

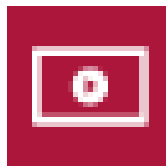


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***A HARD FROST* – Cecil Day Lewis**

A frost came in the night and stole my world
And left this changeling for it – a precocious
Image of spring, too brilliant to be true:
White lilac on the window-pane, each grass-blade
Furred like a catkin, maydrift loading the hedge. 5
The elms behind the house are elms no longer
But blossomers in crystal, stems of the mist
That hangs yet in the valley below, amorphous
As the blind tissue whence creation formed.

The sun looks out and the fields blaze with diamonds 10
Mockery spring, to lend this bridal gear
For a few hours to a raw country maid,
Then leave her all disconsolate with old fairings
Of aconite and snowdrop! No, not here
Amid this flounce and filigree of death 15
Is the real transformation scene in progress,
But deep below where frost
Worrying the stiff clods unclenches their
Grip on the seed and lets
the future breathe. 20



A Hard Frost by Cecil Day Lewis.mp4

SUMMARY

This is a poem describing the beautiful scene the poet saw one day he woke up in winter morning. Besides portraying the stunning scenery, the poet also wanted to relate the transformation in nature to human life cycle.

The most prominent imagery used was snow, for example, brilliant, white, diamonds, bridal gear. Things used to describe the hard frost was beautiful, shiny and bright. These were used to portray a beautiful scene of white snow spreading all over the forest. Usually the forest in Winter gave people a sense of cruelty, harshness and lifelessness, but after having a white frost coating on the dead trees, mountains, everything seemed to become glamorous and attractive. Also, personification was used, like the dry and dead forest coating with shiny, white frost was personified as a raw country maid wearing a borrowed bridal gear for a few hours. As a raw country maid was not that beautiful, but, after she wore the white bridal gear, she shined brightly. The poet wanted to show the contrast between the forest before and after coating with the frost by personifying it, to make the shape contrast stood out from the poem to get readers' attention. At the same time, he conveyed that this beautiful scene did not last long.

After using the imagery to show how beautiful the scene was, the poet also indicated that this scene had only lasted for a short period of time, because after the sun rose, the frost melted. Though the poet was a bit disappointed that the frost melted so quickly, but he found out that after the frost melted, it was also the time for new seeds to grow, it was shown by grip on the seed and lets our future breathe.

Throughout the poem, besides portraying how beautiful the hard frost coating on the forest was, the poet also wanted to show us that after a cold and harsh Winter (maybe it was not that harsh), it was also the time for seeds to grow and bloom. Applied to the human condition, though there were illnesses and deaths which caused unhappiness to humans, but after these hard times, which would not last long, there would be new lives coming up and replace the old ones and bring new hope and joy to human beings. In between death and life, maybe human beings could learn more and experience more than the usual times, so, passing through difficult times might indicate a new birth or hope to ourselves. So try looking forward in our lives and appreciate everything we see, we hear and experience.

It was also the most important message the poet wanted to bring out through the poem

WHAT'S THIS POEM ABOUT? WHAT'S THE UNDERLYING MESSAGE OF THIS POEM?

Imagine it is spring. One night however, an unexpected frost comes and covers everything. If you awaken before the sun melts it all and look outside you would see things similar to what the poet is describing to you here.

For instance, have you ever seen frost leave designs on a window? With a little imagination, you could see lilacs or blades of grass in its whorls and turns.

Surely everyone has seen frost on grass? As the sun rises the frost sparkles on the grass like diamonds carelessly thrown around.

Have you ever looked at a Christmas card where it shows a wooded scene with all the trees touched with snow and sparkles? The poet compares that to a bridal gown – all white and sparkly.

He is saying he went to bed expecting a spring day the next morning and was surprised to awaken to a frost in its place! He admires the beauty of the frost and how it has changed the landscape, but he knows that the frost is temporary and the spring, with its promise of summer lies just beneath the frost.

VOCABULARY

Stanza 1

<i>frost</i>	temperature of the air below 32°Fahrenheit, which causes freezing of water, frozen dew or moisture
<i>changeling</i>	something – usually a child – that has been secretly exchanged for something else/for another child
<i>precocious</i>	developed earlier than usual/prematurely developed
<i>lilac</i>	a sweet-smelling, faintly pink-purple, flowering shrub
<i>furred</i>	to form a coating of fur – protective coat of certain animals
<i>catkin</i>	the long, fluffy hanging flower of the willow or hazel
<i>elms</i>	large tree with serrated leaves, bark marked with long fissures and yielding valuable limber
<i>crystal</i>	clear, transparent variety of quartz
<i>amorphous</i>	having no specific shape or form
<i>tissue</i>	a structure formed of cells and cell products

Stanza 2

<i>Mockery</i>	an absurd imitation, a false show, a thing that deceives, to ridicule
<i>disconsolate</i>	extremely unhappy or dejected, utterly miserable, without comfort or consolation
<i>aconite</i>	flower similar to a buttercup, a poisonous plant
<i>flounce</i>	sudden, quick jerky movement of the body, impatient movement
<i>filigree</i>	fine delicate work – so delicate as to resemble lacework, ornamental and delicate
<i>Worrying</i>	to annoy, irritate, pester, to distress
<i>clods</i>	lumps of earth
<i>unclenches</i>	loosens, to open from a tightly closed state or position
<i>grip</i>	hold, clutch, grasp, power

UNDERSTANDING THE POEM

- This poem describes the appearance of a hard frost that formed overnight. Think of the patterns that frost forms on glass, and how it sparkles in the early morning sunlight.
- The speaker comments on how the world's appearance has been radically altered by the layer of frost, and in such a way that suddenly the surroundings seem almost spring-like (although the absolute opposite is the case). The

glittering and sparkling of the reflected frost creates a bright image but, as the speaker admits, this is 'too brilliant to be true' (line 3). The speaker notes that as opposed to this fake appearance of spring is beginning to make itself felt unnoticeably underground.

FORM AND STRUCTURE

- The poet arranges his content into two stanzas, of similar length. He does not use traditional rhyme schemes, and the line and stanza arrangement is set up to support the content. The first stanza describes the scene, while the second stanza comments on it and exposes the 'truth' of the first.

POETIC/LANGUAGE DEVICES

- Lewis uses an extended metaphor to compare the image of frost on a window to different features of spring. This is an intriguing choice of comparison, as he describes how the effects of frost can remind the viewer of its opposite, spring.
- The imagery suggests spring flowers and the freshness of new growth, such as 'may drift loading the hedge' (line 5) or 'blossomers in crystal' (line 7). Despite the glittering beauty, from the outset the speaker points out that this appearance is deceiving. He accuses the frost of theft as it has stolen away the expected scene and replaced it with a fake. The frost is given almost magical, mystical powers in its ability to accomplish this transformation.
- The metaphor comparing the white frost blanket to a wedding dress (line 11-13) contains quite a disapproving tone. The wedding dress is being lent to a country maid for a few hours, but she will be left terribly sad when she has to return it and resume her usual, boring appearance.
- The personification of the last two lines creates an image of a contest of strength taking place beneath the ground where the earth is surrendering its frozen hold to the power of spring. This allows the seeds the chance to sprout, grow and break out of the soil to promise future life and growth.

SOUND DEVICES

- The poem focuses on the tension between appearance and reality. Unsurprisingly, there is no overt reference to sound. The heavy coating of frost would blanket the world in sharp silence, and the brittle crispness of this is implied in the mention of 'crystal' (line 7) and 'diamonds' (line 10).
- The alliteration of 'flounce and filigree' (line 15) suggests the disapproving tone of the speaker.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS:

1. ***Explain the comparison of frost to a thief, used in the first line of the poem.***

The frost has made a sudden appearance and transformed the world in a way that makes it appear as if spring has arrived; the frost has stolen away the winter with its pretence of spring.

2. **Name the plants mentioned in the first stanza that are used to describe this 'spring' scene.**

'White lilac' (line 4), 'catkin' (line 5), 'may drift' (line 5) and the transformed 'elms' (line 6) make the scene appear like spring.

3. **Comment on the effect of the figure of speech used in lines 11 – 14.**

The figure of speech in lines 11-14 compares the white finery of the countryside to a bride adorned with her white clothing and accessories; it suggests that this 'raw country maid' (line 12) is soon to return to her previous single status, disconsolate with old fairings' (line 13), when the 'correct' weather reclaims its grip.

4. **Explore how the poet uses punctuation to convey emotion in the poem.**

The dash in line 2 explains the outrageous theft that has occurred. The exclamation mark after 'aconite and snowdrop!' (line 14) conveys the extreme disappointment and shock of the bride at losing her newfound status.

5. **Critically evaluate the poetic technique of the extended metaphor, and how it is used in this poem. How effective is it? What might be the potential risks of using this technique? Use evidence from the poem to formulate your response.**

The poet uses the extended metaphor of frost to describe the opposite season, spring. The way the frost creates patterns, coats the landscape and decorates existing plants is effective in making it seem as though spring has arrived early. This technique does rely on readers knowing which plants flourish in which season, and so runs the risk of readers not understanding the essence of the poem.

6. **Frost is a deposit of small white ice crystals formed on damp or wet surfaces when the temperature falls below freezing. What does the adjective 'Hard' in the title tell you about this frost?**

This is a severe form of frost. It suggests that things are frozen solid because the temperature has dropped very low. Perhaps this has happened after rain, when everything is very wet and more susceptible to frosting.

7. **In this poem personification is used very effectively, giving human qualities to the frost, the countryside and, briefly, the sun. Refer to lines 1 – 2 to comment on the actions of this hard frost. Begin by listing the verbs which carry the personification connected with the changeling, the abject of the actions.**

The verbs are: came, stole and left. The frost is a fairy or magical creature who has come secretly in the night and taken away the winter countryside the poet knows well, leaving in its place what looks like early spring. It has done this by transforming everything into something new and beautiful.

8. **Why is this changeling 'a precocious/Image of spring, too brilliant to be true?' Pay attention to the underlined words.**

An image is a picture of something, in this case it is a picture of spring, not the real thing. It is precocious because, like a child who is 'forward' – behaving in

a way too mature for her age, it is still winter not spring. This changeling is not natural as it is too brilliant to be true. Here 'brilliant' does not refer to intellect (which is often how the word is used for children) but to something shiny, bright and hard. All these adjectives aren't associated with spring but with the glittering whiteness of frost. All this indicates that the changeling is only pretending to be spring.

9. Why is there a colon at the end of line 3?

The colon introduces a list of what the frost has created which could be seen as flowers but actually aren't.

10. Discuss the textures of the various frost flowers in line 4 – 5.

- White lilac is on the window pane so it appears as a pattern which is flat and two dimensional;
- the grass blades are so coated with frost they have become furry, seemingly soft but bumpy to the touch,
- while the may-bush is like a softly spreading snowdrift on the hedge. There is so much of it, it 'loads' or weighs the hedge down.

11. What has happened to the 'elms behind the house'?

Their branches and leaves have turned into crystal-like flowers or blossoms (a word associated with spring). They seem like flowers which have grown out of the mist below.

12. The 'mist that hangs in the valley below' is described in a simile in lines 8 – 9. How does the simile take the description of a winter scene to another level?

The mist, having no clearly defined shape, reminds the poet of the raw material of creation. The words move this particular picture of a specific scene in nature to a wider, more universal idea. The words 'blind tissue' refer to his view of the very beginnings of life on earth before anything was formed into particular species.

13. In your own words explain what happens when the 'sun looks out' (line 10)?

When the sun appears out of an overcast sky, the scene is suddenly bathed in sunlight. It makes the hard frost glitter and gleam, shooting off light ('blazing') as a diamond does when it catches the light.

14.1. The poet addresses the frost as 'Mockery spring'. In the context of lines 11 – 14, what tone is apparent here? Give a reason for your answer.

The tone is strongly and negatively critical, accusatory, disparaging, perhaps even indignant, because the frost has turned the countryside into a bride dressed in white just for a short while, then taken it all away (by melting), leaving only the plants which flower in winter. The exclamation mark in line 14 emphasises this tone.

14.2. What does the personification of the countryside in these lines add to the way the poet feels about this frost, beautiful as it makes things look? You will have to discuss the image first in order to reach a conclusion.

The countryside is described as an unsophisticated young country girl who briefly becomes a bride and then is left, cheated of her finery. All she has now are the ordinary little plants, the meagre little gifts, which flower in winter. It makes her sad and unhappy. The poet feels that the frost is a cheat and a tease. It doesn't seem fair to get the girl's (the countryside's) hopes up then let her down like this.

15. ***A new idea begins in the middle of a line in the middle of stanza 2. Why does the poet call all that he has described as such beauty up till then 'this flounce and filigree of death' (line 15)? Does the alliteration add anything to the line? Discuss.***

All the delicate frost crystals ('flounce' [frills] and 'filigree' [delicate ornamental metal work]) making such beauty cannot survive – they melt away as it grows warmer (die) and perhaps also kill the plants that are not strong enough to resist the ice cold, unlike the aconite and snowdrop. The alliteration of 'f' and 'l' creates a sense of lightness and attitude. It is as though the frost is showing off. The word 'flounce' also has connotations of showing off highlighting the poet's disapproval of 'this behaviour'.

16. ***Comment on the word 'real' (line 16) in the context of the line and in the poem as a whole.***

This word marks the difference between what has changed above the ground and what is changing below the ground. One can see what is happening on the surface, a transformation or change that is ephemeral. What is unseen is what is real and important.

17. ***The frost is seen in a different way in lines 17 – 20. Paraphrase the lines, making clear the different image of the frost.***

Here, deep underground, the frost is at work in a positive way. It does not give up its task because it is 'worrying' the 'clods' of earth which are holding the seeds tightly. 'Worrying' tells us that it does not give up, even though the clods are clenching the seed. It just keeps at it. It is forcing the clods to let go of their tight grip in order that, when warmer days arrive (spring), they will be able to grow out of the soil into the air. The seeds are the future and the frost is giving them space to get ready for spring growth, to 'breathe' (a long, gentle sounding word).