

Language Arts



Earth Day: Every
Day for Everybody

Below is a poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge along with some discussion questions to get you interested in doing close readings of literature. This poem was written one evening in 1797 when, according to Coleridge, his wife spilled a saucer of boiling milk on his foot, preventing him from taking a walk with his visiting friends, Charles Lamb (to whom the poem is addressed), William Wordsworth, and Wordsworth's sister, Dorothy.

This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison

S.T. Coleridge

Well, they are gone, and here must I remain,
This lime-tree bower my prison! I have lost
Beauties and feelings, such as would have been
Most sweet to my remembrance even when age
Had dimm'd mine eyes to blindness! They, meanwhile, 5
Friends, whom I never more may meet again,
On springy heath, along the hill-top edge,
Wander in gladness, and wind down, perchance,
To that still roaring dell, of which I told;
The roaring dell, o'erwooded, narrow, deep, 10
And only speckled by the mid-day sun;
Where its slim trunk the ash from rock to rock
Flings arching like a bridge;--that branchless ash,
Unsun'd and damp, whose few poor yellow leaves
Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still, 15
Fann'd by the water-fall! and there my friends
Behold the dark green file of long lank weeds,
That all at once (a most fantastic sight!)
Still nod and drip beneath the dripping edge
Of the blue clay-stone. 20

Now, my friends emerge
Beneath the wide wide Heaven--and view again
The many-steeped tract magnificent
Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea,



With some fair bark, perhaps, whose sails light up 25
The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles
Of purple shadow! Yes! they wander on
In gladness all; but thou, methinks, most glad,
My gentle-hearted Charles! for thou hast pined
And hunger'd after Nature, many a year, 30
In the great City pent, winning thy way
With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain
And strange calamity!* Ah! slowly sink
Behind the western ridge, thou glorious Sun!
Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb, 35
Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds!
Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!
And kindle, thou blue Ocean! So my friend
Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,
Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round 40
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
Less gross than bodily; and of such hues
As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes
Spirits perceive his presence.

A delight 45

Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad
As I myself were there! Nor in this bower,
This little lime-tree bower, have I not mark'd
Much that has sooth'd me. Pale beneath the blaze
Hung the transparent foliage; and I watch'd 50
Some broad and sunny leaf, and lov'd to see
The shadow of the leaf and stem above
Dappling its sunshine! And that walnut-tree
Was richly ting'd, and a deep radiance lay
Full on the ancient ivy, which usurps 55
Those fronting elms, and now, with blackest mass
Makes their dark branches gleam a lighter hue
Through the late twilight: and though now the bat
Wheels silent by, and not a swallow twitters,
Yet still the solitary humble-bee 60
Sings in the bean-flower! Henceforth I shall know
That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure;
No plot so narrow, be but Nature there,
No waste so vacant, but may well employ
Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart 65
Awake to Love and Beauty! and sometimes
'Tis well to be bereft of promis'd good,
That we may lift the soul, and contemplate
With lively joy the joys we cannot share.
My gentle-hearted Charles! when the last rook 70
Beat its straight path across the dusky air
Homewards, I blest it! deeming its black wing



(Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light)
Had cross'd the mighty Orb's dilated glory,
While thou stood'st gazing; or, when all was still,
Flew creaking o'er thy head, and had a charm
For thee, my gentle-hearted Charles, to whom
No sound is dissonant which tells of Life.

75

*Charles Lamb's sister Mary, in a moment of delusion, killed their mother and wounded their father.

Questions for further discussion

1. How would you describe the tone of the poem? Is Coleridge whining when he regrets not being able to accompany his friends on their walk? What about his sudden change at line 45? Is he actually delighted by his musings or could we consider this a cover for his jealousy?
2. What does Coleridge mean when he says that "Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure" (line 61)? Is it only the wise and pure who have the capacity to experience nature everywhere or is this simply a way for Coleridge to elevate himself and his friends above those he thinks do not appreciate nature in the "right" way?
3. Why does Coleridge insert a reference to the tragedy Charles Lamb has just experienced (line 30-33) in the middle of his descriptions of natural beauty? What sort of effect does this have? Do you think it is out of place or might it serve to highlight the psychologically healing power of nature?
4. Consider the last line. Does it relate to Coleridge's earlier allusion to Charles' tragedy? How does it describe Charles as a person? Is it the right tone to end on or might it betray the potentially bitter tone of the title ("my prison"). What is Coleridge trying to do with this poem anyway?

