

Dejection: An Ode

BY SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

Late, late yestreen I saw the new Moon,
With the old Moon in her arms;
And I fear, I fear, my Master dear!
We shall have a deadly storm.
(Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence)

I

Well! If the Bard was weather-wise, who made
The grand old ballad of Sir Patrick Spence,
This night, so tranquil now, will not go hence
Unroused by winds, that ply a busier trade
Than those which mould yon cloud in lazy flakes,
Or the dull sobbing draft, that moans and rakes
Upon the strings of this Æolian lute,
Which better far were mute.
For lo! the New-moon winter-bright!
And overspread with phantom light,
(With swimming phantom light o'erspread
But rimmed and circled by a silver thread)
I see the old Moon in her lap, foretelling
The coming-on of rain and squally blast.
And oh! that even now the gust were swelling,
And the slant night-shower driving loud and fast!
Those sounds which oft have raised me, whilst they awed,
And sent my soul abroad,
Might now perhaps their wonted impulse give,
Might startle this dull pain, and make it move and live!

II

A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,
A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,
In word, or sigh, or tear—
O Lady! in this wan and heartless mood,
To other thoughts by yonder throstle woo'd,
All this long eve, so balmy and serene,

Have I been gazing on the western sky,
 And its peculiar tint of yellow green:
And still I gaze—and with how blank an eye!
And those thin clouds above, in flakes and bars,
That give away their motion to the stars;
Those stars, that glide behind them or between,
Now sparkling, now bedimmed, but always seen:
Yon crescent Moon, as fixed as if it grew
In its own cloudless, starless lake of blue;
I see them all so excellently fair,
I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!

III

My genial spirits fail;
 And what can these avail
To lift the smothering weight from off my breast?
 It were a vain endeavour,
 Though I should gaze for ever
On that green light that lingers in the west:
I may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.

IV

O Lady! we receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does Nature live:
Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!
 And would we aught behold, of higher worth,
Than that inanimate cold world allowed
To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd,
 Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
 Enveloping the Earth—
And from the soul itself must there be sent
 A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
Of all sweet sounds the life and element!

V

O pure of heart! thou need'st not ask of me

What this strong music in the soul may be!
What, and wherein it doth exist,
This light, this glory, this fair luminous mist,
This beautiful and beauty-making power.
 Joy, virtuous Lady! Joy that ne'er was given,
Save to the pure, and in their purest hour,
Life, and Life's effluence, cloud at once and shower,
Joy, Lady! is the spirit and the power,
Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower
 A new Earth and new Heaven,
Undreamt of by the sensual and the proud—
Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud—
 We in ourselves rejoice!
And thence flows all that charms or ear or sight,
 All melodies the echoes of that voice,
All colours a suffusion from that light.

VI

There was a time when, though my path was rough,
 This joy within me dallied with distress,
And all misfortunes were but as the stuff
 Whence Fancy made me dreams of happiness:
For hope grew round me, like the twining vine,
And fruits, and foliage, not my own, seemed mine.
But now afflictions bow me down to earth:
Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth;
 But oh! each visitation
Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,
 My shaping spirit of Imagination.
For not to think of what I needs must feel,
 But to be still and patient, all I can;
And haply by abstruse research to steal
 From my own nature all the natural man—
 This was my sole resource, my only plan:
Till that which suits a part infects the whole,
And now is almost grown the habit of my soul.

VII

Hence, viper thoughts, that coil around my mind,
 Reality's dark dream!
I turn from you, and listen to the wind,
 Which long has raved unnoticed. What a scream
Of agony by torture lengthened out
That lute sent forth! Thou Wind, that rav'st without,
 Bare crag, or mountain-tairn, or blasted tree,
Or pine-grove whither woodman never clomb,
Or lonely house, long held the witches' home,
 Methinks were fitter instruments for thee,
Mad Lutanist! who in this month of showers,
Of dark-brown gardens, and of peeping flowers,
Mak'st Devils' yule, with worse than wintry song,
The blossoms, buds, and timorous leaves among.
 Thou Actor, perfect in all tragic sounds!
Thou mighty Poet, e'en to frenzy bold!
 What tell'st thou now about?
 'Tis of the rushing of an host in rout,
 With groans, of trampled men, with smarting wounds—
At once they groan with pain, and shudder with the cold!
But hush! there is a pause of deepest silence!
 And all that noise, as of a rushing crowd,
With groans, and tremulous shudderings—all is over—
 It tells another tale, with sounds less deep and loud!
 A tale of less affright,
 And tempered with delight,
As Otway's self had framed the tender lay,—
 'Tis of a little child
 Upon a lonesome wild,
Nor far from home, but she hath lost her way:
And now moans low in bitter grief and fear,
And now screams loud, and hopes to make her mother hear.

VIII

'Tis midnight, but small thoughts have I of sleep:
Full seldom may my friend such vigils keep!
Visit her, gentle Sleep! with wings of healing,
 And may this storm be but a mountain-birth,

May all the stars hang bright above her dwelling,
 Silent as though they watched the sleeping Earth!
 With light heart may she rise,
 Gay fancy, cheerful eyes,
Joy lift her spirit, joy attune her voice;
To her may all things live, from pole to pole,
Their life the eddying of her living soul!
 O simple spirit, guided from above,
Dear Lady! friend devoutest of my choice,
Thus mayest thou ever, evermore rejoice.

Coleridge's Poems Summary and Analysis of "Dejection: An Ode" (1802)

Summary

Part I

The preface to the poem is an excerpt concerning the Moon's ominous foreshadowing of a deadly storm in the "Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence." Coleridge remarks that if the Bard is accurate about the weather, then this currently tranquil night will soon turn into a storm; Coleridge sees the new moon holding the old moon in her lap, an identical scene to the moon image in the prologue. He wishes for a storm to occur, because he needs something to stir his emotions and "startle this dull pain."

Part II

Coleridge's invocation of "Lady" suggests that his pain is the result of a broken heart and signals that this poem is a conversation with this Lady (who represents Sara Hutchinson). In his grief, Coleridge says that he has been endlessly gazing at the skies and the stars. He claims that he is so overwhelmed with sadness that he can only see and can no longer feel or internalize the beauty of nature.

Part III

Coleridge doubts that anything can "lift the smothering weight from off my breast." He admits that gazing at the beauty of the skies is a vain and futile effort to ease his pain. He realizes that "outward forms" will not relieve him of his inner pain and that only he has the power to change his emotional state.

Part IV

Coleridge once again addresses his Lady, telling her that although some things are inevitable in life and controlled by nature, a person must still be an active agent in creating his or her own happiness.

Part V

Coleridge describes the characteristics of the feeling of Joy to his Lady. He extols the powers of Joy, which can create beauty as well as create a “new Earth and new Heaven.”

Part VI

Coleridge reflects on a time when joy was able to surmount his distress. During that time, he was able to take advantage of the hope (that was not his own internal hope) that surrounded him in nature. However, the distress he feels now is much more dominating. He no longer even cares that all his happiness is gone. However, he does lament how each small “visitation” of sadness robs him of his power of Imagination. Since Coleridge cannot feel any emotion other than sadness, his imagination would have at least allowed him to “steal” the happiness that surrounded him in nature and thus pretend that he possesses joy.

Part VII

Coleridge now turns his attention to the tumultuous weather. Within this raging storm, he is able to hear the less frightful sounds of a child looking for her mother.

Part VIII

Although it is now midnight, Coleridge has no intention of going to sleep. However, he wishes for “Sleep” to visit his Lady and to use its healing powers to lift the Lady’s spirits and bring her joy. Coleridge concludes the poem by wishing the Lady eternal joy.

Analysis

One of Coleridge's more personal and autobiographical poems, "Dejection" was originally a "verse letter" to Sara Hutchinson, a woman with whom Coleridge was desperately in love. Hutchinson is not mentioned directly, however, perhaps because at the time of the poem's publication Coleridge was (unhappily) married to Sara Fricker. Coleridge was inspired to write it upon hearing the opening lines of Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality." In his own poem, Coleridge echoes Wordsworth's themes of disillusionment in love and the loss of imaginative powers.

In "Dejection: An Ode," Coleridge also reinvents poetic traditions. His opening quotation is from the "Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence," yet his poem is given the title of an ode. The ode dates back to classical times as a serious poem concerning itself with a highly-regarded subject, accompanied by a strong attention to details of time and place; the English ballad tradition, on the other hand, was about intense action and emotion. Coleridge blends these two literary traditions into the triumph that is "Dejection: An Ode." He keeps the general form of the ode, modified from the classical Pindaran ode of 500 BC to the 17th century form of three-part stanzas structured in turn, counter-turn, and stand. The modification does not end there, however, as Coleridge uses irregular lines to make the poem somewhat informal in sound, harking to the ballads of days gone by. That the poem is (at least in part) dedicated to a "Lady" rather than a somber meditation upon a public occasion also divorces it from the ode tradition and places it closer to the English ballad in sensibility.

The motif of the power of nature, which runs throughout much of Coleridge’s work, is a major theme in “Dejection.” In the first stanza of “Dejection,” Coleridge hopes that the Bard in the preface is correct about the moon’s foreshadowing of the weather because Coleridge

hopes that a storm can revive him from his paralyzed emotional state. He reflects that in the past, he was able to use his imagination to translate the beauty of the surrounding nature into his own happiness, even when he suffered from sadness. However, Coleridge now acknowledges that the futility of his current wish to rely on nature to change his emotions. Although Coleridge greatly admires and desires to feel as one with nature (see Coleridge's lamentation of his upbringing in the city and his longing to be in a more natural landscape in "Frost at Midnight"), he realizes that nature and humans are separate and distinct entities.

In "New Moons, Old Ballads, and Prophetic Dialogues in Coleridge's 'Dejection: An Ode,'" R.A. Benthall states that "the dramatic arc of 'Dejection' in large part dramatizes an attempt to see clearly how verbal and phenomenal worlds relate, collide, or whether they interact at all" (613). The conclusion that Coleridge reaches in this poem is that it is the responsibility of humans, not of the surrounding nature, to create and sustain their own internal happiness. However, as the poet-creator of the work, Coleridge is able to move between these two states (nature and the inner life) with ease, suggesting that the two may not be in a cause and effect relationship, but they are indeed equally accessible to the imaginative soul.

The power of imagination/dreams, another recurring motif in Coleridge's work, is also prominent in "Dejection." The one thing that Coleridge particularly misses is his power of imagination and the ability to pretend that he is happy. Interestingly, Benthall highlights "the irony implicit in the fact that Coleridge should write a poem about the inability to create" (613). Coleridge's mention of the healing powers of sleep in the last stanza and his claim that he will not go to sleep tonight (and most likely cannot because of his depression) both suggest that dreams offer a portal to happiness. This implication could be the reason why Coleridge wishes for his beloved Lady to have a peaceful night of sleep.