* his spirit, but "seal[ed]" it, closing it tightly away and perhaps even imprisoning it.

The word "seal" might also suggest another kind of seal: a wax stamp imprinted with an insignia or initials, used to close letters in the days before envelopes. In other words, this "slumber" might not just have closed the speaker's spirit up, but stamped it with its own identity, possessing it. This would mean that the speaker was so deep in his sleep that his very soul seemed to *belong* to the dream-world.

Similarly, the idea of having "no human fears" might *sound* like a relief, but it's also a little sinister. If the speaker had "no human fears," he was safe, sure, but also distanced from his own humanity.

And though he seemingly had no idea he was asleep, dreams always come to an end.

The speaker communicates all this complex feeling in a remarkably straightforward way. This poem uses the simple ABAB rhyme scheme and the steady, pulsing common meter of a ballad (a traditional form based on folk songs). This means that the lines alternate between iambic tetrameter (four iambs, or four da-DUMs) and iambic trimeter (three da-DUMs).

The speaker builds a lot of sophistication into this simple template. Take a look, for instance, at the evocative way he uses end-stopped lines here:

> A slumber did my spirit seal;
> I had no human fears:

Those heavy closing punctuation marks suggest big, thoughtful pauses. These pauses, in turn, give the poem a pensive quality, making it seem like the speaker is reflecting deeply on his past. That colon in line 2 also feels expectant: the speaker is about to tell readers something more about his long-ago "slumber."

LINES 3-4

She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

These lines introduce a new character: a mysterious "she." This abrupt, anonymous arrival suggests that the speaker doesn't feel this woman *needs* introduction. To him, there's clearly only one "she" this could be, a person who must be at the center of his thoughts—a beloved.

While the speaker was deep in his "slumber," this woman seemed as if she "could not feel / The touch of earthly years." In other words, she seemed immortal and eternally young to the speaker, as if she were a goddess. And considering that the speaker didn't believe those personified "years" could "touch" her, she even "seemed" ethereal, untouchable in the same way a dream is untouchable.

But once again, the past tense spells trouble here—as does the word "seemed." The speaker's past "slumber"—which disconnected him from "human fears"—appears to have blinded him to one of life's most fundamental truths: death. Love might make someone *seem* immortal and changeless, but that's a dream that just can't last.

The speaker was once deeply caught up in that dream, though. Here, he uses the poem's only enjambment to suggest just *how* deeply:

> She seemed a thing that could not feel
> The touch of earthly years.

The lines flow swiftly into each other here, seamless as a vivid fantasy. But this enjambment also foreshadows the tragedy to come. Taken on its own, the line "She seemed a thing that could not feel" spells out exactly what the speaker's beloved is about to become: a dead body, or a thing that truly cannot "feel." The terrible reality of death, these lines suggests, was lurking just beneath the surface of the speaker's dream all along.

LINES 5-6

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;

The speaker begins the next stanza with a jump to the present tense. His dreamlike past is over, and "now" he's in the world of solid reality—a world in which his beloved is dead.

He doesn't say this flat out, though. Instead, he makes a strange catalog of everything his beloved now lacks. She has no "motion" and no "force"; she can't hear and she can't see. These are the cold, hard facts the speaker has to confront now that he's no longer deep in the "slumber" of ignorant bliss.

Take a look at how he uses anaphora in line 5:

> No motion has she now, no force;

That repetition of the word "no" makes it sound as if the speaker is trying hard to comprehend what has happened—or perhaps force himself to believe it. And the rhythmic assonance of the /o/ sound in "No motion" feels grimly insistent.

Notice, too, the way the speaker moves through his list of qualities his beloved has lost in death. He starts with "motion," referring to one of the most obvious qualities of a living person: the ability to move. Then he moves on to "force," a more mysterious idea. It might just suggest a variation on motion—the "force" to move yourself around—but perhaps it also touches on the feeling that the beloved's spirit, the intangible thing that made her the person she was, is gone.

The speaker then observes that the beloved "neither hears nor

sees." Whereas "motion" and "force" have to do with movement and vitality, hearing and seeing have to do with *communication*—with the ways that people perceive and interact with the surrounding world. Discovering that the beloved can no longer "hear" nor "see," the speaker seems to be trying to interact with her—and failing.

Awakened from his fearless "slumber" by this lover's death, the speaker is forced to reckon with a reality that's at once absolute and incomprehensible. On the one hand, everyone dies one day: that's the plainest fact there is. On the other hand, that plain fact is unfathomable: how can a person just *disappear* so completely, leaving only motionless matter behind?

LINES 7-8

Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

Still trying to come to terms with his beloved's death, the speaker imagines her body as an inert object that passively "roll[s] round" with the rest of the spinning planet. She is, in other words, as unmoving and unfeeling as a "stone[]." Dead, she's become nothing more than a part of the earth. The idea is a clear one—but the language is strange.

Consider, for instance, the "earth's diurnal course." The speaker could have used any number of simpler words to describe the earth's daily spin (like, for instance, "daily"), but instead, he chooses the elevated and formal "diurnal." This really stands out from the plain language around it: it's the only word in the poem with more than two syllables. And the strong /er/ assonance between "earth's" and "diurnal" draws even more attention to the word.

That long, rhythmic, and lofty "diurnal" also evokes another element of grief: the feeling that it's absurd that the world just keeps on unfeelingly spinning even after a person has suffered a terrible loss. With this strange, drawn-out word, the speaker suggests that the "earth's diurnal course" itself now feels strange and drawn-out to him in the aftermath of his beloved's death.

The speaker's mood here isn't just grief-stricken, though. He's also awestruck. The strong /r/ alliteration and consonance in "Rolled round in earth's diurnal course" makes it sound as if the speaker can hear the very rumble of the planet as it spins: he's got a god's-eye view here, perceiving the whole world at once. And from above, watching the earth spin, he sees his beloved's body carried right along with "rocks, and stones, and trees."

This line is pretty odd, too. Take a look at the way polysyndeton and caesura work together here:

> With rocks, || and stones, || and trees.

Those mid-line pauses (rare in this poem) and those repeated "ands" slow the poem down and give equal weight to "rocks," "stones," and "trees," singling each out for special attention. That choice asks readers to wonder why "rocks" and "stones"—surely two versions of the same basic thing—might deserve separate mention.

There's no single answer to that question. But one thing those separate "rocks" and "stones" do is to quickly create a vivid landscape. If it's both rocky and stony, it's clear that this is a barren, hard, and forbidding environment. And yet, between those "rocks" and "stones" grow "trees"—flickers of green life.

The closing moments of the poem thus bring life and death together. The speaker's beloved may have no "motion" of her own, but she's *moved*: "earth's diurnal course" carries her around and around. She may be as unseeing as a rock or a stone, but she's also part of a vibrantly alive planet.

Coming into contact with death, this poem suggests, also means coming into contact with *life*—life as it really is. The speaker is heartbroken and dazed, but he's also more human and more alive than he was in his ignorant "slumber." As he confronts the deep pain and strangeness of death, he finds himself able to see life and existence more broadly, understanding that his beloved—and, by extension, everyone—is part of a mysterious whole.

SYMBOLS

ROCKS AND STONES AND TREES

The "rocks, and stones, and trees" mentioned in the poem's final line symbolize the stillness of death. In death, the speaker's beloved has now become as still and passive as these objects: she can't move, hear, or see any more than a stone can. Her soul is gone, and her body is just a thing among things.

But this image also provides a little hint of consolation. In becoming like "rocks, and stones, and trees," the dead beloved also becomes a part of the world—and trees, after all, are alive. Although death feels final and incomprehensible to this speaker, perhaps it's also an opportunity to become part of something bigger: nature itself.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "rocks, and stones, and trees"

SLEEP

The speaker's "slumber" is a symbol of the willful ignorance in which people often lead their lives. Day to day, the speaker suggests, most people don't really consider the reality of death, preferring instead to remain dreamily unconscious, "seal[ed]" away from the fact that everyone will

eventually die. Inevitably, though, the grief of losing a loved one comes to wake up everyone who "slumbers," forcing them to finally confront mortality.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "A slumber did my spirit seal;"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration gives "A Slumber did my Spirit Seal" its musing, reflective tone, and draws attention to the contrast between the speaker's "slumber" and his awakened grief.

Strong sibilant alliteration appears in the very first line: "A slumber did my spirit seal." Repeated /s/ sounds often feel gentle and quiet; here, that quietness evokes the speaker's past life, when he metaphorically "slept" in blissful ignorance, with no "human fears" even crossing his mind.

Later, as the speaker tries to wrap his head around his beloved's death, the alliterative /r/ evokes not just a mood, but a landscape. The beloved's body, he says, is:

> Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
> With rocks, and stones, and trees.

The rumbling /r/ sound recalls exactly what it describes: rocks rolling round. The repetition of the /r/ even suggests the constant cycling of "earth's diurnal course"—the globe's daily rotation. And the alliteration here connects to strong /r/ consonance, too: listen to all the internal /r/ sounds in "earth's diurnal course." These rough, insistent /r/ sounds contrast with the gentler /s/ alliteration in the first stanza, making it clear that the speaker has awakened to the hard reality of death.

A subtler alliterative sound here might go unnoticed in a longer poem—but in only eight lines, it catches the reader's attention. That's the repeated /f/ sound that connects "fears," "feel," and "force." While these words don't appear right next to each other, they're strong enough to stand out, and they link the poem's two stanzas together.

Each of these vivid words relates to something that's *missing*. In the first stanza, the speaker *has* no "fears," and imagines that his beloved *can't* "feel" the passing of time. In the second stanza, those illusions are gone, and the speaker has to reckon with the fact that his beloved now has "no force," no vitality. The emphatic /f/ sound thus tracks the speaker's transformation from a naïve young man to a grieving older one—and his beloved's transition from life to death.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "slumber," "spirit," "seal"
- **Line 2:** "had," "human," "fears"
- **Line 3:** "She," "seemed," "feel"
- **Line 5:** "force"
- **Line 7:** "Rolled," "round"
- **Line 8:** "rocks"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, helps create the poem's reflective, musical tone. The first stanza, for instance, features assonant sounds that give the speaker's words a diffuse, dreamy quality:

> A slumber did my spirit seal;
> I had no human fears:
> She seemed a thing that could not feel
> The touch of earthly years.

The gentle repetition of /ee/ sounds binds this stanza together. The sounds here are as cohesive as the "slumber" that "seal[s]" the speaker, cutting him off from the reality of death.

In the second stanza, assonance appears in pairs:

> No motion has she now, no force;
> She neither hears nor sees;
> Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,

The quick pairings of the /oh/, /ee/, and /uh/ sounds make the language feel solid and insistent, tracking the poem's movement from a dreamy "slumber" to a painful awakening.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "did," "spirit," "seal"
- **Line 2:** "fears"
- **Line 3:** "She," "seemed," "feel"
- **Line 4:** "earthly," "years"
- **Line 5:** "No," "motion"
- **Line 6:** "hears," "sees"
- **Line 7:** "earth's," "diurnal"

CAESURA

The speaker only uses three caesurae in the entire poem, and they all appear in the second stanza. Those simple pauses thus take on a special weight. As the speaker struggles to come to terms with his beloved's death, the caesurae slow the poem down and make its words fall as heavily as the "rocks" and "stones" that the last line depicts.

First, the speaker tries to make himself understand his beloved's death by listing everything she no longer has:

> No motion has she now, || no force;

The caesura here draws attention to the speaker's repetition of the word "no"—and to the way he chews over a single idea in an effort to understand it. Trying to come to terms with reality, he focuses on physical powers—"motion" and "force"—trying to fathom the simple lifelessness of his beloved's dead body.

Still struggling to accept this, the speaker pauses again in the final line. There's not just one caesura in this line, but two, as the speaker describes his beloved's body:

> Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
> With rocks, || and stones, || and trees.

This sentence would have worked fine without the commas: those repeated "ands" (an example of polysyndeton) could have held things together on their own. But by using commas, the speaker slows the pace of the poem. These caesurae also make the speaker sound incredulous, as if he still can't accept that his beloved is as lifeless as a rock, a stone, or a tree.

This moment gets at the utter incomprehensibility of death. No matter how easy it is to intellectually understand that death comes for everyone, the poem suggests, in some way it still just doesn't *feel* believable that a person can be here one minute and gone the next, leaving only an empty shell behind.

The caesurae here also draw attention to one of the most strange and vivid language choices in this poem by giving "rocks" and "stones" their own separate space. These two words, given equal weight, ask readers to think about what the difference between "rocks" and "stones" really is—and perhaps to picture the bleak, craggy landscape in which one might *need* to distinguish between rocks and stones.

The poem thus leaves the reader and speaker in a desolate place, but also one with a glimmer of hope: living "trees" are the last thing to spring out of that stony world.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "now, no"
- **Line 8:** "rocks, and," "stones, and"

END-STOPPED LINE

End-stopped lines give this poem a slow, deliberate pace that communicates both the speaker's dreamy state in the first stanza and his shock in the second. Nearly every line is end-stopped, and a lot of those end-stops are strong ones. In particular, the speaker's use of colons and semi-colons call for substantial pauses, asking readers to really take a moment to let each line sink in while they prepare themselves for whatever will come next.

The slow, steady pace this creates makes the speaker seem like he's thinking things over deeply, trying to make his way toward an understanding of his beloved's death. For example, take a look at the first stanza, where strong end-stops surround the poem's single enjambment:

> A slumber did my spirit seal;
> I had no human fears:
> She seemed a thing that could not feel
> The touch of earthly years.

The semicolon at the end of the first line makes the speaker's "slumber" and his lack of "human fears" feel like connected thoughts. His ignorant bliss, in other words, was the source of his fearlessness.

Then, the colon at the end of line 2 creates a pause that sets readers up to discover that the speaker's "slumber" led him to think that his beloved was eternally young and untouchable by death. The enjambment between lines 3 and 4, in which the speaker remembers that his beloved once "seemed a thing that could not feel / The touch of earthly years," makes it sound as if the speaker is getting caught up in his memories.

But those memories come to a firm close at the stanza's final period. The dreamy, illusory part of the speaker's life, that end-stop suggests, has come to a decisive end.

End-stops thus both pace the poem and shape the speaker's thought process.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "seal;"
- **Line 2:** "fears:"
- **Line 4:** "years."
- **Line 5:** "force;"
- **Line 6:** "sees;"
- **Line 7:** "course,"
- **Line 8:** "trees."

POLYSYNDETON

The poem's final line uses polysyndeton like a brake, slowing an already slow-paced poem down to a reflective standstill.

In this closing line, the speaker imagines his beloved's dead body, trying to come to terms with its bewildering lifelessness. Now that she's dead, she's nothing more than an object that rolls "around in earth's diurnal course, / With rocks, and stones, and trees."

The repeated "and" here isn't grammatically necessary. Wordsworth could easily have written "rocks, stones, and trees" instead. But the extra "and" creates a feeling of accumulation or build-up: the beloved's body is just one object among many, this polysyndeton suggests.

The extra "and" also makes each noun fall deliberately and heavily, giving each its own little space in the line. This slow pace brings the poem to a standstill, as if the speaker just can't

keep going any more: he's forced to fall silent and reckon with his grief.

Polysyndeton also draws attention to the speaker's choice to list "rocks" and "stones" as separate categories. This invites readers to consider what the difference between a "rock" and a "stone" might be—and, in so doing, to imagine a hard and forbidding landscape, a place where a lonely speaker might have plenty of time to make fine distinctions between different types of unfeeling stones.

But by the same token, polysyndeton draws attention to the final entry in the list, the thing that's not like the others: "trees." There's still green life and hope growing among all those "rocks" and "stones," even in the midst of terrible grief.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "rocks, and stones, and trees."

REPETITION

The poem's repetitions evoke the speaker's struggle to come to terms with his beloved's death.

Anaphora appears in line 5, in which the speaker says, "No motion has she now, no force." That repeated "no" makes it sound as if the speaker is trying to convince himself of an almost incomprehensible truth, listing all the signs of life his beloved no longer has.

There's a similar feeling of grief and disillusionment in the poem's use of polyptoton. In the first stanza, the speaker's beloved seems to him to be "a thing that could not feel / The touch of earthly years." In the second, he discovers that this fond dream was far from true: even now, her lifeless body is "Rolled round in earth's diurnal course."

This repetition brings the speaker down to earth, literally. Where once he felt his beloved was eternally young and beyond the reach of time, now he's forced to admit that she was mortal just like everyone else. The repeated variation of the word "earth" reminds readers that death is simply part of what it means to be alive in the world; *everyone* feels "the touch of earthly years" and eventually becomes nothing but a lifeless object whirling around with everything else in "earth's diurnal course."

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "earthly"
- **Line 5:** "No motion has she now, no force;"
- **Line 7:** "earth's"

METAPHOR

The two strong metaphors in "A Slumber did my Spirit Seal" help make abstract ideas feel tangible and concrete, and shape the contrast between the speaker's dreamy past and his painful present.

The first metaphor appears in the very first line: "A slumber did my spirit seal." The speaker's spirit, he says, used to be asleep, metaphorically speaking—so deeply asleep that it was "seal[ed]" off from the world. In other words, he was living in a dream, believing that normal "human fears" (like, say, a fear of mortality) were of no concern to him and his beloved.

This metaphor hints that the speaker might not be totally alone in this closed-off "slumber." Everyone *literally* sleeps every day, of course, but it's also possible that everyone *metaphorically* sleeps as a way of simply getting through life without constantly confronting mortality. After all, very few people really engage with death on a daily basis.

The poem's second metaphor also deals with the incomprehensibility of death. To the speaker, his beloved used to seem like:

> [...] a thing that could not feel
> The touch of earthly years.

Here, time—"earthly years"—becomes a solid thing that "touch[es]" people. There's even a hint of personification here, with time presented as an active force. Deceptively simple on the outside, this metaphor is in fact packed with complexities. The speaker isn't saying that he believed time couldn't "touch" his beloved, exactly. Instead, he believed she couldn't *feel* time's touch—that it would have no effect on her. In other words, he used to imagine that she was somehow protected from the destructive influence of time in much the same way that he himself was sealed off from reality.

But time's physical power can't be escaped so easily. The second stanza doesn't use any metaphors, just the cold hard facts: now that she's dead, the speaker's beloved has "no force," and her body rolls passively around with "rocks, and stones, and trees." The transition from a metaphorical first stanza to a heavily literal second stanza mirrors the speaker's movement from fantasy to reality.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "A slumber did my spirit seal;"
- **Line 4:** "The touch of earthly years."

VOCABULARY

Slumber (Line 1) - A deep sleep.

Seal (Line 1) - Tightly close.

Earth's Diurnal Course (Line 7) - The earth's daily rotation.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A Slumber did my Spirit Seal" is built from two short stanzas, each a quatrain. It was first published in a collection known as *Lyrical Ballads*, so it should come as no surprise that it's a lyrical ballad—or, rather, a lyric poem that is also a ballad.

This means that it deals with an intense moment of emotion, but does so using the simple form of a folk song (a ballad). With its simple shape, its singsong ABAB rhyme scheme, and its common meter, the poem communicates a complex feeling—the strangeness and bewilderment of grief—in a form as plain as a nursery rhyme. (See the Rhyme Scheme and Meter sections for more on that.)

At the time that Wordsworth was writing, the idea of a "lyrical ballad" was wildly innovative. At the turn of the 19th century, lyric poetry tended to be high-flown and formal; ballads, on the other hand, were a common, popular form, usually used to tell stories—often bawdy stories. Here, though, Wordsworth uses the ballad form to explore the human experience rather than to simply tell a story. In doing so, he puts his tale of grief into plain language, ultimately suggesting that what he has to say about the human experience is true and relevant for everyone, not just the literary upper class.

METER

Like many of the poems in *Lyrical Ballads*, "A Slumber did my Spirit Seal" uses common meter—also known as ballad meter. That means that the lines alternate between iambic tetrameter (that is, lines of four iambs, metrical feet that go da-DUM) and iambic trimeter (lines that use *three* iambs).

Here's how that sounds in context:

> Rolled round | in earth's | diur- | nal course,
> With rocks, | and stones, | and trees.

This steady unstressed-stressed rhythm is all part of Wordsworth's bigger poetic philosophy. He and his friend Coleridge were interested in folksy poetic forms like ballads, hymns, and nursery rhymes—all of which usually use common meter. (See the Form section for more on that.) Wordsworth and Coleridge believed that this simple, alternating meter could hold all kinds of complex feeling.

And so it does here. The iambic pulse of these lines sounds a lot like a heart—a heart that skips a beat every other line. Like the life of the speaker's beloved, the rhythm seems as if it could go on steadily forever—and then it stops short.

RHYME SCHEME

"A Slumber did my Spirit Seal" uses a steady, consistent rhyme scheme. It runs like this:

ABAB CDCD

The simplicity of this pattern reflects the speaker's grief and confusion. Grappling with the mind-boggling fact that people can be alive one moment and dead the next, the speaker sticks to plain rhymes and plain language, as if trying to put his huge loss into a form he can hold onto.

This rhyme scheme also reflects Wordsworth's poetic approach. Along with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Wordsworth rejected the formality of Enlightenment-era poetry in favor of basic folk forms like the ballad, which often uses an ABAB or ABCB rhyme scheme. The back-and-forth rhyme pattern here makes this poem feel straightforward and musical, even as it lyrically explores a profound human mystery.

The tension between this simple rhyme scheme and the poem's complex subject matter fits the speaker's conflicted outlook on death, illustrating that mortality is two contradictory things at once: the plainest fact there is, and a phenomenon way beyond human understanding.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "A Slumber did my Spirit Seal" doesn't reveal much about himself—not even his gender. (We're calling him "he" here because so much of Wordsworth's poetry was autobiographical.) In his anonymity, this speaker becomes a universal figure, facing a problem that every human has to deal with at one time or another: grief.

As this speaker mourns the death of his beloved, he reflects that he used to be in a metaphorical kind of sleep, believing that his loved one would never die. Now, though, he has to face the fact that she's as lifeless as a stone—a bitter awakening after his happy "slumber."

His simple language reflects how difficult it is for anyone to grasp mortality: it's as if he's trying to put an incomprehensible experience into words he can understand. How, he seems to ask, can someone go from being vibrantly alive one minute to unresponsive and motionless the next? Voicing this universal feeling, the speaker faces the mystery of death with plainspoken sorrow and wonder.

SETTING

One might say that the setting of "A Slumber did my Spirit Seal" is the whole world. The speaker doesn't set the poem in any single place. Instead, he imagines the "earth's diurnal course" (that is, its daily rotation) and the "rocks, and stones, and trees" that the spinning planet carries with it.

These big images suggest that the poem's themes are similarly huge. Everyone in the world, the poem seems to say, will have to confront mortality at one time or another—whether grieving

over a loved one or facing their own deaths. Death is as essential and basic a feature of life as "rocks, and stones, and trees" are of the earth.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was a founder of English Romanticism. In collaboration with his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge, he revolutionized how the world thought about poetry.

"A Slumber did my Spirit Seal" was first printed in the second edition of Wordsworth and Coleridge's masterpiece, a collaborative collection called *Lyrical Ballads*. The first edition, which came out in 1798, shook the literary landscape. Using familiar forms like the ballad to muse on nature, magic, and human consciousness, *Lyrical Ballads* shocked readers raised on the Enlightenment-era elegance and wit of writers like Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope. The book was widely discussed, and the publication of a second edition only two years later reflects its popularity.

Wordsworth put himself in charge of this second edition, making many revisions and adding a sequence known as the "Lucy poems." "A Slumber did my Spirit Seal" is that sequence's conclusion. These poems deal with a speaker's grief over a mysterious beloved.

There's no critical consensus about whether "Lucy" was based on a real person. But one theory is that these poems deal with Wordsworth's grief and frustration over his relationship with Coleridge. The two men, along with Wordsworth's brilliant sister Dorothy, shared a short period of intense creative inspiration. For a few magical years, they lived and worked closely together, going for long walks, discussing literature, and composing poetry.

But Wordsworth and Coleridge were very different. Wordsworth was disciplined, arrogant, and fully persuaded of his own genius; Coleridge was erratic, inspired, and insecure, prone to addictions and hopeless loves. After the pair's brief period of shared genius, they drifted apart: Wordsworth grew frustrated with Coleridge's moods and frenzies, and Coleridge was heartbroken by Wordsworth's rejection.

These tensions came to a head when Wordsworth published the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. By this time, Wordsworth was conscious of his status as a public poet—and of his and Coleridge's stylistic disagreements. He revised *Lyrical Ballads* to play down Coleridge's contributions, even taking Coleridge's name off the title page. Coleridge never quite recovered from this slight, and the two men didn't speak for many years. The loss of this friendship truly was like a death.

But the great collaboration between Wordsworth and Coleridge lives beyond "the touch of earthly years." Their work was a major inspiration to younger Romantic poets like John Keats and to future generations of writers. Wordsworth remains one of the best-known poets—some of his poems, like "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" are so famous that they're almost proverbial.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Wordsworth and Coleridge wrote *Lyrical Ballads* during a time of massive political and social upheaval. Besides the burgeoning Industrial Revolution, during which the English began to abandon traditional rural lifestyles to find employment in factories and cities, all of Europe was shaken in the aftermath of the French Revolution.

In this revolt, the French people overthrew their decadent monarchy and installed a republic in its place. Wordsworth, who had traveled extensively in France in the years leading up to the Revolution (and left an illegitimate daughter behind there), was at first a passionate supporter of the revolutionaries. He was, in his youth, a great believer in democracy; his use of the popular, lower-class ballad form speaks to his sense of universal human dignity.

But his fervor for the French cause cooled as the Republic fell into the Terror, a dark, paranoid, and bloody period in which the new government took to guillotining its opponents. By the time Wordsworth wrote "A Slumber did my Spirit Seal," the French Republic had become belligerent and territorial; under the command of Napoleon Bonaparte, its armies rampaged across Europe, bent on conquering.

Wordsworth's disappointment in the French Revolution led to his reactionary conservatism. In his later years, this former anti-monarchist was pleased to accept the title of Poet Laureate from Queen Victoria herself.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the poem read out loud. (https://youtu.be/e3HuIkR_rZg)
- More on the Lyrical Ballads — Read about the second edition of Lyrical Ballads—the important collection in which this poem was first published—on the British Library's website. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/lyrical-ballads-1800-edition)
- A Short Biography — Read a brief biography of Wordsworth from the Poetry Foundation, where you can find links to more of his poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-wordsworth)
- The Wordsworth Trust — Visit the Wordsworth Trust's

website for more on Wordsworth's life, poetry, and legacy. (https://wordsworth.org.uk/)

- The Lucy Poems — Read a New Yorker essay that discusses what's so strange, novel, and important about Wordsworth's "Lucy poems." (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/12/05/strange-fits-of-passion)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM WORDSWORTH POEMS

- Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802
- Extract from The Prelude (Boat Stealing)
- I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud
- Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey
- Lines Written in Early Spring
- London, 1802
- My Heart Leaps Up
- She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways
- The Solitary Reaper
- The Tables Turned
- The World Is Too Much With Us
- We Are Seven

HOW TO CITE

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