The Eolian Harp

POEM TEXT

composed at clevedon, somersetshire

My pensive Sara! thy soft cheek reclined
Thus on mine arm, most soothing sweet it is
To sit beside our Cot, our Cot o'ergrown
With white-flowered Jasmin, and the broad-leaved Myrtle,
(Meet emblems they of Innocence and Love!)
And watch the clouds, that late were rich with light,
Slow saddening round, and mark the star of eve
Serenely brilliant (such would Wisdom be)
Shine opposite! How exquisite the scents
Snatched from yon bean-field! and the world *so* hushed!
The stilly murmur of the distant Sea
Tells us of silence.

And that simplest Lute,
Placed length-ways in the clasping casement, hark!
How by the desultory breeze caressed,
Like some coy maid half yielding to her lover,
It pours such sweet upbraiding, as must needs
Tempt to repeat the wrong! And now, its strings
Boldlier swept, the long sequacious notes
Over delicious surges sink and rise,
Such a soft floating witchery of sound
As twilight Elfins make, when they at eve
Voyage on gentle gales from Fairy-Land,
Where Melodies round honey-dropping flowers,
Footless and wild, like birds of Paradise,
Nor pause, nor perch, hovering on untamed wing!
O! the one Life within us and abroad,
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance everywhere—
Methinks, it should have been impossible
Not to love all things in a world so filled;
Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air
Is Music slumbering on her instrument.

And thus, my Love! as on the midway slope
Of yonder hill I stretch my limbs at noon,
Whilst through my half-closed eyelids I behold
The sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the main,
And tranquil muse upon tranquility:
Full many a thought uncalled and undetained,
And many idle flitting phantasies,
Traverse my indolent and passive brain,
As wild and various as the random gales
That swell and flutter on this subject Lute!

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversely framed,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all?

But thy more serious eye a mild reproof
Darts, O beloved Woman! nor such thoughts
Dim and unhallowed dost thou not reject,
And biddest me walk humbly with my God.
Meek Daughter in the family of Christ!
Well hast thou said and holily dispraised
These shapings of the unregenerate mind;
Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break
On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring.
For never guiltless may I speak of him,
The Incomprehensible! save when with awe
I praise him, and with Faith that inly *feels*;
Who with his saving mercies healèd me,
A sinful and most miserable man,
Wildered and dark, and gave me to possess
Peace, and this Cot, and thee, heart-honored Maid!

SUMMARY

Written at Clevedon in the county of Somersetshire

The speaker begins by addressing a thoughtful companion Sara, whose cheek is resting on his arm. He notes how pleasant it is to sit outside their cottage where jasmine and myrtle flowers grow (adding that these flowers are appropriate symbols of innocence and love), to watch the clouds go from being brightly lit to a sadder, darker shade, and to watch the bright evening star (which, he adds, is an appropriate symbol of wisdom) shine in the sky across from the clouds. He notes how pleasant the

scent is from the nearby bean-field and how quiet their surroundings are—the sound of the far-off sea is so hushed and gentle that it seems more like silence than noise.

The speaker then turns his attention to a stringed instrument, a lute, that is sitting on a windowsill in the cottage. When the wandering breeze touches the lute's strings, the lute makes a sweet sound, just like a mischievous girl who complains so sweetly when her lover touches her that her complaints make him want to keep going. When the wind blows on the strings more strongly, the long notes fall and rise in pitch, making a soft, airy melody of the kind that, the speaker imagines, elves would make on evening voyages in ships blown by gentle breezes from Fairy-Land. In Fairy-Land, the speaker imagines, music is always playing around the honey-filled flowers in wild, changing melodies, like birds of paradise flying freely without stopping or setting down. The speaker then exclaims that human beings and the natural world around them share a single source of life, that animates everything that moves and in fact is the soul of all living things. This force can be sensed indirectly, as if it were the color of sound or the sound of light, and it creates pattern and order in our thoughts as well as a sense of joy everywhere. The speaker believes you cannot help loving everything in existence in a world that is filled with such a vibrant source of life, where the moving air makes music and still air is simply resting, but retains the potential to move and make music.

Addressing Sara again, the speaker stretches out the way he sometimes stretches out on a slope halfway up the nearby hill at noon, while he half-closes his eyes and watches the sunbeams sparkle like diamonds on the ocean and calmly thinks about the experience of being calm. Many thoughts come into the speaker's mind without his trying to think of them and without his being able to hold on to them. Many thoughtless images also flow out of his imagination and dart through his lazy, relaxed mind, images that are as unpredictable and diverse as the unpredictable winds that blow on the strings of the lute.

The speaker then wonders to himself if all things in nature could be thought of as living harps, crafted in different shapes, that come alive when a single spiritual force animates them. This spiritual force acts both as the soul of each living thing and as the God of the whole natural world.

The speaker then notices that Sara is looking critically at him, indicating that she disapproves of his unholy speculations about God, and urging him to adopt a more orthodox view of God. He praises her as a faithful follower of the Christian God and says she has correctly criticized his unholy ideas, which are attractive but ultimately meaningless philosophical speculations. The speaker acknowledges that he can never speak entirely correctly about God, who cannot be fully understood, except when he praises God with heartfelt faith. God has mercifully healed the speaker, although he was a wretched, sinful person wandering in confusion, and gave him the gifts of peace, of this cottage, and of Sara, whom the speaker sincerely values.

THEMES

THE UNITY OF THE NATURAL WORLD

The poem's title, "The Eolian Harp," refers to a stringed instrument that gives out music when touched by a breeze. The speaker uses this instrument as a metaphor for all living things: just as the instrument comes alive when moved by the wind, the speaker proposes that all nature comes alive when animated by a spiritual force. And because it is the *same* spiritual force that gives life to all things, the speaker suggests that there may be an underlying unity to all of creation—a thought he believes, at least at first, should inspire great joy.

The speaker begins by thinking about a lute that makes music when the breeze blows. When the lute's strings are touched by the passing breeze, they vibrate and produce sweet notes. After using various images to describe the lute's music, the speaker suddenly exclaims, "O! the one Life within us and abroad," suggesting that all human beings and all of the natural world they inhabit share a single source of life.

The speaker then uses the image of the lute as a metaphor for this idea of a single source of life. He compares all of nature to many "organic," or living, harps that come alive when stirred by "one intellectual breeze," just as many musical harps would come alive with sound if they were touched by the same physical breeze. The "intellectual breeze" is a single spiritual force that acts as the "Soul of each" thing in nature. The fact that all living things—human or otherwise—draw life from the same source and share the same soul indicates that there is a fundamental unity to all of nature.

The speaker reacts at first with joy at the idea that all living things are connected in this way. When the speaker suggests that there is "one Life" animating all of nature, he says this life creates "joyance everywhere." The speaker also thinks it should be "impossible" not to "love all things in a world so filled" with this source of life. Seeing all things as sharing one life should fill every person with joy and love. In the final section, however, the speaker distances himself from this view (see our next discussion of the theme of "God and Nature").

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 14-19
- Lines 28-35
- Lines 46-50

GOD AND NATURE

In "The Eolian Harp," the speaker proposes that all living things are animated by the same spiritual force, like many lutes that produce music when touched by the same breeze. The speaker then suggests the unorthodox idea that this single spiritual force may be both the God and soul of all living things; in other words, God doesn't just supply souls to living things, God *is* the soul of all living things. God is identical to that spiritual breeze that breathes life into everything. This would mean that God is not *separate* from nature but rather *part* of it. But when the speaker's addressee, Sara, disapproves of this view, the speaker reverts to an orthodox Christian view of God as nature's *creator* and humanity's savior.

The speaker proposes that nature is animated by God just as the lute is animated by the breeze. The speaker wonders whether all things in nature could be thought of as "organic Harps"—i.e., as living instruments that come alive when touched by an "intellectual," or spiritual, breeze, just as the lute comes alive with music when touched by a physical breeze. The speaker identifies this spiritual breeze as "the soul of each" living thing "and God of all." God is thus directly identified with a single spiritual force that animates all living things. (This image develops the speaker's earlier suggestion that "one Life" exists in humans and in nature.) Essentially, God exists *within* all things.

This view of God is pantheistic, in that it arguably imagines that God is inseparable from nature. There is nothing in the natural world that is not filled with divine life; at the same time, there is no part of God that exists outside the natural world. This view is also abstract: God is a broad, impersonal force in nature, not a specific person-like being who created nature and who has personal relationships with the humans he created.

The speaker then notices that Sara "reject[s]" this idea of God. It's "unhallowed," or unholy, because it contradicts the typical Christian view of God. She steers the speaker back to the orthodox view by telling him to "walk humbly with [his] God," an allusion to a biblical passage, Micah 6:8 ("And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God"). Orthodox Christianity sees God as a personal figure, not an abstract force. When the speaker calls Sara "Daughter in the family of Christ!" he reminds the reader that God is chiefly present, not in nature, but in the person of His Son, Christ, who came to earth to save humanity.

The speaker accepts Sara's reproof, rejects his earlier metaphor, and affirms the view of God as a creator and savior separate from His creation. The speaker says Sara has spoken "well" and follows her lead by rejecting his speculations about God as "shapings of the unregenerate mind," or a mind not sanctified by God, and as a product of "vain Philosophy." "Vain" suggests something useless, that doesn't help him understand the truth.

The speaker acknowledges that a mere human can *never* fully comprehend God, "the Incomprehensible." If God existed entirely in nature, then humans should be able to understand God. But the Christian God stands apart from nature because he *created* nature, and his creatures are supposed to simply have faith in him, like the "Faith" the speaker offers here. The speaker also affirms that God healed him, a "sinful" man, with "saving mercies." In this way, he supports the Christian view that all humans are sinners who have been saved by God's mercy.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 28-29
- Lines 46-50
- Lines 51-66

CREATIVITY AND POETIC INSPIRATION

In "The Eolian Harp," the speaker describes the process of poetic inspiration. First, he finds that images from the natural world can make fitting poetic symbols for abstract ideas. The speaker then takes one particular image, the breeze that blows on the lute and brings forth music, as a metaphor for how the poet receives inspiration. This suggests that the poet enjoys a rich source of inspiration in nature, but also that he doesn't totally *control* the thoughts that inspire him.

In the poem's first section, the speaker begins by describing an outdoor environment where jasmine and myrtle flowers are growing. He then turns these natural elements into "meet emblems," or appropriate symbols, of abstract ideas, identifying jasmine as a symbol of innocence and myrtle as a symbol of love. He also interprets the evening star as a symbol of wisdom. This all suggests that poets find inspiration in natural images, which they can use as symbols to communicate more abstract ideas.

The speaker then uses the image of the breeze and the lute to create a metaphor for the actual process of writing poetry: the poet is like an instrument that lets out poetry when touched by nature's wind of inspiration. In the second stanza, the speaker notices how a lute's strings produce music when the passing breeze touches them. In the next stanza, he describes how his mind is sometimes filled with many images and thoughts that seem to come from nature: they're as "wild and various" as the natural winds that blow on the lute, and they come naturally, "uncalled," into his mind. If the speaker's thoughts are like the breeze, then the speaker himself is like the lute. The breeze stirs the lute's strings just as these spontaneous thoughts stir the speaker's mind; and as the lute transforms the breeze's *motion* into *music*, the speaker transforms these *thoughts* into *poetry*.

This image of poetic inspiration has both positive and negative

aspects. It's easy for the poet to be inspired with ideas, but not easy for him to *control* these ideas or to be sure that they're trustworthy.

The speaker says that "many a thought" and "many" fantasies come into his mind while he lies tranquilly outside on a hill. Going out into nature brings a flood of inspiration. He takes this natural scene and describes it with the poetic image of sunbeams dancing "like diamonds" on the sea. This beautiful image suggests that further beautiful thoughts will come pouring into his mind just as the sunlight pours around his body. However, the speaker then describes his brain as "indolent and passive." "Indolent" has a negative connotation, suggesting laziness. "Passive" indicates that the poet plays no *active* role in shaping the thoughts that inspire his poetry. He is simply an instrument that cannot control what it produces, as the lute cannot control the music it plays.

If the poet cannot control his thoughts, the reader might question whether they're actually worth listening to. The suggestion that the poet's thoughts may be untrustworthy is reinforced in the final section. The speaker rejects one of his earlier poetic metaphors as a glittering "bubbles" rising on the "babbling" spring of "vain Philosophy." The thoughts that rise out of the speaker's brain may have no more meaning or significance than a bubble rising out of a spring. The terms "vain" and "babbling" reinforce the idea that his thoughts may be meaningless, incoherent speech.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-6
- Lines 8-9
- Lines 14-19
- Lines 36-45
- Lines 56-59

LOVE AND MARRIAGE

The poem opens by addressing "My pensive Sara!" Scholars agree that "Sara" represents Sara Fricker; Coleridge was engaged to Fricker when he began work on the poem and they married while he was still composing it. As such, it's no wonder that the poem is in part a meditation on the nature of love and marriage. The speaker first proposes a vision of romantic love that is both erotic and innocent. He then playfully introduces a more daring or sinful erotic love. Sara then takes on a new role as the speaker's guide in the Christian faith, and the poem ultimately presents a strong marriage as one in which the partners are united above all in their spiritual lives.

The first stanza places Sara and the speaker in an intimate, romantic setting, but suggests that intimacy can be innocent as well as erotic. The couple are physically close, as her "soft cheek" is "reclined" upon his arm. They're watching the "star of eve." The star of eve, or evening star, is the planet Venus, named for the Roman goddess Venus. Venus is the goddess of love, sexuality, and desire, and so the "star of eve" suggests the erotic attraction the pair might feel. However, the star shines "serenely," suggesting that the couple can easily control their feelings. The speaker also pairs the jasmine and myrtle flowers as symbols of "Innocence and Love," suggesting that innocence and intimacy can easily coexist.

The next section depicts erotic attraction that strays away from innocence, but which is still presented playfully. The speaker compares the lute to a "coy maid" who is caressed by her lover as the lute is "caressed" by the breeze. This image introduces a less innocent, more daring kind of love. The maid pretends to "upbraid," or scold, her lover, but her scolding is so "sweet" that it just tempts him to keep going. The speaker says the persistent lover "repeat[s] the wrong," suggesting this erotic encounter may be sinful. However, the fact that the maid and her lover are playing a game (she pretends to scold him, he pretends to back off), combined with the speaker's own amused tone, suggest that this condemnation is more playful than serious.

The final stanza represents romantic partnership as a source of redemption rather than temptation. It suggests that a strong marriage is one in which the partners have a primarily spiritual bond of mind and heart. To get to this point, the speaker first proposes an idea of God as essentially identical with nature. Sara condemns this idea of God because it goes against orthodox Christianity, and the speaker respects her critique. By urging him to "walk humbly with … God," a biblical allusion, Sara steers him back to Christian orthodoxy.

The speaker accepts her criticism gratefully, calling her "beloved Woman!" who speaks "well." The speaker thus reaffirms his commitment to orthodox Christianity and claims that one of God's greatest gifts is Sara herself, whom the speaker calls a "heart-honored Maid!" Since she corrects his mind and he honors her in his heart, their relationship is a spiritual union of mind and heart, not only of body. And since God gave Sara to the speaker, this spiritual union is divinely blessed.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-10
- Lines 14-19
- Lines 51-57
- Lines 60-66

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 2-7

My pensive Sara! thy soft cheek reclined

Thus on mine arm, most soothing sweet it is
To sit beside our Cot, our Cot o'ergrown
With white-flowered Jasmin, and the broad-leaved Myrtle,
(Meet emblems they of Innocence and Love!)
And watch the clouds, that late were rich with light,

The "Sara" here refers to Sara Fricker, to whom Coleridge was engaged when he started writing this poem, and whom he married while he was still finishing it. The fact that the poem is framed as an address to a specific person makes it one of Coleridge's "conversation poems." Scholars have identified six of Coleridge's poems as conversation poems because they share certain key characteristics. Most notably, they're all written as an address to a specific person. Sara's presence in the poem as the addressee will influence the direction of the speaker's thoughts. Her presence as the poet's fiancee/wife also suggests that love and marriage will be one of the themes of the poem.

This poem, like Coleridge's other conversation poems, is written in blank verse, a metrical form that uses unrhymed iambic pentameter. One line of iambic pentameter contains five iambs, or five pairs of unstressed-stressed syllables. The first line establishes this meter (though already there is some variation, with the double stress of "soft cheek" creating a spondee in the fourth foot):

My pen- | sive Sa- | ra! thy | soft cheek | reclined

The first line also establishes the poem's use of enjambment. In the first two lines, for instance, the speaker notes that Sara's cheek is "reclined," but the completion of that thought, that it is reclined "Thus on mine arm," doesn't come until line 2. Nearly *all* the lines in the poem are enjambed, as the speaker expresses himself in long sentences that flow over many poetic lines (the first sentence, for example, goes all the way from line 2 to line 10!).

These long sentences, with their many clauses, suggest that the speaker isn't planning out his words ahead of time, but instead speaking casually, expressing words as they come to him, just as people do in ordinary conversation. This establishes an intimate, informal relationship between the speaker and the addressee (and also might subtly reflect the way that poetic inspiration merely comes to the speaker passively, rather than being something he actively controls).

Besides establishing the addressee and the meter, the first lines also make the poem's setting clear. The conversation poems all begin by describing a vivid physical environment in detail, as the speaker here describes the color and shape of the flowers and the changing light in the clouds. The speaker reinforces the sense that this setting is quiet and peaceful through his use of consonance. The /s/ and /m/ sounds are repeated in "My pensive Sara!", "thy soft cheek," "Thus on mine arm," "most soothing sweet it is," and "sit beside." The fact that the repeated consonant sounds are soft ones contributes to the overall sense of euphony in these lines and in the whole stanza.

After describing the physical setting, the speaker in the conversation poems usually then moves into more abstract thoughts inspired by this setting. We see a hint of this pattern right away in lines 2-6. The speaker establishes that he and Sara are sitting "beside our Cot" (cottage), surrounded by particular varieties of flowers (jasmine and myrtle), but then notes that these flowers could be seen as symbols of more abstract ideas (innocence and love). This small movement from the concrete to the abstract will be replicated on a larger scale by the poem overall.

Finally, these opening lines suggest what key themes might emerge in the poem. The fact that the speaker takes elements from nature as symbols of larger ideas introduces the theme of nature as poetic inspiration. Because the flowers symbolize spiritual values, like love, there's also a suggestion that the natural world may be connected to the spiritual or divine world.

LINES 8-13

Slow saddening round, and mark the star of eve
Serenely brilliant (such would Wisdom be)
Shine opposite! How exquisite the scents
Snatched from yon bean-field! and the world
so
hushed!
The stilly murmur of the distant Sea
Tells us of silence.

The next six lines continue to establish the physical setting of the poem using some of the same poetic techniques. The serene, soothing quality of the setting is reinforced with consonance again, specifically through the repetition of the /s/ sound throughout the lines, especially in "the world *so* hushed" and "Tells us of silence." "Hushed" and "murmur" could also be considered as potential examples of onomatopoeia, as words that sound similar to the sounds they are meant to describe. The soft /s/, /m/, and /r/ sounds, also examples of euphony, create the same quiet sounds for the reader that the sounds the speaker hears around him.

These lines differ from the first six lines, however, by breaking the poetic meter established in the poem's opening. Standard lines of iambic pentameter begin with an unstressed syllable and continue the pattern of stressed-unstressed-stressed, etc. Several lines here deviate from that pattern.

Lines 10 , 11, and 13 begin with a stressed syllable:

Shine opposite!

Snatched from yon bean-field!

Tells us of silence.

By breaking the metrical pattern, these stressed openings give additional emphasis to the words being used (which are also sometimes emphasized by exclamation marks at the ends of the phrases, creating caesuras). This reveals how the speaker is struck and moved emotionally by what he sees. The end of line 11 also deviates from standard iambic pentameter by ending with a spondee, a pair of two stressed syllables: "and the world *so* hushed!" The three stressed syllables in a row not only emphasize the words but slow down the poem's speed, bringing the reader to a slower, calmer (yet still wonderstruck) state that imitates the speaker's.

The speaker also continues to find symbolic meaning in natural elements—here, seeing the "star or eve," or evening star, as a symbol of wisdom. The evening star is the planet Venus. Venus, the Roman goddess who shares her name with the planet, is the goddess of love, sexuality, and fertility. (Myrtle, the flower mentioned in line 5, is also associated with Venus.) The star of eve might, then, be considered a symbol of the couple's romantic desire. But the fact that the speaker sees the star as a symbol of wisdom, not love or passion, suggests that his relationship with Sara is one that is both erotic and spiritual—a suggestion developed in the poem's last section. They have romantic feelings for each other but aren't overcome by physical passion.

LINES 14-19

And that simplest Lute,
Placed length-ways in the clasping casement, hark!
How by the desultory breeze caressed,
Like some coy maid half yielding to her lover,
It pours such sweet upbraiding, as must needs
Tempt to repeat the wrong!

The speaker continues to focus on the surrounding physical setting, but now he calls Sara's attention to a stringed instrument, a lute, lying in the windowsill of the cottage. What is extraordinary about this instrument is that it lets out music without a musician playing it. When the breeze blows through the window and touches the strings of the lute, the strings vibrate and produce notes.

The speaker to come up with similes, or poetic comparisons, to describe the lute's music. In these lines, the speaker compares the lute producing music to a mischievous young woman "upbraiding," or complaining, to her lover as he touches her. The music produced by the lute is sweet just as the woman's complaints are—so sweet that they tempt her lover to keep going rather than persuading him to stop. This image of the maid tempting her lover and the lover advancing contrasts with the image of controlled, spiritual love in the first section. In the first section, love was paired with "innocence." Here, the speaker calls the lover's advances "wrong"—but the image is also a playful one, and the speaker's tone is more amused than harsh, so his criticism may not be too severe after all.

The development of the simile suggests, like the enjambed structure of the lines, that the speaker is coming up with his ideas on the spot and speaking the words as he thinks of them. He observes first that the lute is "caressed" by the wandering breeze. "Caressed" could simply mean "touched gently," as a soft breeze would gently touch a wooden object. But the word "caress" is usually used to describe the way human beings touch each other in intimate, romantic settings. By using the word "caressed," the speaker seems to call into his own mind the image of romantic lovers, and so this is the image he uses in the following lines to further describe the way that the wind plays on the lute.

LINES 19-24

And now, its strings
Boldlier swept, the long sequacious notes
Over delicious surges sink and rise,
Such a soft floating witchery of sound
As twilight Elfins make, when they at eve
Voyage on gentle gales from Fairy-Land,

The speaker continues to describe the lute's music using similes, but now the images become even more inventive and fantastic. They also seem to build upon each other. The wind blows even more strongly on the strings, and the speaker describes how the lute's notes move up and down in pitch "Over delicious surges." The word "surge"—a sudden, powerful, upward or forward movement—refers at first to the sudden gusts of wind moving the lute's strings. But as with "caress," this word suggests another image to the speaker that he uses to further describe the sound. "Surge" is more often used to describe a surge of water, like a strong wave coming in to shore, and so the speaker's next simile uses the image of a ship at sea.

He also describes the music as a "witchery of sound," or a sound that seems to be produced by magic, and this word seems to direct his thoughts to the realm of magic and fantasy. His next simile compares the lute's music to the music made by magical creatures sailing the sea—elves voyaging on ships from Fairy-Land. This simile is far more removed from everyday life than the image of the maid and her lover, and so it shows how the speaker's mind is moving further away from the concrete physical setting around him and more into the realm of his own thoughts and imagination.

Fittingly, given that these lines are describing beautiful music, the words here are themselves extremely musical. With the abundance of alliteration, assonance, and consonance—of soft sounds like /s/, /sh/, /g/, and /v/, plus long, open /o/ vowels—might even be described as euphony.

The long /o/ of "long sequacious notes" for example makes the phrase itself feel long and open, like it's mimicking the very notes it describes. This phrase becomes consonant with the /s/ and /sh/ sounds that fill the next two lines (which also exhibit consonance of soft /f/ sounds):

Over delicious surges sink and rise,
Such a soft floating witchery of sound

All these pleasing shared consonants make these "surges" of sound come across as rather "delicious" indeed. Note also the luxurious /v/, /g/, and /l/ sounds of "eve voyage on gentle gales," which together evoke the gentle winds ("gales") the line is talking about.

LINES 25-27

Where Melodies round honey-dropping flowers,
Footless and wild, like birds of Paradise,
Nor pause, nor perch, hovering on untamed wing!

The speaker develops his image of "Fairy-Land" even further in these lines. He had compared the lute's music to the music heard by elves as they leave Fairy-Land. Now he describes the music heard in Fairy-Land itself.

There, music seems to continually surround the "honey-dropping flowers." There's no mention of any musicians; it seems the melodies exist mysteriously on their own. In this way, they are similar to the lute's melodies, which also do not require a musician. The speaker describes these melodies as being wild and uncontrolled "like birds of Paradise," using a simile to describe something that was *already* part of a simile. The last line of this section describes the birds of Paradise as much as it describes the melodies, with words like "perch" and "wing" that mainly apply to birds.

Once again, readers can see how the speaker's mind moves freely and without plan from one idea to the other. The lute's music led his thoughts to the music of elves, which led him to Fairy-Land, which led him to wild melodies, which led him to untamed birds of Paradise. The speaker creates poetry by taking each new idea that comes into his mind and further developing its possible meanings and implications.

These lines, like the rest of the section so far, are filled with consonance, alliteration, and assonance, making them sound and pleasant and musical as the music they describe (indeed, they are again euphonic). Note the extensive use of /d/, /f/, and /p/ sounds, as well as long, luxurious vowels sounds like /oh/, /i/, and /aw/.

These lines also break the poem's pattern of iambic pentameter. Line 26, for example, begins with a stressed syllable instead of the usual unstressed syllable (i.e., "Foot less and wild"). Line 27 breaks pattern in the middle:

Nor pause, nor perch, hovering on untamed wing!

This line could be scanned in a few different ways, but none of them conform to perfect iambic pentameter and all clearly have a trochee (stressed-unstressed) in the third foot (hover). In this particular line, breaking the metrical pattern suggests that the poetic line is *itself* untamed, unable to be constrained by any poetic form. In this section overall, breaking the metrical pattern so many times gives the section a more informal, conversational feel than it would have if it perfectly followed a regular poetic meter. This informal style further reinforces our impression that the speaker is coming up with ideas on the spot rather than sharing something carefully planned.

LINES 28-31

O! the one Life within us and abroad,
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance everywhere—

After developing this image of Fairy-land, the speaker suddenly exclaims,

O! the one Life within us and abroad

The exclamation "O!" breaks the metrical pattern by stressing the first syllable of the line, creating a trochee that calls our attention to a sort of switch in what the speaker is saying. As we noted previously, Coleridge's conversation poems often begin in a concrete physical setting and gradually move into the speaker's own thoughts. In this poem, inspired by the physical setting, the speaker has been creating more and more imaginative images. Now, he moves entirely into his own mind and imagination. He introduces the philosophical idea that there is "one Life" shared both by humans and by the natural world they inhabit, that animates each moving, living thing.

This idea that all living things share a single source of life is an important theme for the poem, and this is reinforced by the meter: a spondee in the line's second foot results in two stresses in a row: "one Life." The doubled emphasis on this phrase emphasizes its significance for the speaker's thinking.

The poet then describes this source of life as:

A light in sound, a sound-like power in light

Just as light and sound spread across and fill the entire space they are in, this source of life fills the whole of the natural world. It is everywhere, yet it is difficult to perceive directly. The speaker's phrases suggest that this source of life is something like "the color of sound" or "the sound that light makes"—things we cannot perceive with our senses. But even though we cannot *directly sense* this "One Life," it still affects us. The speaker is saying that the fact that all things share a single source of life is the reason we can have "Rhythm," or order and sense, in our thinking. We can have a coherent understanding of the the natural world *because* we share its source of life. This source of life also affects us by filling us with joy, spreading "joyance everywhere" just as light and sound spread everywhere.

LINES 32-35

Methinks, it should have been impossible
Not to love all things in a world so filled;
Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air
Is Music slumbering on her instrument.

The speaker continues to muse on the consequences of this one life filling all of nature. He imagines that such an interconnected world must inspire people to "love all things." This idea helps the earlier theme of love, reflected first in the speaker's intimacy with Sara and then in the image of the coy maid and her lover, take on a new aspect: the speaker imagines love as existing, not just between two romantic partners, but between *all* living things.

This is a very optimistic view of the world. It is slightly undermined, however, by the specific way the speaker phrases his view (emphasis added):

> Methinks, it *should have been* impossible
> Not to love all things in a world so filled

If the speaker had said "it *is* impossible," he would imply that we really *do* live in this kind of world, filled with one life, and that people really *do* love all things. But saying "it *should have been* impossible" implies that we do not, in fact, live in such a world and perhaps that love is not as universal as it should be. This shade of doubt anticipates the last section in the poem, when the speaker does give a very different picture of what the world is actually like.

For now, however, the section ends with further optimistic images, ones that recall the images earlier in the poem. The speaker says the breeze "warbles"; warbling is a term usually associated with the songs of birds, so this image recalls the birds of Paradise in line 26. A warbling or singing breeze also recalls the image of the eolian harp itself, given that the harp makes music (essentially, sings) when the breeze touches it.

The next image also recalls the harp. The speaker goes on to say the "mute still air / Is Music slumbering on her instrument." Again, the "instrument" being played by the air is the eolian harp. The personification of "Music" here further reflects the poem's idea so far that God breathes life into all things just as the wind that elicits sound from the harp; "Music" wouldn't be able to go to sleep unless she was a conscious being who can actively choose when to let the air blow across "her instrument," making her a parallel to the speaker's vision of God.

As such, this line concludes an optimistic section with an optimistic ending. Even when it's "mute" and "still," the air is still associated with music. It's simply that, instead of actively making music, the still air has *potential* to do so; music is simply waiting to be made the next time the air moves. This suggests the comforting notion that, in a world filled entirely by the "one Life," even something that appears to be dead isn't really dead—it's just "slumbering." God has the potential to breathe life into all things just as "Music" can cause the air to warble across a harp.

LINES 36-40

And thus, my Love! as on the midway slope
Of yonder hill I stretch my limbs at noon,
Whilst through my half-closed eyelids I behold
The sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the main,
And tranquil muse upon tranquility:

Here the speaker reflects on the pleasure of lying idly on a hill absorbed in his own thoughts. He addresses Sara, again, as "my Love!" and calls attention to their physical setting as he points out "yonder hill." Once again, the natural world becomes a jumping-off point for poetic reflection.

Specifically, the speaker reflects on how he often stretches out on the hill at noon and watches the bright sunlight. His description of the scene is a memory; at the moment he is speaking, the light has disappeared and the evening star is in the sky. But the vivid way he describes the scene, even when he is just recalling it in his mind, suggests how powerful poetry can be at helping people imagine things that are not in front of them. This section helps readers understand that the poem isn't just about God, but also about how the poet himself is like an eolian harp—that is, that he waits for inspiration to wash over him like the breeze flows over the harp's strings.

Once again the language itself is deliberately beautiful. The speaker describes how the "sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the main," a line brimming with alliteration and consonance of /d/ and /m/ sounds that add an element of sonic beauty to this lovely visual image. The image of the sun sparkling on the sea is made even more beautiful by the simile "like diamonds."

As like in the second stanza, the speaker moves from contemplating a concrete physical image to being absorbed in his own thoughts. He goes from focusing on the sunbeams around him to focusing on the workings of his own mind as he lies in the sun. The phrase "And tranquil muse upon tranquility" significantly repeats the root word "tranquil" (this line could be considered an example of diacope). Repeating the same word reinforces our sense of how much the speaker is focusing on himself. He is tranquil and he is musing on the *state* of being tranquil: he is absorbed in contemplating his own experience.

LINES 41-45

Full many a thought uncalled and undetained,
And many idle flitting phantasies,
Traverse my indolent and passive brain,
As wild and various as the random gales
That swell and flutter on this subject Lute!

These lines give the reader further insight into the workings of the speaker's mind and the way he receives inspiration. The

poem's first two stanzas showed how elements in nature inspired the speaker to create symbols and other figurative language. Here, it becomes clear that when the speaker goes out into nature, his mind is flooded with thoughts, ideas, and images. The break in metrical pattern with "Full many a thought" stresses both the first and the second syllable of the line (creating a spondee), emphasizing just how full the speaker's mind is.

These lines also reveal that the speaker is not actually in *control* of this thought process. The thoughts are "uncalled"—meaning he isn't actively "calling" them forth into his mind—and also "undetained"—meaning he cannot make them stay. His brain is "passive"; it merely *receives* these thoughts, and it does not create or shape them. And the sequence of thoughts does not have any orderly shape in itself (a fact that is reflected in the total enjambment of these lines as well, each of which spills over onto the next). Instead, the thoughts are:

> As wild and various as the random gales
> That swell and flutter on this subject Lute!

This image, which compares the speaker's unpredictable thoughts to the unpredictable winds that blow on the lute, sets up a very important metaphor. If the thoughts that inspire the speaker are like the winds that make music on the lute, then the speaker *himself* is like the lute. The poet, then, is a kind of eolian harp. Nature is the *true* author of his poetry, just as nature is the true musician that plays on the harp. The poet, then, is simply a sort of channel for nature: he is inspired by the natural world and this inspiration comes out as poetry, just as the lute's strings are set in motion by natural forces and this motion comes out as music.

This image, of the poet as an eolian harp channeling nature, can be seen as beautiful and inspiring, especially if nature is as rich and joyful as the second section suggests. At the same time, the speaker's diction makes the image slightly darker. The words the speaker uses to describe his thought process have several negative connotations: "Idle," "indolent," and "passive" suggest an element of laziness. "Subject," like "passive," reinforce the idea that the poet is not in control of his thoughts (one person is *subject* to another if he is controlled by that other person). If his thoughts are "wild," "various," and "random," they don't have the "Rhythm," or order, that he described in line 31. The suggestion that there may be something negative about the speaker's thought process is further developed in the poem's fifth stanza.

LINES 46-50

> *And what if all of animated nature*
> *Be but organic Harps diversely framed,*
> *That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps*
> *Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,*
> *At once the Soul of each, and God of all?*

These lines, like lines 28-31, represent some of the speaker's most abstract thoughts—philosophical speculations about the nature of the world.

The speaker returns to the idea of "one Life" that he introduced at line 28—that is, the idea that all living things share a single life source. He also returns to the image of the eolian harp. He has just compared *himself* to the harp in lines 44-45, and this image seems to inspire his next thought—what if *all* living things are like "organic," or natural, harps? Just as the harp comes alive with music when a physical breeze blows on it, he suggests that things in nature are "animated," or made to live, when an "intellectual," or spiritual, breeze touches them. Since all things in nature are animated by the same breeze and share the same soul (since the same breeze is "the Soul of each"), there really is "one Life" that they all share.

The image of the poet as eolian harp suggested a very close relationship between the poet and nature. The image of *all* living things as harps likewise suggests a close relationship between humans and nature. Romantic poets, and especially Coleridge, aimed to show that traditional oppositions—like the opposition between the human world and the natural world, or between what is earthly and what is divine—weren't really opposites after all. And Coleridge's image here works to bring people and nature closer together. He takes a musical instrument, something crafted by humans and *not* found in nature, and imagines it as "organic," or something that *is* found in nature. He doesn't simply say that all things "tremble into *life*," but that they "tremble into *thought*." Plants and animals are accepted as having life, but it's usually only humans who are considered to have thought. By bringing together human and non-human traits, and by describing both humans and non-humans with the same metaphor, Coleridge breaks down the opposition between the human world and the natural world. He also reinforces the idea from line 28 that there is one life both "within us" and "abroad" in nature.

This image of the animating breeze alludes to the Book of Genesis in the Bible. Genesis explains how people were brought to life when God breathed into them: "Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). But there are also important differences here from the Genesis story. The Bible only says that God breathed life into the first man; it does not say that God breathed the same life into *every* living thing, as the speaker suggests here. In the story, this breath comes from God but it is not *identical* to God. The speaker, however, says that the animating breeze is not only the soul of every living thing but also the "God of all." By identifying God with the souls of living things, the speaker suggests that God exists entirely in the natural world.

This is just a suggestion, not a firm claim. The speaker formulates his idea as a question —"And what if ... ?"—rather than as a declarative sentence. But given the way that the idea deviates from traditional Christian accounts, just raising it as a question will prove problematic.

LINES 51-55

But thy more serious eye a mild reproof
Darts, O beloved Woman! nor such thoughts
Dim and unhallowed dost thou not reject,
And biddest me walk humbly with my God.
Meek Daughter in the family of Christ!

The speaker has been absorbed in his own thoughts, but now he is jerked back to attention by his conversation partner, Sara. This section is addressed to Sara directly, as he refers to her in the second person with "thy," "thou," and "thee" from the first line to the last line of the section. These addresses (which, it should be noted, are actually *less* formal forms of address than "you," despite sounding the opposite to modern ears) suggest that the speaker is more focused on Sara in this section than during any other section of the poem, and that her presence influences the direction of his thoughts.

Sara catches his attention when her eyes dart "reproof," or condemnation, at him. The speaker captures the power of her glance by placing "Darts," a stressed syllable, at the start of a line (with the stress of "O!" this creates yet another spondee, a double stress that results in a rather emphatic line opening). The word strikes the reader with force, just as Sara's look forcefully strikes the speaker. She looks at him critically because the "thoughts" he has just been expressing are "unhallowed," or unholy, in that they go against orthodox Christianity.

The speaker's depiction of God in lines 46-50 is pantheistic. It imagines God as an abstract spiritual force that exists equally everywhere *within* nature. God is not found outside of the natural world; God exists as the soul of each thing in nature. This view contradicts the orthodox Christian view of God as a person-like being who created nature and who thus exists outside of nature.

Sara rejects the speaker's unorthodox ideas and tries to steer him back to the orthodox view with an allusion to the Bible. Telling the speaker to "walk humbly with [his] God" is an allusion to the biblical passage Micah 6:8: "And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

The speaker shows immediately that he accepts Sara's critique. When she urges him to adopt the orthodox view, he uses orthodox Christian language to respond to her:

> Meek Daughter in the family of Christ!

The speaker has just been imagining that all living things, human and non-human, share the same soul. This would make all of nature closely related, almost like one family. But the speaker doesn't say that Sara is part of the family of nature, he says that she is part of the family of Christ. Christ is believed by Christians to be the Son of God. By calling Sara God's "Daughter" and a member of Christ's family, the speaker adopts the Christian view of God and moves away from his earlier view of God as a spiritual force in nature.

LINES 56-61

Well hast thou said and holily dispraised
These shapings of the unregenerate mind;
Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break
On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring.
For never guiltless may I speak of him,
The Incomprehensible!

The speaker continues to accept Sara's critique, saying that she has spoken "Well" and "holily," and emphasizing "Well" by placing it as a stressed syllable at the beginning of the line, creating a trochee ("Well hast..."). He also agrees with her that his thoughts were "unhallowed" by saying that his mind is "unregenerate," or not made holy by God. The metaphor he uses to describe the thoughts in his unregenerate mind is significant:

> Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break
> On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring.

Earlier, the speaker used images of water in a positive and powerful way. In stanza 2, the word "surges" led to the image of elfin ships voyaging out from Fairy-Land; in stanza 3, the description of sunlight dancing "like diamonds" on the sea demonstrated how nature could inspire the poet with beautiful images. This image is almost a parody of that image from the third stanza. Instead of the vast sea, we have a small, babbling spring. On the water's surface, instead of the powerful force of sunlight, we have easily broken bubbles. Instead of dancing like diamonds, the bubbles "glitter." Diamonds are precious gems, but "glitter" suggests a merely shiny surface that may be worthless underneath. By reducing and parodying the image that he used when his mind was being flooded with speculative thoughts, the speaker casts doubt on the truth of those thoughts.

He also returns to the idea that his mind didn't fully *control* his thoughts but only passively *received* them. There's no meaning or significance to a bubble rising up out of a spring. If these thoughts just rise up out of his brain in the same way, there may not be meaning or significance in them. By calling his philosophy "vain" and saying the spring "babbl[es]," or talks nonsense," he further reinforces the idea that his earlier speculations about God were not valid or true.

Having rejected his earlier speculations about God, the speaker

turns back to the orthodox Christian view. According to Christianity, God exists outside of the natural world and cannot be fully understood by any being in nature. The speaker now agrees with this view by acknowledging that God is "Incomprehensible." He cannot describe God's nature without saying something false that would bring him "guilt." The caesura of the exclamation mark in line 61 seems to reflect the force of the speaker's revelation, the immensity of God's power stopping him in his tracks.

LINES 61-66

save when with awe
I praise him, and with Faith that inly
feels
;
Who with his saving mercies healèd me,
A sinful and most miserable man,
Wildered and dark, and gave me to possess
Peace, and this Cot, and thee, heart-honored Maid!

In the poem's final lines, the speaker continues to adjust his attitude towards God. Instead of approaching God through the mind, with philosophy, he now suggests that the only right way to approach God is through emotion, with gratitude and faith—faith that "inly" (that is, interally) "*feels*."

He also adjusts his picture of the world that he lives in. Earlier, he suggested that if all living things shared "one Life," everything would be filled with this "light in sound" and it would be impossible "Not to love all things." Now, he acknowledges that he used to be "Wildered and dark," suggesting that he didn't always experience the world as being filled with light—and if he was "sinful and miserable," he likely did not show perfect love to all things or find "joyance everywhere." The natural world on its own is not enough to provide knowledge, love, or joy. Those gifts only came when God "with his saving mercies healèd [him]." Here, too, the speaker returns to orthodox Christianity, which claims that the world is fallen and that humans are sinful, and that Christ mercifully died to save humans.

By acknowledging that God saved him, the speaker does the very thing he says he ought to do in line 62: praise God. He also praises God for giving him certain gifts:

> Peace, and this Cot, and thee, heart-honored Maid!

This line, and this whole section, return to the theme of romantic love developed in stanzas 1 and 2. The first stanza suggested that couples can have romantic, erotic feelings for each other while remaining innocent. The second stanza gave a picture of more daring, potentially sinful erotic love. Now, the end of stanza 5 gives the fullest picture of what the speaker considers the best possible romantic relationship: a relationship built on a primarily *spiritual* bond.

The speaker expresses his respect and love for Sara—"O beloved Woman!"—when she corrects his spiritual missteps and guides him back to the true kind of faith. By helping the speaker escape the "guilt" of speaking falsely about God, Sara helps him recover the "Innocence" that is paired with love in the first stanza. But here, the speaker's love isn't just expressed in the way that he enjoys the sense of her body reclining on his. It's expressed in the way he "honor[s]" her in his "heart." Their relationship is thus spiritual even more than it is physical. And he sees her as a gift from God, which suggests that their marriage will be divinely blessed.

Coleridge's conversation poems often begin in a concrete physical setting, and move to more abstract thoughts inspired by that setting. They conclude by returning to the same setting, which the speaker now understands in a deeper way. This gifts listed in the last line—peace, the cottage, Sara—recall the key ideas from the poem's first three lines: that they are sitting "beside [the] Cot," that it is "soothing sweet," and that the poet is speaking to Sara. We are returned to the same place we began, but now the speaker has a new understanding of what that place means. The sweet experience doesn't just come from the flowers and the clouds, it comes from God's gift of peace. Sara isn't just described as "pensive," she is "heart-honored," because the speaker better appreciates that she, too, is a divine gift.

SYMBOLS

THE EOLIAN HARP

An eolian harp, or an Aeolian harp, is a stringed instrument built from a wooden box with strings stretched across. The instrument is named for Aeolus, the Greek god of wind, because its most notable feature is that it plays music when wind blows across the strings. Eolian harps are often put in windowsills, as the speaker describes here, to allow the wind to blow across them. The eolian harp became a popular instrument during the period when Coleridge was writing this poem, and the image of the harp appears in several poems from the period.

The harp first appears as a real, physical instrument in the window of the speaker's cottage. After he sees that instrument, the speaker takes the idea of the eolian harp—an instrument that is played by the wind—and makes it into a symbol for the poet himself.

In the third stanza, the speaker describes lying on a hill and exposing himself to the forces of nature just as the harp is exposed to the wind when placed in the window. While out in nature, thoughts and images move unpredictably across the speaker's mind, just as the winds move unpredictably across the strings of the harp. From these wild thoughts, the speaker

makes poetry, just as the harp makes music from the "random gales" that blow across it.

The fourth stanza then takes this the harp from being a symbol just of the poet and makes it into a symbol for all of nature, and for the way that all things in nature are connected. The speaker imagines that all living things are "organic" harps that "tremble into thought" when swept by an "intellectual" breeze, just as the instrumental harp starts making music when swept by a physical breeze. And because all these living harps are brought to life by the *same* breeze, they are intimately connected. The harp is thus also a symbol for the shared life that the speaker perceives existing within all of nature.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-15:** "And that simplest Lute, / Placed length-ways in the clasping casement, hark!"
- **Lines 16-27:** "How by the desultory breeze caressed, / Like some coy maid half yielding to her lover, / It pours such sweet upbraiding, as must needs / Tempt to repeat the wrong! And now, its strings / Boldlier swept, the long sequacious notes / Over delicious surges sink and rise, / Such a soft floating witchery of sound / As twilight Elfins make, when they at eve / Voyage on gentle gales from Fairy-Land, / Where Melodies round honey-dropping flowers, / Footless and wild, like birds of Paradise, / Nor pause, nor perch, hovering on untamed wing! "
- **Lines 34-35:** "Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air / Is Music slumbering on her / . "
- **Line 35:** "instrument"
- **Lines 41-45:** "Full many a thought uncalled and undetained, / And many idle flitting phantasies, / Traverse my indolent and passive brain, / As wild and various as the random gales / That swell and flutter on this subject / ! "
- **Line 45:** "Lute"
- **Lines 46-50:** " And what if all of animated nature / Be but organic Harps diversely framed, / That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps / Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze, / At once the Soul of each, and God of all? "

WIND

If the harp symbolizes the poet, the wind symbolizes the *inspiration* that the poet receives, especially the inspiration from nature. "Inspire" actually comes from the Latin term meaning "to breathe or blow into." The literal blowing (or inspiring) of the wind is turned into the symbolic inspiring of the ideas the poet receives. He describes the thoughts and "phantasies" that move through his brain by comparing them to "random gales" or winds. The fact that the poet is most flooded with ideas when he is out in nature, lying on the hill, reinforces this connection between physical wind and figurative inspiration.

Just as the harp goes on to represent living things more broadly, the wind also expands to become a symbol of the animating force in nature—even of God himself. Things in nature come to life when swept by an "intellectual breeze"—not a physical breeze but a spiritual one. In the biblical Book of Genesis, man first comes to life when God breathes into his nostrils. This story draws a close connection between literal breath or wind and the more abstract idea of a spirit or soul. The speaker draws the same connection, saying that the intellectual breeze is "the Soul of each, and God of all." Wind, then, becomes a symbol for the soul that animates each living thing.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 44-45:** "As wild and various as the random gales / That swell and flutter on this subject Lute!"
- **Lines 48-50:** "That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps / Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze, / At once the Soul of each, and God of all?"

POETIC DEVICES

CONCEIT

The eolian harp, the instrument produces music when the wind blows across its strings, becomes part of the poem's conceit. Initially, in lines 14-15, the speaker refers simply to the physical harp sitting in the window of the cottage. But the harp goes on to become an elaborate extended metaphor, first for the process of poetic inspiration, and then for the entirety of the living world.

In lines 41-45, the speaker compares the wild and unpredictable thoughts that come into his head to the wild and unpredictable winds that make music on the lute. Within this comparison, the speaker himself is like the lute: just as the lute takes in the motion of the wind and turns it into music, the speaker takes in the thoughts with which nature inspires him and turns them into poetry.

One thought that seems to inspire him, which he then turns into a part of this very poem, is the idea that all living things (not just poets) could be considered "organic" eolian harps. This idea leads to the most fanciful version of the harp conceit yet, as the speaker imagines that, just as the eolian harp is brought to life musically by a physical breeze, all of nature might be "animated" by an "intellectual breeze."

The fact that Coleridge conveys this idea of nature through a poetic conceit is significant. His image of all living things being brought to life, essentially, by a single breeze breaks down barriers between human beings and the natural world they inhabit, emphasizing that people and the rest of nature share a

single source of life. This reflects the literary device actually being used in the poem: a poetic conceit works similarly to break down barriers by comparing things that might initially seem very different. A harp is a man-made instrument not found in nature. By saying that living beings are like "organic Harps," or "natural" harps, the speaker breaks down the barrier between the human world and the natural world. The conceit reinforces the sense of how closely those two worlds are connected.

Where Conceit appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-15:** " And that simplest Lute, / Placed length-ways in the clasping casement, hark!"
- **Lines 41-45:** "Full many a thought uncalled and undetained, / And many idle flitting phantasies, / Traverse my indolent and passive brain, / As wild and various as the random gales / That swell and flutter on this subject Lute! "
- **Lines 46-50:** "And what if all of animated nature / Be but organic Harps diversely framed, / That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps / Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze, / At once the Soul of each, and God of all?"

SIMILE

The speaker employs a number of similes in the poem, especially in his descriptions of the eolian harp itself. In some ways, this is simply part of the lyrical beauty of the poem, a means to evoke lovely imagery. For example, he describes how "sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the main." This simile shows how the poet is inspired by an event in nature (the sunlight shining on the sea), and makes this image even more beautiful in the reader's mind by describing it with figurative language.

But the speaker also uses similes in a way that subtly reflects his creative thought process. For example, the speaker first compares the harp's music to a maid's sweet complaints to her lover. Later he compares its music to the music elves might make, and then compares the music of Fairy-Land to birds of paradise. These similes do the work that similes normally do, which is to clarify some feature of an object by comparing it to another. Readers get a better sense of how sweet and varied the harp's music is, for example, through these various comparisons.

These similes also serve to take the poem further away from the speaker's immediate, physical setting and further into his own imagination. The similes move readers from the lute, which really does sit in his window, to a coy maid, who isn't present but who could be real, and finally to a totally imaginary landscape. The comparisons thus move from the concrete to the fantastical, mirroring the way the speaker gets caught up in his own abstract thoughts (eventually to the point that he declares he's gotten wrapped up in "vain Philosophy" and lost sight of what's real regarding the nature of God).

Other similes also help clarify the speaker's thought process. In lines 42-45, for example, the speaker uses the simile of the winds striking the harp to describe the way nature inspires him. The simile here shows that he's not in control of the "idle flitting phantasies" that sweep through his "passive brain," any more than the stationary harp can control the wind that caresses its strings.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 16-19:** "How by the desultory breeze caressed, / Like some coy maid half yielding to her lover, / It pours such sweet upbraiding, as must needs / Tempt to repeat the wrong!"
- **Lines 22-27:** "Such a soft floating witchery of sound / As twilight Elfins make, when they at eve / Voyage on gentle gales from Fairy-Land, / Where Melodies round honey-dropping flowers, / Footless and wild, like birds of Paradise, / Nor pause, nor perch, hovering on untamed wing!"
- **Line 39:** "The sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the main,"
- **Lines 42-45:** "many idle flitting phantasies, / Traverse my indolent and passive brain, / As wild and various as the random gales / That swell and flutter on this subject Lute! "

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker personifies elements of the natural landscape throughout the poem. To describe these elements, he uses certain verbs and adverbs that are generally associated with human traits. For example, in lines 8 and 9, the evening star is described as "serenely brilliant." "Serene" is typically used to describe a person's calm demeanor, but here it is applied to the star. Later, the speaker says that the breeze has "caressed" the lute, and that when the air is still, Music (made all the more human by the capitalization that deems it a proper noun) "slumbers." Even the sunbeams "dance." All of these verbs usually describe human activity.

These moments where natural elements are given human characteristics help reinforce the idea that human beings and the natural world share a single source of life. If all living things share the same "intellectual breeze," then there must not be that much of a difference between human beings and the world they inhabit. The fact that this breeze causes of all nature to "tremble into thought"—"thought" again being the domain of people, not nature—further emphasizes the way the natural world shares in human qualities. Thus, by personifying different natural elements throughout the poem, the speaker reinforces this connection between people and nature—as well as the idea that God is present within the natural world.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "the star of eve "
- **Line 9:** "Serenely brilliant"
- **Line 16:** "How by the desultory breeze ," "caressed"
- **Lines 35-35:** "Music / on her instrument."
- **Line 35:** "slumbering"
- **Line 39:** "The sunbeams ," "dance"
- **Lines 47-48:** "organic Harps diversely framed, / That "
- **Line 48:** "tremble into thought"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The speaker poses a rhetorical question in the fourth stanza, when he asks, "And what if all of animated nature / Be but organic Harps ... ?" The idea he expresses in this section is a significant one, addressing both the nature of God and the nature of the entire physical world. It is significant that he expresses this idea not as a declarative sentence, but rather as a question: a "what if?" *What if* God is present throughout nature—indeed, what if God essentially is *part* of nature?

If the speaker had framed the idea in a sentence, this would indicate that he firmly believed in it, that he had considered it over time and concluded that it was true. But the use of a *question* here suggests that this idea is only occurring to him in this moment and that he is simply *wondering* whether it is true. And, indeed, the final stanza of the poem, he seems to answer his own question and assert that it's *not*.

The use of a question here reinforces the sense that the speaker is expressing thoughts as they come to him—readers are watching him in the process of forming new ideas. He had just been explaining that he receives inspiration from the unplanned thoughts that come suddenly into his mind. The rhetorical question makes it seem like this is exactly one of those unplanned thoughts that has suddenly come to him, "uncalled and undetained."

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 46-50:** "And what if all of animated nature / Be but organic Harps diversely framed, / That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps / Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze, / At once the Soul of each, and God of all?"

EUPHONY

It's unsurprising that, in a poem that describes a soft, peaceful setting and beautiful music, the speaker frequently uses euphony. Stanza 1, for example, builds an overall sense of euphonious sound through frequent use of consonance. The stanza repeats soft, non-percussive consonants with muffled or buzzing sounds, like /s/ or /z/ ("soothing sweet," "jasmin," "slow saddening"), /m/ and /n/ ("meet emblems they of Innocence"), and /l/ ("late were rich with light"). There are a couple sharper /t/ and /k/ sounds throughout, but *overall* this stanza is so intricately connected through a repetition of pleasing, soft sounds in a gentle rhythm that it becomes intensely beautiful on an auditory level. One of the speaker's goals in this section is to convey the peace and stillness of the summer evening. By describing the setting with similarly gentle, hushed sounds, he recreates for the reader some of the pleasant, peaceful qualities of that setting.

Similarly, when the speaker describes the music of the eolian harp in stanza 2, he uses a number of techniques to achieve a euphonious effect that evokes the very music he is describing. The long /o/ sound is repeated (assonance) in lines 20-21:

> Boldlier swept, the long sequacious notes
> Over delicious surges sink and rise,

This open vowel sound mimics the sound of the "long" notes described by the speaker. Similarly, the speaker creates a sense of smoothly flowing notes rising and falling through the repeated /s/ and /sh/ sounds, both at the start of words (alliteration) and in the middle of words (consonance): "desultory breeze caressed," "sequacious notes / Over delicious surges sink and rise," "Such a soft," etc. Other soft consonant sounds—/v/, /g/, and /l/—are repeated in lines 23-24:

> As twilight Elfins make, when they at eve
> Voyage on gentle gales from Fairy-Land,

Both consonant and vowel sounds (short /i/ and /o/ sounds, as well as /d/, /l/, and /s/) are repeated in lines 25-26, as the poet further develops his image of Fairy-Land and its music:

> Where Melodies round honey-dropping flowers,
> Footless and wild, like birds of Paradise,

Repeating the same sounds ties the words and the lines together, creating an overall sense of harmony, and when the repeated sounds are soft and gentle like those used here, they create this lovely euphonious effect. In this particular stanza, the dense repetition of soft consonants and vowels imitates the soft, enchanting music and the gentle winds that the lines themselves describe.

Where Euphony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-13:** "My pensive Sara! thy soft cheek reclined / Thus on mine arm, most soothing sweet it is / To sit beside our Cot, our Cot o'ergrown / And watch the clouds, that late were rich with light, / Shine opposite! How exquisite the scents / Snatched from yon bean-field! and the world / so / hushed! / The stilly murmur of the distant Sea / Tells us of silence. "

- **Lines 5-6:** "With white-flowered Jasmin, and the broad-leaved Myrtle, / (Meet emblems they of Innocence and Love!) "
- **Lines 8-9:** "Slow saddening round, and mark the star of eve / Serenely brilliant (such would Wisdom be) "
- **Lines 20-27:** "Boldlier swept, the long sequacious notes / Over delicious surges sink and rise, / Such a soft floating witchery of sound / As twilight Elfins make, when they at eve / Voyage on gentle gales from Fairy-Land, / Where Melodies round honey-dropping flowers, / Footless and wild, like birds of Paradise, / Nor pause, nor perch, hovering on untamed wing! "

POLYPTOTON

The speaker uses polyptoton when he describes the way that he would stretch out on the hill and "tranquil muse upon tranquility." Repeating the same root word reinforces the sense of how much the speaker is now absorbed in himself and his thoughts. His thoughts (thoughts "upon tranquility") are about the very thing that he is experiencing at the moment (the state of being "tranquil). He is completely focused on his *own* experience.

This poem, like Coleridge's other conversation poems, begins in the external world of the physical setting and then moves into the internal world of the speaker's thoughts. The next section, section 4, is entirely the speaker's abstract philosophical speculations. The line "tranquil muse upon tranquility" signals that the speaker's attention is turning inward, to focus on his own experience and thoughts, and prepares readers to move even further into the speaker's own mind.

Where Polyptoton appears in the poem:

- **Line 40:** "And tranquil muse upon tranquility:"

ALLUSION

The speaker alludes to classical mythology, literature, and the Bible in the course of the poem. In the first stanza, the poet describes the cottage as being overgrown with jasmine and myrtle. Myrtle is a flower associated with Venus, the Roman goddess of love, desire, and fertility. The star of eve, which refers to the evening star or the planet Venus, also alludes to the goddess Venus. This allusion reinforces the reader's sense of the erotic love and desire that might exist between the speaker and Sara, especially since they are physically close.

The jasmine and myrtle may also be part of another very subtle allusion: they are both plants mentioned by John Milton in *Paradise Lost*, which retells the biblical story of Adam and Eve. In Milton's poem, Adam and Eve live in the Garden of Eden while they are still sinless and innocent. The "blissful Bower" where they sleep overflows with luxurious plant life, just like the cottage described here. In particular, Milton says the roof of the bower "was inwoven shade / Laurel and Mirtle" (myrtle) and that on the walls grow "each beauteous [flower], / Iris all hues, Roses, and Gessamin" (jasmine) (*Paradise Lost*, Book 4, lines 690-698). Adam and Eve are a loving couple, but because they are sinless, their love is entirely innocent. The bower where they sleep—and the flowers that adorn it—represent their innocent love. The speaker here, too, pairs "Innocence and Love" when he describes the jasmine and the myrtle. Alluding to Adam and Eve's sinless life in the garden reinforces the sense of the perfect love, harmony, and innocence that the couple in *this* poem enjoys.

In the fifth stanza, the poet alludes to the Bible itself. When Sara criticizes the speaker's speculations about God and urges him to "walk humbly with [his] God," this is an allusion to the biblical verse Micah 6:8: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Sara is urging the speaker to reject his unholy thoughts and align himself with orthodox Christianity. By quoting from the accepted holy text of Christianity, Sara shows the orthodoxy of her own faith and reminds the speaker of where he should look for the truth about God—in God's word, not in his own head.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Jasmin," "Myrtle"
- **Line 8:** "star of eve"
- **Line 54:** "And biddest me walk humbly with my God. "

METAPHOR

Like the poem's many similes, its metaphors help enhance the reader's understanding of some idea through an illuminating comparison. For instance, when the speaker says in lines 34-35 that the "mute still air / Is Music slumbering on her instrument," he clarifies an abstract idea by connecting it to a physical image. The idea here is that, in the world of "one Life," even things that appear to be lifeless or dead are really still full of the potential for life. But he expresses this idea metaphorically with the image of the harp: what seems dead is just sleeping, just as air that is still and silent is just music waiting to be made the next time the air moves.

At this point in the poem, the speaker is engaged in abstract thought. The similes in the poem created a kind of transition from his immediate physical setting to the ideas that exist only in his mind. The metaphor in line 35, however, reminds readers where those ideas came from. Even the most abstract thoughts about "one Life" were partially inspired by the harp the speaker saw sitting in the windowsill.

In the fifth stanza, the metaphor of rising bubbles serves another important double purpose:

> These shapings of the unregenerate mind;
> Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break
> On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring.

Besides describing the speaker's state of mind, the metaphor also connects back to the simile in line 39, describing the sunbeams dancing like diamonds on the surface of the sea. There, this simile helped create a positive sense of the way nature inspired the speaker. Now, the speaker is abandoning some of those natural inspirations, and he uses a metaphor that is almost a parody of the earlier simile. Both images are based around water. But instead of a great ocean, we have a tiny spring that babbles or talks nonsense. Instead of the sun's powerful light dancing, we have flimsy bubbles bursting. And instead of precious diamonds, we have cheap glitter. The second image is like a reduced, less valuable version of the first, and the speaker uses it to express how those initial ideas were less valuable than he thought. The metaphor makes a connection to the earlier image, and this connection reinforces the idea that in section 5, the speaker is rejecting the thoughts that inspired him earlier in the poem.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 34-35:** "the mute still air / Is Music slumbering on her instrument. "
- **Lines 57-59:** "These shapings of the unregenerate mind; / Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break / On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring. "

ENJAMBMENT

This poem makes very frequent use of enjambment. Although the stanzas are relatively lengthy (there are only five in this 65-line poem!), they contain only a few complete, single sentences. The poem's sentences are thus generally quite long, extending over multiple lines of the poem. And within these long sentences, many lines are unsurprisingly enjambed. Lines 19-20 provide a good example:

> Tempt to repeat the wrong! And now, its strings
> Boldlier swept, the long sequacious notes

The frequent enjambment serves the same purpose as the poem's long sentences. It makes it seem as though the speaker is saying the lines as they occur to him, giving the reader his spontaneous thoughts. It takes careful planning to complete a thought so that it fits perfectly into one line of regular iambic pentameter; as such, the fact that the speaker's thoughts constantly spill over from line to line suggests that he is *not* planning his thoughts ahead of time. (Note that we've marked a few lines that contain final punctuation as being enjambed for this exact reason; these lines also spill over from one to the next, and given that the entire poem is so heavily enjambed and free-flowing, the reader will *experience* these punctuated lines as enjambment despite their ending commas.)

The content and order of the poem—the way the speaker first notices the physical lute, and then moves into speculations and metaphors based on the lute—create the impression that speaker is being inspired in the moment by the world around him and that he shares his inspirations as they come to him. The enjambment reinforces that impression. The enjambment also reinforces the impression that the speaker is engaged in conversation with Sara, since people don't usually plan out their words ahead of time in informal conversation.

Besides creating a sense of spontaneity, the enjambment also creates additional momentum for the reader as they go through the poem. When there is no end stop at the end of a line, the reader moves more quickly to the next line and a sense of anticipation builds about where the thought will end. Stanzas 1, 2, 3, and 5 all use enjambment just before the final line to give additional emphasis to the final line. The last two lines of the poem, for example, read:

> Wildered and dark, and gave me to possess
> Peace, and this Cot, and thee, heart-honored Maid!

The fact that the line doesn't stop at "possess" gives additional emphasis to the first word of the next line, "Peace," and emphasizes by contrast the sense of finality that comes with "Maid."

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** " reclined / Thus"
- **Lines 3-4:** "is / To"
- **Lines 4-5:** "o'ergrown / With"
- **Line 7:** "light, "
- **Line 8:** "Slow"
- **Lines 8-9:** "eve / Serenely"
- **Lines 10-11:** "scents / Snatched"
- **Lines 12-13:** "Sea / Tells"
- **Lines 18-19:** "needs / Tempt"
- **Lines 19-20:** "strings / Boldlier"
- **Line 20:** "notes "
- **Line 21:** "Over"
- **Line 22:** "sound"
- **Line 23:** "As," "eve"
- **Line 24:** "Voyage"
- **Line 25:** "flowers, "
- **Line 26:** "Footless"
- **Lines 32-33:** "impossible / Not"
- **Lines 34-35:** "air / Is"
- **Lines 36-37:** "slope / O"
- **Lines 38-39:** "behold / The"
- **Line 42:** "phantasies, "
- **Line 43:** "Traverse"

- **Lines 44-45:** "gales / That"
- **Lines 46-47:** "nature / Be"
- **Line 47:** "framed, "
- **Line 48:** "That"
- **Lines 48-49:** "sweeps / Plastic"
- **Lines 51-52:** "reproof / Darts"
- **Lines 52-53:** "thoughts / Dim"
- **Lines 56-57:** "dispraised / These"
- **Lines 58-59:** "break / On"
- **Line 60:** "him, "
- **Line 61:** "The"
- **Lines 61-62:** "awe / I"
- **Lines 65-66:** "possess / Peace"

CAESURA

The speaker here doesn't seem particularly concerned with where lines begin or end: in addition to enjambing many of the lines so that one thought spills over onto the next, the speaker also includes a caesura in many lines so that the thought then stops in the *middle* of the line. The poem's first four lines, for example, all contain a caesura:

> My pensive Sara! thy soft cheek reclined
> Thus on mine arm, most soothing sweet it is
> To sit beside our Cot, our Cot o'ergrown
> With white-flowered Jasmin, and the broad-leaved
> Myrtle,

The caesura creates an effect similar to enjambment: it breaks the pattern that the reader would expect from the poem's meter. The reader would expect the thought to end when the line ends; enjambment keeps it going. The reader would expect the thought to continue as the lines continue; caesura pauses the thought. Both devices create the impression that the speaker isn't conforming his words to a specific pattern but rather is speaking spontaneously. The pause added by the caesura suggests that the speaker is pausing mid-line to think of where to go next or to add something new.

The fact that so many lines have a caesura, however, makes it particularly noticeable when there is *no* pause in the middle of a line. Significantly, some of the lines *without* caesuras express some of the key ideas of the poem. For example, lines 44-45 convey the image of the poet as an eolian harp:

> As wild and various as the random gales
> That swell and flutter on this subject Lute!

And lines 46-47 convey the image of all of nature as an eolian harp:

> And what if all of animated nature
> Be but organic Harps diversely framed

Not having a caesura in these lines makes it seem as though the speaker has had a vision or inspiration that he suddenly perfectly understands. He doesn't *need* to pause to work through it. Strategically taking away the caesura creates an additional sense of completeness to the ideas expressed in these lines. It also means that the reader can read through the lines more quickly, with no pause. Including and removing a caesura gives the speaker a way to vary the speed of the poem, either to create more rush and momentum or to slow the reader down. The poem's last line—

> Peace, and this Cot, and thee, heart-honored Maid!

—contains three possible caesuras (at the three commas). These multiple pauses slow the line down considerably, reinforcing the reader's sense that the poem is drawing to a close.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "!"
- **Line 3:** "",
- **Line 4:** "",
- **Line 5:** "",
- **Line 7:** "",
- **Line 8:** "",
- **Line 9:** "("
- **Line 10:** "!"
- **Line 11:** "!"
- **Line 18:** "",
- **Line 20:** "",
- **Line 23:** "",
- **Line 26:** "",
- **Line 27:** "," "",
- **Line 30:** "",
- **Line 31:** "",
- **Line 32:** "",
- **Line 34:** "",
- **Line 36:** "," "!"
- **Line 39:** "," "",
- **Line 48:** "",
- **Line 49:** "",
- **Line 50:** "",
- **Line 52:** "," "!"
- **Line 61:** "!"
- **Line 62:** "",
- **Line 65:** "",
- **Line 66:** "," "," "",

CONSONANCE

Although the poem has no regular rhyme scheme, the poem

often repeats the same sounds through its use of consonance. (Note that much of this consonance is also an example of alliteration, or the repetition of sounds at the beginning of words or stressed syllables; given that these two devices largely serve the same function in the poem, we're discussing them together here.) As mentioned in our discussion of euphony, the poem is intensely aware of its sounds. The speaker often uses the same consonant sounds frequently in the space of a few phrases or a few lines to multiple ends.

First, it creates a greater unity and harmony in the poem's sound. The first stanza is full of repeated /s/, /m/, and /n/ sounds, from the beginning—

> My pensive Sara! thy soft cheek reclined
> Thus on mine arm, most soothing sweet it is

—to the end:

> The stilly murmur of the distant Sea
> Tells us of silence

The recurring consonants give a unified sound to the whole stanza. These specific consonants, which are soft and non-percussive, create a gentle, hushed tone overall, matching the gentle mood described by the speaker.

Second, by linking words through their sound, consonance also links their sense. Related sounds reinforce the reader's understanding that the words have related meanings. Lines 19-21 use both alliteration and consonance of the /s/ sound:

> And now, its strings
> Boldlier swept, the long sequacious notes
> Over delicious surges sink and rise,

The repeating /s/ ties together all three lines to create an even more unified image of sinking and rising sound surging from the swept strings. The alliteration of the /p/ sound in line 27—"Nor pause, nor perch"—connects the two verbs more closely to each other and to the creatures they describe, the birds of Paradise. In line 39

> The sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the main,

and in line 42

> And many idle flitting phantasies

the key descriptive phrase starts with the same sound as the thing it describes (dance/diamonds, flitting/phantasies), reinforcing the reader's sense of how closely the words are related (the dancing really does resemble diamonds, etc.) The repeated /f/ sound in line 62, "Faith that inly *feels*," emphasizes that faith *must* be felt to be genuine. Overall, the speaker creates these connections in both meaning and in tone through frequent use of these shared sounds.

We've mapped the consonance present in the first stanza to exemplify the frequency of repeated sounds in the poem; the remaining stanzas are similarly overflowing with consonance.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "p," "s," "S," "s," "k," "c"
- **Line 3:** "s," "m," "m," "m," "s," "s," "s," "t," "t," "s"
- **Line 4:** "T," "s," "t," "C," "t," "C," "t"
- **Line 5:** "W," "w," "m," "b," "d," "l," "d," "M," "l"
- **Line 6:** "M," "m," "bl," "ms," "c," "c," "L"
- **Line 7:** "w," "l," "l," "t," "w," "r," "r," "w," "l," "t"
- **Line 8:** "S," "s," "r," "r," "s," "r," "f," "v"
- **Line 9:** "S," "r," "l," "ll," "s," "w," "d," "W," "s," "d," "b"
- **Line 10:** "s," "x," "s," "t," "s," "s"
- **Line 11:** "S," "s"
- **Line 12:** "s," "t," "m," "m," "st," "t," "S"
- **Line 13:** "T," "s," "s," "s," "c"

VOCABULARY

Pensive (Line 2) - Thoughtful or absorbed in thought

Reclined (Line 2) - Leaning against

Cot (Line 4, Line 66) - Cottage, a small, simple house

Jasmin and Myrtle (Line 5) - Jasmin, usually spelled jasmine, is a type of flowering shrub or vine. Myrtle is a type of flower. Myrtle is associated symbolically with the goddess Venus. The star of eve, or evening star, mentioned in line 8, refers to the planet Venus, which may be another reference to the goddess.

Meet (Line 6) - Appropriate, fitting, or suitable

Emblem (Line 6) - Symbol

Star of eve (Line 8) - The evening star—a term referring to the planet Venus when it appears in the sky after sunset. By mentioning the evening star, the speaker is also alluding to the Roman goddess of love, sexual desire, and fertility. This allusion underscores the theme of romantic love in this section and in the poem overall.

Stilly (Line 12) - Characterized by stillness, i.e., a lack of movement

Lute (Line 14) - A stringed instrument that makes music when its strings are set in motion. The lute here is the "Eolian Harp" of the poem's title.

Casement (Line 15) - Window

Hark (Line 15) - A term used to call or direct someone's attention to something, essentially, "Look!"

Desultory (Line 16) - Skipping or jumping randomly from one

thing to another. If the breeze is desultory, it moves in a random or unpredictable way.

Coy (Line 17) - Pretending to be reserved, modest, or shy, in a way that is actually flirtatious and alluring. A coy woman encourages others to pursue her while pretending to discourage them, just as the maid here encourages her lover's advances while pretending to complain about them.

Maid (Line 17) - A young woman (not necessarily a servant or someone who cleans)

Upbraiding (Line 18) - Complaining or scolding

Sequacious (Line 20) - In music, sequacious notes follow each other with a regular, unchanging order

Witchery (Line 22) - Charming or fascinating power; the term comes from "witchcraft," which also suggests a mysterious power

Elfins (Line 23) - Elves

Gale (Line 24, Line 44) - A strong wind. A gentle wind would be powerful without becoming stormy or destructive; a random gale would be one that moved unpredictably.

Joyance (Line 31) - Joy, delight

Main (Line 39) - The sea

Phantasies (Line 42) - A phantasy, or fantasy, can refer to a random thought, daydream, a product of the imagination, a vision, etc.

Traverse (Line 43) - Travel across or through

Indolent (Line 43) - Lazy, avoiding activity

Passive (Line 43) - Something is passive if it is acted *upon* rather than *doing* the action itself. For example, when you throw a ball, the ball is passive and you are active. If the speaker's brain is passive while thoughts come flitting through it, his mind is not actively forming thoughts but simply *receiving* whatever thoughts happen to occur to him.

Subject (Line 45) - When something is acted upon, it might be called the *subject* of that *action*. The lute is *subject* to the gales in that the gales blow on the lute and the lute receives the gale's blows.

Animated (Line 46) - Living

Organic (Line 47) - Related or belonging to a living being; natural. Harps are artificial, not natural, in that they are created by human beings, not found in nature. The speaker calls living things "organic Harps" to draw attention to the fact that these metaphorical harps are *natural*, not artificial like the actual harp instruments.

Plastic (Line 49) - Causing natural or living things to grow; helping in the creation of living things

Intellectual (Line 49) - Spiritual, non-material; something that can only be perceived with the mind (as opposed to being perceived by the senses)

Reproof (Line 51) - Disapproval, an expression of blame

Dart (Line 52) - To throw or shoot something

Unhallowed (Line 53) - Unholy

Holily (Line 56) - In a holy, godly way

Dispraise (Line 56) - Criticize, condemn

Shapings (Line 57) - Something shaped or created by the mind

Unregenerate (Line 57) - Not spiritually reformed or made holy

Vain (Line 59) - Useless, having no value, worthless

Aye-babbling (Line 59) - Forever babbling or talking nonsense

Save (Line 61) - Except

Inly (Line 62) - Inwardly or internally

Wildered (Line 65) - Bewildered, lost, confused, off the right path

Dark (Line 65) - Lacking moral or spiritual enlightenment, possibly wicked

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Eolian Harp" does not have a strictly regular form (like, for example, a sonnet). The poem is, however, broken up into five stanzas of widely varying lengths.

Each stanza marks a different direction in the speaker's thoughts. The first stanza is focused on his immediate physical setting. The second stanza begins by talking about something in his physical setting, the lute, but then moves into more abstract speculation. The third stanza begins with a memory of another physical setting, the hill, and then moves into a description of the speaker's thought process. The fourth stanza is pure abstract thought on the speaker's part. The fifth stanza begins when the speaker's attention is suddenly called back to his immediate setting by Sara's look.

The irregularity of the stanzas adds to the poem's sense of free-association; that is, it seems the speaker is not thinking too much about what he says before he says it, but rather is simply thinking out loud. One idea bounces off the next, much like the poetic inspiration may come to the speaker's mind "uncalled and undetained."

METER

The meter of "The Eolian Harp" is generally iambic pentameter, meaning each line is made up of five iambs (poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern). Since the lines of iambic pentameter are unrhymed, the poem as a whole is written in blank verse.

This meter is not very consistent throughout, however, with a substitution even in line 1. This can be scanned as having a pyrrhic (unstressed-unstressed) in the third foot and a spondee (stressed-stressed) in the fourth:

> My pen- | sive Sa- | ra! thy | soft cheek | reclined

There are many other deviations from the meter, which may make the poem seem rather jittery. This is in keeping with its conversational nature; the speaker is thinking on his feet, relaying thoughts and ideas as they come to him, and these thoughts often break the expected meter of the line in which they appear. This also thus reflects the poem's conception of poetic inspiration as something that comes to the speaker unbidden—the speaker can't control this inspiration any more than he can control the precise meter of the poem.

For example, the speaker frequently inserts a trochee (stressed-unstressed) in place of an iamb, as seen in line 19:

> Tempt to repeat the wrong! And now its strings

The poem often uses this technique to give particular emphasis to an important word or idea; it feels fitting that a strong word like "tempt" gets a hard stress here, as does "snatched" in line 11. Trochees, pyrrhics, and spondees pop up throughout, creating a sense of ragged excitement as new thoughts pop unto the speaker's mind. Note the irregularity of line 11:

> Snatched from | yon bean- | field! and | the world | *so* hushed!

This line is filled with substitutions that slow it down, adding a sense of deliberate emphasis and consideration that reflects the content of the phrase "world so hushed."

Lines also sometimes have far too few syllables. Note line 13:

> Tells us of silence.

There are just five syllables here—meaning *half* the line is effectively blank (recall that lines of pentameter have ten syllables). It's as though the end-stopped "silence" spills over into the remainder of the line—the second half of the line is a manifestation of the very silence being discussed. The opening line of the stanza *also* has only five lines, making it a sort of continuation of the previous line—reflecting how the speaker's thoughts continuously build upon one another.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Eolian Harp" is written in blank verse, and as such has no regular rhyme scheme. The lack of regular rhyme enforces the reader's sense that the speaker is speaking in an informal, conversational way, not planning what he will say ahead of time but rather just speaking his thoughts as they come to him. Some sounds do reappear at the ends of lines and create rare moments of rhyme—such as "main," "undetained," and "brain," in the third stanza—but these aren't regular enough to really be characterized as a rhyme scheme, and instead reflect the general musicality of the poem.

There are, however, some very subtle internal rhymes created through assonance. For example, in lines 8 and 9 the close repetition of long /e/ sounds in "eve," "serenely," and "be" creates a subtle moment of internal rhyme. This also then echoes with "Sea" in line 12. Moments like this add to the smooth, pleasant musicality of the poem. They also create a sense of connection between the meaning of the words. Take lines 18-19:

> It pours such sweet upbraiding, as must needs
> Tempt to repeat the wrong!

There is an internal rhyme of "sweet" and "repeat" (which also repeat the long /e/ sound of "needs"). The rhyme reinforces the connection between the ideas, emphasizing that it is precisely because the maid's complaints are sweet that the lover is tempted to repeat or continue his advances.

Thus while the poem lacks clear full rhymes, it's still quite musical and lovely sounding.

SPEAKER

Though the speaker is not named nor gendered, people usually interpret it to be the poet himself, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The speaker begins by addressing a woman named Sara, his "beloved," while they sit outside a cottage. Coleridge was engaged to a woman named Sara Fricker when he began writing the poem, and they visited a cottage in Clevedon, Somerset, while they were engaged. Coleridge notes that the poem was "composed at Clevedon, Somersetshire," and so the poem seems, at least at first, almost like a record of his own experience there with Fricker.

The poem is written in the first person, with the speaker frequently referring to himself with terms like "my," "mine," and "I." The speaker also directly addresses Sara with terms like "thy" and "thou" (old-fashioned terms for "your" and "you"). Part of the speaker's goal is clearly to engage in conversation with Sara, but as the poem goes on, he is also drawn to exploring his own thoughts.

He begins by calling Sara's attention to beautiful features of the environment. He then turns his attention away from their shared environment to develop his own philosophical speculations about nature and God. In the last stanza, however, Sara snaps him out of his wandering thoughts with her critical glance. Readers might expect the speaker to be upset or

offended at Sara's criticism. They might also expect that he wouldn't so readily abandon his own ideas about nature (which seemed to bring him a sense of joy). But he shows only gratitude towards Sara for correcting him. This section suggests that the speaker has strong respect for Sara and for Christianity.

SETTING

seThe poem begins with a note that it was "composed at Clevedon, Somersetshire." The poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, visited a cottage in Clevedon, Somerset (in South West England) in 1795, and this visit inspired him to begin writing "The Eolian Harp." The poem itself begins by situating the speaker and his conversation partner outside a cottage in the country—likely one similar to the cottage Coleridge visited. The setting is quiet, peaceful, and full of the beauties of nature, from the flowers growing on the cottage, to the darkening clouds in the sky, to the pleasant scents coming from the nearby fields. The cottage is also not far from from the sea—they can hear the murmur of the waves, dimly, from the cottage, and the speaker later describes a nearby hill from which he can see the sea.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Samuel Taylor Coleridge composed and revised "The Eolian Harp" over many years. The first draft of the poem is a manuscript of 17 lines dated, "Clevedon, August 20th, 1795." It was inspired by a visit Coleridge made with his fiancee and later wife, Sara Fricker, to the cottage in Clevedon, Somerset, where they would live after their marriage. The poem first appeared in print in 1796. It was reprinted with notable changes in 1803, in 1817, and in 1828.

Scholars group "The Eolian Harp" together with five other poems that Coleridge composed between 1795 and 1798: "Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement," "This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison, "Frost at Midnight," "Fears in Solitude," and "The Nightingale." The conversation poems generally are addressed to a specific person and are written in blank verse. Structurally, they have three parts: the poems begin with a detailed description of a specific physical setting, then shift to an exploration of the speaker's thoughts as inspired by the setting, and finally close by returning to the original setting, which the poet now understands at a deeper level.

The Eolian or Aeolian harp itself was a popular image in early nineteenth-century poems. Both the harp and wind figure in major poems by some of the most prominent poets of the Romantic period, including William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley, and Lord Byron. The Romantics believed that poets were like Aeolian harps, in that they were sensitive to the forces of nature and translated those external natural forces into internal thought and feeling. The wind is often a metaphor for a significant change taking place in the mind of the poet. In Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," for example, he requests of the wind, "Make me thy lyre." In Wordsworth's autobiographical poem "The Prelude," the wind is compared to the inspiring spirit of God, and its presence signals the poet's recovery of inspiration and hope.

The word "inspire" actually comes from the Latin term meaning "to breathe or blow into." In the Old Testament, God gives life to man by breathing into his nostrils; the Latin terms spiritus and anima, and similar words in Greek, Hebrew, and Sanskrit, mean wind, breath, and soul. The image of the wind as giving life or inspiration draws on some much older ideas from the Christian religion as well as from pagan mythology. But the Romantic period was the first time this image was used by so many poets in so many poems. The image also worked especially well given Romantic poets' desire to connect human beings more closely to nature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was one of the major poets and thinkers of English Romanticism (a movement dating from roughly 1785 to 1830). The term "Romantic" doesn't refer here to romantic love. It comes partly from the term "romance," which refers to chivalric stories like the tales of King Arthur, with distant or magical settings and idealized characters. It also comes from the term "romantic," which was used in 18th-century England to describe beautiful, emotionally moving scenes in nature. At this time, the Industrial Revolution was beginning in England. There were more factories filling the landscape and more smoke filling the air, and many more people moved from the countryside to cities. Romantic poets reacted against the Industrial Revolution by emphasizing the physical and spiritual beauties of nature.

Romanticism also held that a poet's inspiration was meant to come from nature. In earlier periods, writers were supposed to learn their craft by following certain models and imitating the great writers of the past. Romanticism, by contrast, placed new importance on the individual and celebrated writers for their originality. Poets were, in fact, often seen as channels of nature, or even as prophets who found God's voice in nature. When he represents the poet as an eolian harp, turning nature's inspiration into poetry, Coleridge expresses this new Romantic view of what poetry should be.

Romantics were also very interested in the relationship between the individual mind and imagination and the natural environment, between the internal world and the external world. Many Romantic poems focus on an individual's subjective response to nature. Poetry was not meant simply to reflect or describe the environment. It was meant to show how the speaker sees this environment and how he is changed by

what he sees—what internal, personal, or spiritual significance he finds in the external world. This is why many Romantic poems begin by looking at nature but then focus on the speaker's inner reflections as inspired by the natural landscape. "The Eolian Harp" follows just this pattern, beginning with the physical setting but then moving into the speaker's thoughts.

The creative imagination took on new importance for many poets and thinkers after the French Revolution. Many Romantics had been inspired by the Revolution, seeing it as a promise not only of greater equality and freedom but of a new era in human history. Coleridge, among others, saw the Revolution as the fulfillment of religious prophecy. Their hopes were dashed when the Revolution turned into the bloody Reign of Terror and Napoleon seized power to establish a dictatorship. Some writers in England then started hoping that social transformation could come, not from political action, but from the individual creative imagination. Someone who could see things in an original, spiritual way—someone like a poet—could free himself and others from imprisoning social conventions and reveal new possibilities for human life. Coleridge and others saw the poet as a moral and spiritual prophet, and the imagination as a source of morality and truth. The end of "The Eolian Harp" reigns the poet's imagination in with traditional religion, but the earlier sections emphasizing how the poet channels inspiration from nature and God are more in keeping with Romanticism as a whole.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Coleridge and the Romantics — An interesting overview of the Romantic poets, including Coleridge, from the BBC. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/romantics/)
- "The Eolian Harp" Read Aloud — A recording of "The Eolian Harp" being read aloud. (https://youtu.be/WT-aQqS4iM4)
- A Real, Live Aeolian Harp — A video recording of an actual Aeolian Harp being "played" by the wind on the Irish coast. (https://youtu.be/rmP5XaNYlkI)
- More on Romanticism — Another good overview of the Romantic period from the Norton Anthology. (https://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/romantic/welcome.htm)
- Coleridge's Biography and Poetry — A detailed biography of the poet, with links to the texts of his major poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/samuel-taylor-coleridge)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SAMUEL COLERIDGE POEMS

- Kubla Khan

HOW TO CITE

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