

# The socially revolutionary nature of Coleridge's conversation poems

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



The Romantics sought to distinguish their work from the Enlightenment Era's prioritisation of logic and reason by rejecting and, in effect, redefining literary convention. Coleridge's conversation poems are considered hallmarks of Romanticism for their revolutionary treatment of form and confrontation of core 19th century values. As a means of celebrating the imagination and communicating with the common man, the dramatic reconsideration of form is evident in *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison* through Coleridge's employment of blank verse and decreased adherence to poetic structure. Revolutionary in their subject matter, Coleridge also contradicts prominent religious and economic values in 19th century England. In *Frost at Midnight*, the poet promotes the innocence of the child in strong opposition to Christian tenets outlining original sin. The poet's articulation of pantheistic beliefs presents nature as a refuge from industrialisation, contradicting economic paradigms within English society promoting increased mechanisation. Therefore Coleridge's conversation poems are revolutionary in their fresh approach to form and confrontation of predominant social values.

In celebrating the imagination, a poet's rejection of rigid poetic structure better facilitates spontaneity of imaginative exploration. In *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison*, Coleridge features conversational tone and informal blank verse as a background from which to distinguish the movement of his consciousness. Coined by critic Albert Gerard to describe this movement inwards and outwards of the speaker's consciousness, systolic rhythm is a defining characteristic unique to Coleridge's conversation poems. The poem opens with the speaker lamenting his isolation in the real world, " Well, they

are gone, and here I must remain". Conversational tone is established immediately at the outset through initial placement of the interjection, "well". This informality conforms to the Romantic desire to communicate with the common man. Evident in the title itself, the speaker dubs the lime-tree bower that he is confined to as "my prison". This metaphor suggests that Coleridge believes this element of nature ironically to be a source of incarceration and entrapment.

Additionally, Coleridge manipulates punctuation to reinforce the conversational nature of the poem. Semicolons and caesura are used to indicate pauses of contemplation. The poem then features inward systolic movement as the poet explores "that still roaring dell" through his imagination. Such auditory and colour imagery describing the "poor yellow leaves" and a "blue clay-stone" enhance the vividness of Coleridge's imagination. Active verbs describing "leaves (that) Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still" and foliage "fann'd by the water-fall" are indicative of the speaker's intense desire to transform his physical surroundings. Systolic movement outwards into reality concludes the poem as Coleridge readdresses the lime-tree bower. The transformation of his attitude from dejection to exultation is evident in his remark that "This...lime-tree bower... much has sooth'd me." Personification of the bower suggests that Coleridge has reformed his perception of the lime-tree bower, having fostered a newfound sense of affection. Therefore, as imagination allows the speaker to transcend corporeal limitations, informal tone and blank verse allow

Coleridge to extend the conversation poems beyond structural parameters imposed by literary convention.

Stemming from a rejection of religious and economic paradigms, Romantic literature is considered revolutionary in its bold contradiction of widely held contextual values. The notion of original sin within Christian doctrine guided social decorum in 19th century England, particularly evident in the inhumane treatment of working-class children. This social issue was exacerbated by the burgeoning growth of industrialisation and mechanisation in the European economic sector. The Romantics looked towards a reverence of the child and nature as a refuge from what was perceived as the corruption of modern society. These ideas are particularly evident in Coleridge's *Frost at Midnight*, wherein he expresses pantheistic beliefs and an admiration of his infant son in response to English religious and economic paradigms. In the poem's opening line, Coleridge muses as "the Frost performs its secret ministry, unhelped by any wind". The personification of "Frost" immediately articulates the speaker's pantheistic beliefs, wherein the formation of frost is described as a quasi-religious process. The paradox that the poem's nocturnal setting "vexes meditation with its strange/And extreme silentness" enhances the still atmosphere set up by the Frost "unhelped by any wind". The lexical choice "meditation" hints at the speaker's imminent spiritual contemplation triggered by thoughts of his son.

Systolic movement inwards facilitates the poet's comparison of his urban upbringing to his hopes for his child. In stating that he was "reared in the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim", the speaker's sarcastic tone in reference

to London expresses his distaste for urban life. Growing up in the city, he “ saw nought lovely but the sky and stars”, with sibilance emphasising his yearning for nature. In stark contrast to his own bleak childhood, Coleridge expresses hope for his son’s countryside upbringing that he “ shalt wonder like a breeze”. Simile likens the unrestricted nature of the wind to his child’s growth amongst natural surroundings. Furthermore, in using exclamation to refer to his son as “ my babe so beautiful!”, Coleridge’s tender tone expresses his admiration for the innocence innate to children instead of highlighting original sin. Stanza 3 closes with Coleridge’s description of Nature as “ the lovely shapes and sounds...of that eternal language which thy God utters”, with a linguistic metaphor employed to suggest that God is manifested throughout Nature. Frost at Midnight concludes with circular movement returning to the “ secret ministry of frost” to reinforce and summarise Coleridge’s pantheistic beliefs. Therefore the dismissal of religious and economic paradigms in favour of pantheism and a belief in childhood innocence, as evidenced by Frost at Midnight, contributes to the revolutionary nature of Coleridge’s conversation poems.

As a movement set against the background of the tumultuous political upheaval such the French and American Revolutions, it is hardly surprising that the Romantics too sought to revolutionise literature from their Enlightenment predecessors. Coleridge’s conversation poems, This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison and Frost at Midnight, feature a revolutionary abandonment of form and confrontation of contextual values as a means of celebrating imagination, nature and childhood innocence, qualities distinct to

the Romantic Period. Defined by Wordsworth in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”, Romantic poetry is indeed revolutionary in pushing audiences to consider their own emotions as catalysts for profound change.