

THE COLD WITHIN

The Cold Within: About the poem

Irish American poet, James Patrick Kinney uses his poetic **parable**, ‘The Cold Within’ to illustrate the folly of falling prey to discrimination that shortchanges our own humanity.

Written in the 1960s- during the African American Civil Rights movement (1954-1968) , Kinney was outraged by inhuman discriminatory attitudes at the time and wrote this poem to prompt some serious soul searching. How often are we wise enough to rise above our egos? How foolish are we when we give in to our prejudices? Its message is relevant even today, when we face divisive outlooks in the world that lead to hatred and violence. The poem is a reminder to overcome our personal demons and be open to the wisdom of an **egalitarian view** – an attitude where everyone is considered equal in worth. Kinney’s narrative poem tells a story to protest against bigotry and racism. The piece comprises of 8 **quatrains** — 4 lines per stanza with an approximate **abcb** end rhyme scheme. ‘*The Cold Within*’ uses simple language and structure to ensure the message is not diluted. Given the delicate subject matter, note Kinney’s skillful use of **visual imagery** to engage the reader through:

Environment: *In dark and bitter cold (Line 2) ; the dying fire (Line 5)*

Mannerisms: *The first man held his back (Line 6); He gave his coat a hitch (Line 14)*

Physical appearance: *He noticed one was black (Line 8); The third one sat in tattered clothes (Line 13)*

The delivery too is straightforward — no fancy words or meandering metaphors. We see **allegories** in the wood logs which can be seen to represent a person's abilities and resources; while the fire itself symbolizes the common good. Another language device used by Kinney is **Personification** — where you give personal characteristics to something non-human. He does it with Death — by speaking of Death having cold hands.

Their sticks held tight in death's stilled hands (Line 29)

Kinney does not preach; he wants the reader to draw inferences from the visual and symbolical cues that he gives each character to arrive at a conclusion — the futility of exclusion.

The original citation of the poem *The Cold Within* is unavailable, but a letter from Kinney's widow to an advice column tracks the interesting story behind its distribution. It seems that Kinney submitted the poem to many publications but it was rejected as being “too controversial for the time”. Still the poem with its compelling message spread quietly — shared in gatherings, over the radio and other informal channels.

Somewhere in this, the authorship of James Patrick Kinney was lost and for a few decades, the source was cited as ‘Anonymous’. Kinney’s wife and son however brought his contribution to light. In the early 2000s, the *Liguorian* (an American based Catholic magazine) became the first commercial publication to publish this poem while correctly accrediting the author.

‘The Cold Within’: Explanation by Stanza

First Stanza:

Six humans trapped by happenstance
In bleak and bitter cold.
Each one possessed a stick of wood
Or so the story’s told.

We open up to a bleak **tableau**. The poet recounts a tale he has heard, of six persons caught together in the grip of a severe winter. Each of them probably had a single stick of wood.

Note the poet’s use of the word ‘humans’; he wants to draw attention to the gathering as specific individuals, rather than as a collective group. They were ‘trapped by happenstance’ implying no escape from a situation created by chance. The adjectives ‘dark’ and ‘bitter’ describing the cold add to the ominous feeling.

Second Stanza:

Their dying fire in need of logs
The first man held his back
For of the faces round the fire
He noticed one was black.

The second stanza cuts into a key character in this story — the dying fire. The group's prospects do not look good. In the heart of winter keeping warm is critical to survival. The fire offers a chance for salvation if each person would use their respective logs to feed it. The dying fire is a silent appeal to the group to help themselves by helping each other.

The next verses reveal how the situation unfolds. We find that the first person withheld his log from the fire only because it would benefit a black person. This is racism, where there is discrimination because of a person's race. The man will not even warm himself if someone he looks down upon — simply because of skin color — will gain.

Third Stanza

The next man looking 'cross the way
Saw one not of his church
And couldn't bring himself to give
The fire his stick of birch.

We move on. The second person looked across the fire and saw someone who he knew didn't share his religious ideology. And just because of that, he can't bear to give up his log to the communal fire. This is bigotry, which speaks of intolerance to a person because they do not share the same opinions or ideas.

Fourth Stanza

The third one sat in tattered clothes.
He gave his coat a hitch.
Why should his log be put to use
To warm the idle rich?

The focus now shifts. Here is a person who seems poor. His tattered (old and torn) clothes in the cold weather hint at poverty. He perhaps felt the cold more than the others as we notice that 'he gave his coat a hitch' —adjusting it closer to his body to wry out some warmth from the inadequate clothing. But here too is a dead end. We see that he is a victim of classism — or discrimination based on social or economic class — considering those favorably placed than him to be 'idle'. He is defensive and in his eyes, the rich do not deserve his meager ration and he will not part with his stick.

Fifth Stanza

The rich man just sat back and thought
Of the wealth he had in store
And how to keep what he had earned
From the lazy shiftless poor

At cross purposes, we find the next exhibit of apathy — the rich man. Caught up hoarding his riches in his head, he is oblivious to reality. Greed blinds him as he selfishly connives to keep his wealth. He even miserly holds onto his stick, keeping it from the poor whom he perceives as aimless and lazy.

Sixth Stanza

The black man's face bespoke revenge
As the fire passed from his sight.
For all he saw in his stick of wood
Was a chance to spite the white.

Even the victim becomes an abuser here. We know the black person had experienced racism. Revenge for the atrocities he had faced from the white people was the only thing on his mind. One wonders if he had already resigned himself to dying — he saw ‘the fire pass from his sight’ — he realized that the fire was fast getting spent.

But the spark of human kindness had died in him and literally too, he chose to let the group's fire die. He would perish, but he would take the others he hated down with him as well.

Seventh stanza

The last man of this forlorn group
Did nought except for gain.
Giving only to those who gave
Was how he played the game.

For the first time in the poem 'The Cold Within', the poet foreshadows the fate of the group by finally describing the bunch as 'forlorn' or hopeless. Until then, the poet had reserved judgement, allowing the reader instead to examine each individual in turn and derive his/her own conclusion.

Unfortunately, we find that the last person also perpetuates the vicious circle of inertia. There is a word for this person's attitude — and it is not in the English language. '*Mahmilapinapatai*', is a word in the indigenous South American language of the Yaghan people. It refers to a look shared between people, where each hopes that the other will do something that all of them want, but none are willing to initiate. In giving just

to get, the last person played a losing move in the ‘game’
— a metaphor for the game of Life.

Eighth Stanza

Their logs held tight in death’s still hands
Was proof of human sin.
They didn’t die from the cold without
They died from the cold within.

We witness the grim aftermath of the group’s rigidity of spirit. Death comes and it is personified here with stilled hands. Each individual became their own agent of death — their hands frozen stiff with their refusal to act. The fact that each of them still possessed their firewood when they died suggests the twisted motives in retaining their firewood — proof enough of sin. The final lines abound with **Irony**. We realize it was not the cold weather outside that really killed the group after all, it was the cold in their hearts, the lack of warm human spirits — the cold within.