

Sleep



SUMMARY

The poem's speaker asks: will you hand yourself over to me entirely, both your body and spirit, your skin and what lies beneath it—not like a refugee, in desperation or resentment, but like a child who wants nothing else than to do this?

Another voice replies, "Yes, absolutely."

The speaker continues: in that case, I will carry you through the mouth of my river, lift you up and transport you to a grave in a way that is difficult to explain or understand. I will grasp you and hold you, devour you, and then flood you in the massive cavern of my stomach, wash you with bigger and bigger ripples of water repeatedly.

And you will hold on awkwardly there, and doze there, in that soundless room; you will move to the rhythm of my blood pulsing through my body and you will hear my heart operating wildly through the bones of my skeleton that sit above you. You will reach inside my tissue, liquified and arranged in layers, through invisible faucets.

You will do this until dawn, at which point you will be ejected and woken up, split apart and pushed out. The merciless pliers of life will call you forward, and you will feel the pain and treachery that comes with being born.

desperation of a "fugitive," but should rather resemble the purity of a child's trust in its parent, a child who has "no other wish" than to be in its parent's arms. In this way, the poem suggests sleep is nurturing but also rather ominously overbearing, like a religious leader demanding total faith.

Sleep then tells this person what falling asleep will feel like, comparing it to being carried in the womb. Sleep says that it will "consume" and "engulf" this person. In other words, this person will lose all sense of who they are for a little while—like a fetus growing into a child, the sleeper will be incubated inside sleep's protective "belly." The sleeper won't be alone and separate as they are in the waking world, but rather joined with sleep as if their very being has been "dissolved," immune to outside cares.

But sleep's womblike protection can only be temporary, the poem continues, adding that waking is like being born all over again. In this way, sleep "betray[s]" the complete trust demanded of the sleeper. With the coming of "daylight," the sleeper is subjected to "expulsion and awakening." Just as a baby is suddenly pushed into the "harsh" world outside of the womb, the sleeper is ejected into waking and struck with "pangs" of reality.

Going to sleep is comforting because it feels like becoming an anonymous, protected baby again, safe inside a warm, enveloping womb. That's why waking is so difficult; the sleeper is "riv[ed]" (split apart from) this sense of wholeness and "driv[en] forth" into the "harsh," waking world, where one is again separate and responsible for oneself.

The poem thus ends up commenting both on sleep *and* waking life, depicting the one as a brief, inadequate refuge from the painful necessity of the other. The speaker describes "Life" as brandishing "remorseless forceps"—or merciless pliers. Basically, like a doctor getting ready to deliver a baby, the waking world forcefully removes the sleeper from the temporary reprieve of sleep.

The speaker even compares "awakening" with a kind of "expulsion"—perhaps suggesting that exiting sleep is similar to being cast out of paradise. And if sleep is a kind of "mysterious[]" burial" in which the speaker is temporarily, mercifully dead to the world, then waking is a bit like being resurrected back into the unpleasant realities of life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21



THEMES



THE COMFORT AND ESCAPE OF SLEEP

The speaker of "Sleep" is sleep itself. Addressing a nameless "you," the speaker describes—in a mix of comforting and disturbing language—what will happen when a person gives themselves over to sleep's power, comparing this experience to that of a baby in its mother's womb. The poem thus portrays sleep (and/or death and sex, depending on how [metaphorically](#) readers interpret the poem) as a comforting force, which nevertheless "betray[s]" sleepers by expelling them from its sanctuary. Waking to consciousness, here, is as "harsh" as being born. And by casting sleep as a longed-for, yet temporary and unreliable protector, the poem ultimately comments on the painful difficulty of waking life.

The poem depicts sleep as a nurturing, parental force, but one that demands complete trust and dependency from the sleeper. The speaker (again, sleep [personified](#)) asks if the person they're addressing is ready to "give [themselves] to [sleep] utterly." The word "utterly" suggests that a person must *completely* surrender themselves, without reservation, in order for sleep to overcome them. This surrender shouldn't be like the



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

*Do you give ...
... Yes, utterly.*

The poem kicks off with a mysterious speaker who asks a listener whether they'll "give" themselves over to the speaker "utterly" (that is, absolutely). Based on the poem's title, readers can assume that the speaker is a [personified](#) version of sleep. That is, the poem is trying to describe the act of falling asleep by treating sleep itself like a figure that's alluring, seductive, nurturing, parental, and overbearing all at once.

Sleep doesn't just want this person to hand over their body. Sleep says the sleeper should surrender both their "body and no-body," their "flesh and no-flesh." The implication is that sleep dissolves the barrier between one's body and mind.

The poet could have chosen to write this line a little differently—"body and soul, flesh and spirit," for example. But the choice to [repeat](#) the word "no" adds some rhythm to the line, as does the [asyndeton](#) (or lack of conjunction) between these [parallel](#) phrases (and throughout the poem's first four lines, for that matter). The language moves smoothly forward, evoking the pull of sleep.

Sleep goes on to say that this surrender shouldn't be like a fugitive running away from something "blindly and bitterly," with [alliteration](#) adding emphasis to sleep's point. Instead, sleep says, the sleeper should give themselves up to sleep "as a child might, with no other wish."

By using a [simile](#) to compare the sleeper to a child, the poem casts sleep as a kind of parental figure taking the sleeper into its arms. There is something soothing in this comparison, although there is also a hint of something a little more ominous, as sleep demands complete, unquestioning trust from the sleeper.

The first stanza then concludes with a second voice—the voice of the person sleep is addressing—answering that they will indeed surrender themselves to sleep. They respond using the same language that sleep used: they will trust themselves to sleep's care "utterly." The repetition of the word "utterly" cements the absolute control that sleep will have over the sleeper; the sleeper becomes entirely passive in sleep's care.

LINES 6-7

*Then I shall ...
... to burial mysteriously,*

Sleep goes on to explain what it will do with this person now that they have agreed to go to sleep. Sleep says it will "bear" (or carry) the sleeper down a [metaphorical](#) "estuary." An "estuary" refers to the mouth of a river, into which smaller rivers pour. This metaphor of separate, smaller things joining and becoming one perhaps suggests that in sleep, the sleeper leaves behind

their individual identity and becomes part of something bigger—a great open space where everything is more or less at one with everything else.

Sleep then says it will "Carry [the sleeper] and ferry [them] to burial." In other words, going to sleep is being compared to dying. And like death, the process of sleep is "mysterious[]"—no one really, fully understands what happens on the other side.

This reference to rivers and death might also form a subtle [allusion](#) to the mythological rivers Styx and Lethe:

- In ancient Greek mythology, Styx marks the boundary between earth and the underworld.
- Lethe, meanwhile, refers to a river in the underworld whose waters cause forgetfulness.
- The poem thus suggests that sleep is a kind of oblivion that carries people away from the concerns of waking life.

Also note that the words "bear" and "carry" are suggestive of pregnancy—a theme the poem will take up in the latter half of the stanza, in which sleep becomes like a mother talking to the fetus in her womb. Here, the seeds (no pun intended) of that metaphor take root; it's possible to read the first stanza as describing sexual intercourse, and these lines as then describing the physical process of reproduction (i.e., the fertilization of egg or implantation—perhaps "burial"—of an embryo in a woman's uterus).

These lines (and the rest of the stanza) are filled with [parallelism](#), with the speaker repeating the construction "[verb] + you" over and over again: "bear you," "carry you," "ferry you." This creates a steady, hypnotic rhythm, enhanced by all the /r/ and /st/ [consonance](#) ("estuary," "carry," "ferry," "burial," "mysteriously," etc.) and long /ee/ [assonance](#) ("estuary," "carry," "ferry," "burial," "mysteriously"). Note that "carry," "ferry," and "burial" are also [slant rhymes](#).

Note, too, the meter here, which is arguably made up of [trochees](#) (poetic feet with a **stressed**-unstressed beat pattern):

Carry | you and | ferry | you to | buri- | al mys- | teri- |
ously,

It's possible to scan this a bit differently (i.e., "Carry you and ferry you to burial [...]") but there's clearly a falling rhythm here: a movement from stressed beats to unstressed ones. Altogether, the lines are soothing in their cadence, evoking the pull of sleep.

LINES 8-11

*Take you and ...
... huger waves continually.*

Sleep gets a little more forceful here. It's not simply "carrying" or "ferrying" the listener peacefully along a [metaphorical](#) river

of sleep; now, sleep says, it will "take and receive" the sleeper, "consume" and "engulf" then.

These word pairings illustrate the soothing and overwhelming power of sleep: "take," "consume," and "engulf" feel forceful and even violent or predatory, whereas "receive" is gentle and welcoming. In other words, sleep is a powerful natural process that people have no power to control.

In lines 10-11, the poem uses a second [metaphor](#) for sleep:

In the huge cave, my belly, lave you
With huger waves continually.

Here, sleep is being depicted as a person carrying a baby inside their womb. On the one hand, there is something comforting to this comparison, as the womb is a safe place that nourishes and protects a fetus. Sleep says it will wash larger and larger "waves" over the sleeper, again evoking the gentle rhythms of sleep. And yet, there's also once again something threatening or ominous here: those huge waves might also drown the sleeper!

[Parallelism](#) (the repeated grammatical phrasing of "[verb] + you") and [internal rhyme](#) continue to knit images together and create a sense of building, hypnotic rhythm. The words "cave," "lave," and "waves" also draw attention to the relationship between sleep and the rhythmic way that water moves.

If readers are getting an inkling the poem is talking about more than just sleep, they're not wrong. Again, it's possible that the poem is also depicting sex and procreation—with all that language about taking, receiving, engulfing, etc. actually alluding to intercourse, desire, and reproduction. Even as the poem is comparing sleep to death, then, it is simultaneously, and even [paradoxically](#), comparing it to the creation of new life.

LINES 12-15

*And you shall ...
... ride above you,*

Sleep tells whomever it is addressing that they will "cling and clamber" in the "cave" of sleep's "belly." Again, the sleeper is like a fetus inside a womb, which belongs to this [personified](#) sleep.

The [imagery](#) of this sleeper clutching the sides of the "cave"/"belly" and flailing about awkwardly isn't exactly a restful one, though sleep also says the sleeper will "slumber there, in that dumb" (or soundless) "chamber." In other words, sleep can be soothing and restorative, but it can also be a bit turbulent (consider someone who is having a nightmare, for instance).

Sleep goes on to say that the sleeper will "beat" alongside sleep's "blood's beat" and "hear [sleep's] heart move / Blindly in bones that ride above" the sleeper:

- On the one hand, this imagery suggests a deep connection between sleep and the sleeper. It's easy

to interpret these lines as describing a baby in the womb, listening to the heartbeat of their parent. The heart is "in bones that ride above" the sleeper in the sense that it's encased by the ribcage, which rests above the belly (where the sleeper/fetus rests).

- At the same time, this image again feels slightly sinister and might make readers think of death. The sleeper being located in a soundless "chamber," "blindly" listening to "bones" grinding above them evokes the way that sleeping people are oblivious to the movement of the waking—but also how dead people, buried in the earth, are oblivious to the movements of the living "above" them.
- Finally, the intimacy of these lines might once again hint at *sexual* intimacy: the way that people may feel deeply connected during intercourse, hearing each others' heartbeats. The idea of a "heart" beating "blindly" in "bones that ride above you" might also evoke the "blind" rush of desire—the way one's heart may feel beyond the control of one's body.
- What's clear above all is that the sleeper is removed from the cares of the waking world.

Note the continued use of sonic devices to add musicality and rhythm to these lines. There's the evocatively loud [alliteration](#) of "Cling and clamber," for example, plus that of "hear" and "heart," and "beat"/"blood"/"blindly"/"bones." The lilting /l/ and humming /m/ [consonance](#) throughout and the short /uh/ and long /i/ [assonance](#) add yet more power:

And you shall cling and clamber there
And slumber there, in that dumb chamber,
Beat with my blood's beat, hear my heart move
Blindly in bones that ride above you,

The lines swell in intensity, in turn evoking the hypnotic, overwhelming power of sleep.

LINES 16-17

*Delve in my ...
... embodied so –*

Sleep says the sleeper will "Delve in [its] flesh, dissolved and bedded." The word "bedded" has a few different meanings: on the most literal level, it's just referring to a place where one has gone to sleep. It is also a geological term referring to rock that's been deposited in layers—perhaps suggesting that as the sleeper "dissolves" into unconsciousness, bits and pieces of them scatter and become stuck in sleep's "flesh."

On the other hand, "to bed someone" is slang for having sex. In this way, sleep is likened not just to death and pregnancy, but also to the intimacy of sexual intercourse, which "dissolves" the barriers between people, allowing them to seemingly (and

temporarily) become one. (And, quite literally, a sperm "delves" into an egg, a fetus is embedded in a womb.) Sex, death, sleep: each of these lines, the poem suggests, involves a kind of oblivion that cuts people off from the rest of the world.

These lines are again intensely musical, brimming with [alliteration](#) ("delve"/"dissolved"; "viewless valves"), [consonance](#) (especially of the humming /v/, liquid /l/, and booming /d/ and /b/ sounds), and [assonance](#) (of the short /eh/ sound):

Delve in my flesh, dissolved and bedded,
Through viewless valves embodied so –

There's also [sibilance](#) here, with those vibrating /z/ sounds and hushed /s/ and /sh/ sounds. Altogether, the lines are lush and resonant. All these sounds heighten the intensity of this moment, when the sleeper is losing all sense of their individual identity as they become one with sleep (or a parent, or a partner).

And just as the poem hints again at sex and death, it also reaches a kind of climax; lines 16-17 arrive at the end of a long, sonically charged sentence, and break off with the use of an em dash. The em dash suggests that the person's slumber is to be interrupted; sleep, after all, is a temporary state.

LINES 18-21

*Till daylight, the ...
... of harsh birth.*

In the poem's final stanza, sleep betrays the sleeper's trust by allowing them to be "expuls[ed]" (or cast out) from unconsciousness and thrust back into the waking world.

"Daylight" isn't a welcome transition here, but rather a "riving"—it's like being split apart. The [internal rhyme](#) between "riving" and "driving" adds intensity to the idea that the sleeper is being torn away from sleep and forced into waking. And again, these lines are filled with sexual undertones suggestive of the end of intercourse, when partners physically part (one being "expelled" from the other and both coming to their full senses).

Sleep then says that "Life" will come with its "remorseless forceps beckoning." The [imagery](#) of "forceps," a tool used in surgical procedures, suggests that life coming to deliver the sleeper from sleep as a doctor would deliver a baby from the womb. Life, here, is therefore a source of bewilderment and fear. Like being born, the poem implies, waking up is a painful process, as the transition from the comfort and safety of the womb to the "harsh" "pangs" of entering the outside world is anything but easy. And the sleeper feels betrayed at being forced to leave the comfort of sleep behind.

Combined [assonance](#) and [consonance](#) add musicality to the phrase "remorseless forceps," emphasizing the merciless nature of life, which carries on regardless of whether or not a

person is ready for it. Overall, the final stanza drives home the contrast between the comforting nature of sleep and the painful, unwelcome reality of living.



SYMBOLS



WATER AND RIVERS

Water and rivers in the poem [symbolize](#) unconsciousness, oblivion, and surrender.

In lines 6-7, the speaker says, "Then I shall bear you down my estuary, / Carry you and ferry you to burial mysteriously." An estuary is the mouth of a river, into which other, smaller rivers flow. Falling asleep, these lines suggests, feels a bit like being transported across water—perhaps indicating how weightless and passive the sleeper feels.

At the same time, the mention of being ferried across a river calls to mind the rivers Styx and Lethe from ancient Greek mythology:

- Styx stands as a barrier between the world of the living and the dead, and newly dead souls must enlist the help of the ferryman Charon to cross it. In saying that sleep carries and ferries the sleeper to burial, the poem is suggesting that going to sleep is like dying or like crossing from one world to the next.
- Lethe, meanwhile, is a river in the underworld whose waters cause total forgetfulness or oblivion. Sleep, the poem thus suggests, results in being totally cut off from the waking world.

When the speaker says that the sleeper is "continually" washed in "huger waves," this again builds on the aforementioned water symbolism. The sleeper is washed in unconsciousness.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "Then I shall bear you down my estuary, / Carry you and ferry you to burial mysteriously,"
- **Lines 10-11:** "In the huge cave, my belly, lave you / With huger waves continually."



POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

The poem [personifies](#) sleep, in fact making sleep the speaker of the poem! Sleep is addressing someone who, ostensibly, wishes to fall asleep, asking this person if they will trust in sleep "utterly," or absolutely. It is only through the sleeper's surrender that sleep is able to take hold and "ferry" the sleeper

to a state that is compared by turns to death and birth. In this way, sleep is both soothing and a little bit sinister; it requires the sleeper's permission to take hold, but also demands a complete and total surrender of the self.

By personifying sleep, the poem gives sleep authority: sleep has a forcefulness, mysteriousness, and even a "heart," "blood," and "bones." By depicting sleep as something with a body that can hold and nurture the sleeper, the poem suggests that the relationship between sleep and the sleeper is similar to the relationship between a pregnant person and the baby growing inside them.

This points not only to the nourishing, comforting nature of sleep, but also to the eventual "betrayal" that must occur upon waking. Just as pregnancy doesn't last forever and a baby is eventually pushed screaming into the world, so too must sleep end with the sleeper experiencing "pangs" of "expulsion" as they return to consciousness.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 6-21

REPETITION

The poem uses various kinds of [repetition](#) to create a hypnotic, mesmerizing tone that evokes the allure of sleep.

In the first stanza, for instance, the words "utterly," "body," and "flesh" are all repeated:

Do you give yourself to me **utterly**,
Body and no-body, flesh and no-flesh,
 [...]

 Yes, **utterly**.

While the poet could have chosen to write, "Body and spirit, flesh and soul" without drastically altering the poem's meaning, the repetition builds rhythm and intensity through repetition and grammatical [parallelism](#).

The repetition of "utterly" also emphasizes the total submission of the self that must take place upon sleeping. The listener must do as sleep says, in other words, if they want to fall asleep. The [diacope](#) of "beat" in line 14 has a similar effect, calling attention to the unity between sleep and the sleeper:

Beat with my blood's beat, hear my heart move

The second stanza uses yet more parallelism, turning to the same grammatical structure over and over again: "[verb] + you." This repetitive phrasing again creates a strong, steady sense of rhythm that pulls readers along just as sleep pulls the sleeper along. This parallelism also draws attention to sleep's power and authority; sleep is the one taking action here, whereas the

sleeper is the recipient of these actions.

Then, in lines 10 and 11, the [polyptoton](#) of "huge" and "huger" adds to the poem's momentum, evoking the sensation of waves building and "lav[ing]" against the sleeper.

The [anaphora](#) and [epistrophe](#) of the third stanza work in the same way, making it feel as though the lines are building up in intensity:

And you shall cling and clamber **there**
 And slumber **there**, [...]

Thanks to all this repetition, sleep feels unstoppable and inevitable.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "utterly"
- **Line 2:** "Body and no-body, flesh and no-flesh,"
- **Line 5:** "utterly"
- **Line 6:** "bear you"
- **Line 7:** "Carry you and ferry you"
- **Line 8:** "Take you and receive you"
- **Line 9:** "Consume you," "engulf you"
- **Line 10:** "huge," "lave you"
- **Line 11:** "huger"
- **Line 12:** "And," "there"
- **Line 13:** "And"
- **Line 14:** "Beat," "beat"

ALLITERATION

The poem is filled with [alliteration](#), which makes the language—the language of sleep itself—musical, powerful, and enticing. Take the /b/ sounds of "blindly" and "bitterly," for example, which add emphasis and intensity to the idea that sleepers must willingly give them over to sleep.

The third stanza is particularly alliterative, making it feel climactic. There's the loud /cl/ of "cling" and "clamber," which seems to evoke the very tossing and turning it describes. The bold /b/ sounds and breathy /h/ sounds "beat," "blood's," "blindly," and "bones" might bring to mind the rhythmic beating of the heart that the poem is describing. And in the stanza's last two lines, the heavy /d/ sounds of "delve" and "dissolve" suggest the pull of sleepiness. It's worth noting that these lines are bursting with [consonance](#) as well; together, these sonic devices create the feeling of building, inescapable momentum—which is fitting, as this corresponds with the moment right before the [metaphorical](#) "birth" interrupts the soothing slumber of the sleeper.

Alliteration can also tie words together thematically. In the last stanza, for example, the alliteration of "betrayal" and "birth" pairs these two words in readers' minds. This, in turn, reflects the idea that waking up and being born are both difficult

experiences that sleep/the womb doesn't prepare people for.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "blindly," "bitterly"
- **Line 12:** "cling," "clamber"
- **Line 14:** "Beat," "blood's," "beat," "hear," "heart"
- **Line 15:** "Blindly," "bones"
- **Line 16:** "Delve," "dissolved"
- **Line 17:** "viewless," "valves"
- **Line 19:** "forth"
- **Line 20:** "forceps"
- **Line 21:** "betrayal," "birth"

CONSONANCE

As with [alliteration](#), [consonance](#) adds musicality and rhythm to the poem. Take a look at lines 6 and 7, for example:

Then I shall bear you down my estuary,
Carry you and ferry you to burial mysteriously,

The repetitive sounds of these lines add to their intensity and momentum. The combination of /r/ consonance with [assonance](#) in "bear," "estuary," "carry," and "ferry" creates several [slant rhymes](#), in fact. All this emphatic repetition signals to the reader that something important is happening in the poem.

The consonance of the third stanzas is especially intense:

And you shall cling and clamber there
And slumber there, in that dumb chamber
Beat with my blood's beat, hear my heart move
Blindly in bones that ride above you,
Delve in my flesh, dissolved and bedded,
Through viewless valves embodied so –

The muted /m/, buzzing /v/, and liquid /l/ sounds evoke the gentle lull of sleep, while the more resonant /b/ and /d/ sounds evoke the "beat[ing] heart" being described. The lines feel at once smooth and heavy, bringing to mind the pull of sleep itself.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "flesh," "flesh"
- **Line 3:** "fugitive," "blindly," "bitterly"
- **Line 6:** "bear," "estuary"
- **Line 7:** "Carry," "ferry," "burial," "mysteriously"
- **Line 8:** "receive"
- **Line 9:** "Consume," "engulf"
- **Line 10:** "cave," "belly," "lave"
- **Line 11:** "waves," "continually"
- **Line 12:** "shall," "cling," "clamber"
- **Line 13:** "slumber," "dumb," "chamber"
- **Line 14:** "Beat," "blood's," "beat," "hear," "heart"

- **Line 15:** "Blindly," "in," "bones," "ride," "above"
- **Line 16:** "Delve," "flesh," "dissolved," "and," "bedded"
- **Line 17:** "viewless," "valves," "embodied"
- **Line 18:** "Till," "daylight," "expulsion"
- **Line 19:** "riving," "driving," "forth"
- **Line 20:** "remorseless," "forceps"
- **Line 21:** "betrayal," "harsh," "birth"

ASSONANCE

Like [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#), [assonance](#) heightens the poem's language, adding musicality, rhythm, and momentum that evokes the hypnotic pull of sleep. Take a look at the /oo/ and /ay/ assonance in lines 9-11, for example:

Consume you, engulf you,
In the huge cave, my belly, lave you
With huger waves continually.

The building momentum of all those shared sounds evokes the increasing size of the [metaphorical](#) "waves" that crash up against the sleeper. And combined /ay/ assonance and /v/ consonance creates a string of [internal rhymes](#) between "cave," "lave," and "waves," which once again draws attention to what is happening in the poem. The [imagery](#) is by turns soothing (a baby being carried in the womb) and quite ominous (one might interpret the "huger waves" to be drowning the sleeper).

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "bear," "estuary"
- **Line 7:** "Carry," "ferry," "burial," "mysteriously"
- **Line 9:** "Consume," "you," "you"
- **Line 10:** "huge," "cave," "lave," "you"
- **Line 11:** "huger," "waves," "continually"
- **Line 13:** "slumber," "dumb"
- **Line 15:** "Blindly," "ride"
- **Line 16:** "Delve," "flesh," "bedded"
- **Line 19:** "riving," "driving," "forth"
- **Line 20:** "remorseless," "forceps"
- **Line 21:** "Pangs," "betrayal"

IMAGERY

The poem uses [imagery](#) to build its central [metaphors](#) about what sleep feels like—namely, like something overwhelming, powerful, comforting, soothing, and unnerving all at once. In lines 10-12, for example, the poem uses imagery that compares sleep to pregnancy:

In the huge cave, my belly, lave you
With huger waves continually.

The imagery is dreamlike—hazy and shifting. The sleeper is in a

"huge cave" that is also a "belly," both of which are, again, metaphors for sleep. The imagery is disconcerting (much like the imagery of dreams) because of its slipperiness: is sleep like being carried in the womb, or is it like being in a dark, frightening cave? Somehow it is both.

To complicate matters, the imagery in the third stanza might also be describing sex. Sleep says the sleeper will "Delve in [sleep's] flesh, dissolved and bedded, / Through viewless valves embodied so—" The language is intentionally ambiguous; sleep can feel like many things, it implies.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "In the huge cave, my belly, lave you / With huger waves continually."
- **Lines 12-17:** "And you shall cling and clamber there / And slumber there, in that dumb chamber, / Beat with my blood's beat, hear my heart move / Blindly in bones that ride above you, / Delve in my flesh, dissolved and bedded, / Through viewless valves embodied so —"
- **Lines 20-21:** "Life with remorseless forceps beckoning – / Pangs"

SIMILE

The poem uses a [simile](#) (or rather two similes) in the first stanza. Sleep asks if the person who wishes to fall asleep will surrender themselves to sleep "utterly":

Not as a fugitive, blindly or bitterly,
But as a child might, with no other wish?

In other words, the poem is using one simile (to give oneself "as a fugitive") to illustrate the wrong kind of surrender, and another (to give oneself "as a child") to illustrate the correct kind.

Sleep doesn't want people to "give" themselves in desperation, because they're running from something. Instead, it wants people to come to it with the complete trust of a "child" who desires nothing else. It seems that in order to fall asleep, one must embrace the fact that one will be totally out of control. The simile of the child suggests that sleep is like a parental figure who will carry the sleeper to wherever they are going.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Do you give yourself to me utterly,"
- **Line 3:** "Not as a fugitive, blindly or bitterly,"
- **Line 4:** "But as a child might, with no other wish?"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The poem uses three central [metaphors](#) to explain what sleep feels like. The first, and arguably most important metaphor, is that of pregnancy and birth. This [extended metaphor](#) begins in

lines 6-11:

Then I shall bear you down my estuary,
Carry you and ferry you to burial mysteriously,
Take you and receive you,
Consume you, engulf you,
In the huge cave, my belly, lave you
With huger waves continually.

The word "bear" calls to mind the phrase "bear a child," while the word "Carry" also suggests that sleep is "carry[ing]" (or pregnant with) the sleeper. Likewise, sleep says that the sleeper will be "engulf[ed]" (or immersed) in its "belly." This [imagery](#) clearly suggests pregnancy. Sleep, this metaphorical language implies, is like being a fetus in the womb.

Of course, these lines also present sleep as a kind of death. Sleepers are carried along a river that evokes the mythological rivers of the underworld, Styx and Lethe, and then "buri[ed]." The line "lave you / With huger waves continually" also sounds an awful lot like death by drowning.

Pregnancy and death are still very much present in the third stanza, which can also be read as describing reproduction/ pregnancy and burial. But a third metaphor also emerges: that of sex. Sleep says that the sleeper will:

Beat with my blood's beat, hear my heart move
Blindly in bones that ride above you,
Delve in my flesh, dissolved and bedded,
Through viewless valves embodied so—

All three metaphors seem to be at play in these lines. The sleeper might be a fetus safely tucked inside a womb, hearing the "heart" of the body carrying it; or the sleeper may be disintegrating below the earth, beneath "bones," "dissolv[ing]" and eternally "bedded"; or the sleeper may be "Delv[ing]" into the "flesh" of a lover, whose body (and thus "bones") "ride above" them during lovemaking.

Regardless of how one interprets these images—as one metaphor or multiple—the point seems to be that sleep is somehow as intimate as pregnancy, death, or a sexual act. There is no boundary between the sleeper and sleep; the sleeper is completely at one with their environment and utterly oblivious to the concerns of the waking world.

Finally, the last stanza depicts "Life" as a doctor with "remorseless forceps beckoning." Waking up, in other words, is like being born; sleep "betrays" the sleeper by forcing them to return to the waking world, which is "harsh" in comparison to the soothing rhythms of sleep.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-21



VOCABULARY

Utterly (Line 1, Line 5) - Completely; without qualification.

Fugitive (Line 3) - An escapee or refugee; someone in hiding from the law.

Estuary (Line 6) - The mouth of a large river into which smaller rivers flow.

Ferry (Line 7) - Transport across water in a boat or ship.

Engulf (Line 9) - Flood or immerse; completely cover.

Lave (Lines 10-11) - Wash.

Clamber (Line 12) - Scramble or move awkwardly.

Dumb (Line 13) - Soundless; mute.

Delve (Line 16) - Reach into; burrow.

Dissolved (Line 16) - Broken down or liquified.

Embodied (Line 17) - To be given tangible or visible form.

Viewless (Line 17) - Not able to be seen; invisible.

Valves (Line 17) - A device such as a pipe or a faucet that controls the passage of fluid or air.

Expulsion (Line 18) - The process of forcing something out of the body.

Riving (Line 19) - Splitting apart.

Remorseless (Line 20) - Without regret or guilt; merciless.

Forceps (Line 20) - An instrument used in surgery.

Pangs (Line 21) - Sharp pains.

might be thought of as a very loose accentual tetrameter.

Take lines 3 and 7, which both feature a clear falling rhythm—that is, a rhythm that moves from **stressed** beats to unstressed beats. Both lines have four **stresses** apiece; line 3 is made up specifically of **dactyls** (poetic feet consisting of one **stressed** beat followed by two unstressed beats), while line 7 features three unstressed beats after each **stress**:

Not as a | fugitive, | blindly or | bitterly,
[...]
Carry you and | ferry you to | burial mys- | teriously,

These lines feel smooth and hypnotic, evoking the pull of sleep. And that same pattern of four stresses per line in a falling rhythm pops up again and again in the poem. Take lines 15-16, which feature a mixture of **trochees** (stressed-unstressed) and more dactyls:

Blindly in | bones that | ride a- | bove you,
Delve in my | flesh, dis- | solved and | bedded,

Later, lines 20-21 again mix trochees and dactyls (plus a final **spondee**, two **stressed** beats in a row, to add emphasis to the phrase "harsh birth"):

Life with re- | morseless | forceps | beckoning -
Pangs and be- | trayal of | harsh birth.

While not every line has the same falling pattern, many others still feature the same number of stressed beats. Take line 10:

In the | huge cave, | my bel- | ly, lave | you

Nearly the entirety of the third stanza (including lines 15-16, mentioned above) also features four stressed beats per line:

And you | shall cling | and clamb- | er there
And slumb- | er there, | in that | dumb cham- | ber,
[...]
Blindly in | bones that | ride a- | bove you,
Delve in my | flesh, dis- | solved and | bedded,
Through view- | less valves | embo- | died so -

The poem thus feels rhythmic and musical but never overly strict or predictable. It might bring to mind the gentle, soothing rhythms of sleep—and the way that those rhythms get disrupted by the "harsh birth" of awakening.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem doesn't follow a regular **rhyme scheme**. However, its first and last stanzas do feature an alternating pattern of **slant end rhymes**. The rhymes in the first stanza can be thought of as following the pattern ABABA:



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Sleep" is made up of four stanzas of varying lengths. It doesn't have a traditional form, such as a **sonnet** or a **villanelle**, but instead unfolds loosely, organically, unpredictably—fitting for a poem describing how it feels to sleep. Each stanza also consists of a single sentence (with the exception of the first, which has two). These long, windy sentences pull readers down the page, perhaps evoking the pull of sleepiness.

METER

The poem is written in **free verse**, meaning it does not follow a set **meter**. This keeps the poem feeling smooth and organic. That said, many lines don't stray too far from pentameter. For instance, lines 1, 2, and 4 in the first stanza are all 10 syllables long, and the third stanza contains lines that are mostly 9 syllables long.

What's more, the majority of the poem's lines (though certainly not all of them) feature four **stressed** beats, with varying numbers of **unstressed** beats in between. As such, the meter

[...] utterly, *A*
 [...] flesh, *B*
 [...] bitterly, *A*
 [...] wish? *B*
 [...] *utterly*, *A*

Stanza 2 breaks with this pattern; lines 6, 7, and 11 contain slant rhymes ("estuary," "mysteriously," "continually"), while lines 8-10 simply repeat the same word ("you") at the end of each line. In stanza 3, end rhyme disappears altogether.

Then in the last stanza, the alternating ABAB rhyme pattern returns, perhaps suggesting that such regimented order is tied to the waking world, while sleep is a more disorganized and intuitive state:

[...] awakening, *A*
 [...] forth, *B*
 [...] beckoning – *A*
 [...] birth. *B*



SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is sleep itself, [personified](#). Sleep is addressing a person, asking them if they are willing to completely surrender themselves with total, childlike trust. When the person responds with a "yes," sleep goes on to describe what the experience of sleep will feel like.

The language sleep uses to describe itself is both comforting and a little disturbing. For instance, sleep says that it will "carry" the speaker in its "huge [...] belly" and also to a [metaphorical](#) "burial," [imagery](#) that is at once nurturing and sinister. Sleep also says that it will "lave" (or wash) the sleeper with "huger waves continually." While washing in itself feels parental, the idea of the "waves" getting bigger and bigger—and the sleeper "cling[ing]" and "clamber[ing]" while the waves "engulf" them—feels dangerous, almost as if the sleeper's very essence will be eroded or washed away.

Note that it's also possible to interpret the speaker as an actual mother speaking to a baby in her womb or as someone speaking to a lover during intercourse. This is because sleep, here, is presented as being metaphorically like both sex and pregnancy. In any case, the speaker remains at once a nurturing and overwhelming force that protects the listener from the harsh light of waking life—for a while.



SETTING

The poem is mostly a description of what it feels like to sleep, so the setting is an imagined (and largely [metaphorical](#)) one. The speaker (who, again, is sleep [personified](#)) first describes falling asleep as being carried "down [an] estuary" (or the mouth of a

river) where the sleeper will be "ferr[ied]" to "burial." In other words, sleeping is a little like floating along a river, and it's also like dying.

Following this sleeper down the river, the poem's setting transitions into a "huge cave" that is also a "belly." This is a pretty surreal atmosphere, and sleep is being compared to many things at once: death, a sea cave, a womb. Sleep seems both terrifying and comforting, a place of warmth and protection but also a place that's suffocating and difficult to escape.

In the third stanza, the speaker expands on the metaphor of sleep as a womb—which here becomes a "dumb," or silent, windowless "chamber" surrounded by the beating of blood and a heart pounding in a ribcage above. This dark, muffled space contrasts sharply with the brightness of the "daylight" that emerges in the poem's final stanza, as the sleeper is eventually "birth[ed]" back into the waking world.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Kenneth Slessor (1901-1971) was one of Australia's most influential poets as well as a journalist and war correspondent during World War II. He is well known for steering Australian poetry away from the "bush ballads" (a genre of poetry that depicted life in undeveloped parts of Australia in simple, [rhyming](#) verse) and towards the more complex and experimental tenets of [Modernism](#).

Modernism, which arose in response to the rapidly shifting landscape of the early 20th century, celebrated artistic experimentation and a rejection of rigid formal constraints like [rhyme](#) and [meter](#). Slessor's evocative [imagery](#) and experimental techniques (such as the purposefully inconsistent use of end rhyme in this poem) are in keeping with Modernism's mantra to "make it new." He was equally at home writing about world-weariness and disillusionment as he was about the beauty of living in the moment, and even his heaviest subject matter is often tempered by [irony](#) and an insistent love of life.

Slessor's poems frequently focus on time and memory and feature sea-related imagery—a reflection of having spent most of his life in Sydney, Australia. His best-known poems include "[Beach Burial](#)," an homage to Australian troops in World War II, and "[Five Bells](#)," an elegy for his friend Joe Lynch.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The early 20th century was a time of massive societal change. Technological advancements meant that more people had access to cars, telephones, and radios, and it also led to the increasing urbanization of society and the mechanization of labor. But shifting social norms and the horrific violence of World War I left many disillusioned with so-called modern

"progress"—a feeling compounded by the rise of fascism and the outbreak of World War II in the 1930s.

Slessor himself was a teenager when World War I began and ended, and he went on to become an official war correspondent during World War II. "Sleep," published in 1939, doesn't reference any of these events explicitly. But its depiction of the waking world as a "harsh" place into which sleepers are unwillingly pulled by "remorseless forceps"—and of the desire to give oneself "utterly" to sleep (or sex, or death)—seems to reflect a distinctly Modernist attitude.

One might also argue the poem contains a subtle [allusion](#) to the death of Slessor's friend Joe Lynch, who died by drowning in Sydney Harbor in 1927. The metaphorical watery "burial" and the imagery of "waves" "consum[ing]" and "engulf[ing]" the sleeper may explain why sleep isn't a strictly soothing presence in this poem; after all, dreams are often the site of unprocessed trauma and grief.

life. (<https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/slessor-kenneth-adolf-11712>)

- [In Slessor's Own Hand](#) — A collection of Slessor's handwritten poetry drafts hosted by the National Library of Australia. (<https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-223827772/view>)
- [A Slessor Documentary](#) — Listen to an ABC radio documentary about Slessor's life and literary contributions. (<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/poetica/kenneth-slessor-part-one/4579892>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER KENNETH SLESSOR POEMS

- [Beach Burial](#)



HOW TO CITE

MLA

Mottram, Darla. "Sleep." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 7 Sep 2021. Web. 29 Sep 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mottram, Darla. "Sleep." LitCharts LLC, September 7, 2021. Retrieved September 29, 2021. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/kenneth-slessor/sleep>.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Slessor's Life and Work](#) — Explore a biography of Slessor and additional poems via the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/kenneth-slessor>)
- [More About the Poet](#) — A more in-depth look at Slessor's