Edexcel English Literature GCSE

Poetry Collection: Relationships

A Child to his Sick Grandfather - *Joanna Baillie*

A Child to his Sick Grandfather

Joanna Baillie

Brief Summary

A child, the speaker, sits with and addresses his ailing grandfather as he dies. The speaker recalls the way things were, and wishes things could return to that time. He notes all the ways in which his grandfather's health is failing, but he won't accept that he will die. In her work, Baillie depicts a child coming to terms with the decline and eventual death of a loved one.

Synopsis

- The speaker has been told his grandfather is ill, and can now see the ailing state he's in
- He expresses his sadness for his grandfather and wishes things could return to how they were, though he is still grateful to be with his grandfather at all
- The grandchild describes the changes in his grandfather's appearance but stresses that he loves him regardless
- The grandfather's community are doing their part to help the grandfather
- The speaker cannot accept that his grandfather is dying
- He fantasises about all the time they can spend together if his grandfather does not die
- The speaker wants to be a companion to his grandfather and give him hope for the future
- The speaker believes his grandfather has fallen asleep, though it is likely that he has passed away

Context

Joanna Baillie (1762 - 1851)

Joanna Baillie was born in Lanarkshire, Scotland, in the Autumn of 1762. She was one of twins, but her twin sister died shortly after birth. Her family was very intellectual, with strong ties to the main philosophical and scientific communities of the time. Her father was a Presbyterian (a type of Protestantism prominent in Scotland) minister, and was later made Professor of Divinity at the University of Glasgow. This meant her upbringing was **heavily influenced by religion**, as well as academia. As a result, religion, moral philosophy, and science were very important in her work.

Baillie's father died suddenly when she was 16, meaning she was confronted with death at a young age. After several deaths in the family, Baillie and her mother moved down south into England. Baillie spent most of her life near London.

Baillie was a dramatist as well as a poet, writing twenty seven plays. She is credited with playing a large part in the revival of Scottish culture in the arts. Both critics in the nineteenth century and the modern day regard her as a key figure in British women's poetry. Much of her work focused on nature and youth.

Published 1790

The poem was written and published in the **Romantic era**, which was characterised by an emphasis on **emotionality** along with **natural imagery**. Poets typically employed devices such as the **sublime** (an emotional response is evoked by the beauty of nature). Romantics worshipped nature and the past and believed in the moral capabilities of the individual, while condemning urbanisation and organised religion.

Specifically, Baillie wrote her poem in the Early Romantic period. This was a time of war: the French Revolution was a violent demonstration of the tensions between the poor and the aristocracy. The values of the French Revolution inspired the early Romantics, as they wrote against a background of social and political chaos.

The Role of Children

The way children were expected to behave at the time of writing was still heavily influenced by Christianity and the Bible: 'Respect your father and mother'. Children had to **respect** those who were older than them, and **obey any orders they were given**. However, at the same time, children were viewed as the **foundation** of many families; they were the **future** of the family. As many children died in infancy, they were precious and their families treasured them.

Romantics had a significant perspective on childhood. They believed children were closer to nature than adults were, and because children weren't made to fit into working society the way adults were, they had a unique worldview. Children were **symbols of freedom and innocence**. Romantics believed that everyone was born innocent, only to be corrupted by experience and the sin of the world.

ELEGY | A poem of serious reflection, normally mourning the death of its subject (the person the speaker is talking to/about).

A Child To His Sick Grandfather

Grand-dad, they say you're old and frail,

Your stiffened legs begin to fail:

Your staff (that was my horse)

Can scarce support your bended corse,

,

While back to wall, you lean so sad,

I'm vex'd to see you, dad.

You used to smile and stroke my head,

And tell me how good children did;

But now, I wot not how it be,

You take me seldom on your knee,

Yet ne'ertheless I am right glad,

To sit beside you, dad.

How lank and thin your beard hangs down!

Scant are the white hairs on your crown:

How wan and hollow are your cheeks,

Your brow is crossed with many streaks;

But yet although his strength be fled,

The poem opens by directly addressing the grandfather, establishing it as an elegy. The poem revolves around grandfather and grandson, focusing on the relationship between them. Opening with this direct address emphasises the importance of the grandfather to the speaker.

The sibilance creates tension as the grandchild watches his grandfather. It could also represent the grandfather's hisses of pain. "Corse" means corpse, suggesting the grandfather already looks dead. It is hard for the child to ignore the inevitable, but he does anyway, showing the stubborn innocence of childish spirit.

The speaker switches between the present and past tense, showing how he is preoccupied and longing for times long gone. The past tense is used to depict happy and light scenes, contrasting with the gloom and sadness of the present.

The exclamation conveys his shock, showing how sudden or unexpected the change is. It shows that death and frailty

The speaker reports on what he has been told, showing that he hasn't accepted his grandfather's imminent death as fact yet. Alternatively, it shows a child's inability to identify death and illness.

The uncomfortable fricative sounds convey the grandfather's pain and the shock of the grandchild as he struggles to come to terms with it.

The archaic language suggests the child is disoriented. The pain of death is felt by both grandfather and grandson.

To a contemporary listener, this would be a standard term used to refer to one's grandfather.

"Wot" means "know". The disorientation and confusion of the child continues.

The use of syntactical manipulation in "right glad" creates a youthful tone, highlighting the speaker's age.

These adjectives create a semantic field of death and decay. The speaker's bluntness may come across as insensitive, but highlights his innocence and naivety. The descriptions show a

I love my own old dad.

The housewives round their potions brew,

And gossips come to ask for you;

And for your weal each neighbour cares;

And good men kneel and say their prayers,

And everybody looks so sad,

When you are ailing, dad.

You will not die and leave us then?

Rouse up and be our Dad again.

When you are quiet and laid in bed,

We'll doff our shoes and softly tread;

And when you wake we'll still be near,

To fill old dad his cheer.

When through the house you shift your stand,

I'll lead you kindly by the hand:

When dinner's set I'll with you bide,

And aye be serving by your side;

And when the weary fire burns blue,

don't fit with his worldview.

The use of this possessive adjective denotes the speaker's caring nature and represents the strength of familial ties.

"Witches" and "gossips" would have been seen as sinful and unwelcome members of society, but the speaker suggests the community's love for the grandfather goes beyond this conflict. Everyone loves him, even the 'wicked' people. The fantastical imagery of "round their potions brew" conveys urgency, as the speaker is desperate to find a cure, even if it's a magical one that goes against God.

This image is almost Biblical, as the speaker depicts his grandfather rising from the brink of death. His faith in his grandfather is limitless and unconditional.

Family is presented as a source of light, life, and joy.

The speaker focuses on a theme of companionship in this passage. No matter what, he wants to be at his grandfather's side. This could be a metaphor for

respect for the grandfather's old age, suggesting he is wise and experienced.

The repetition of "and" in a syndetic list displays how the speaker is overwhelmed. All the events are signs that something is wrong, but the speaker lists them as a way to lift the mood of his grandfather and convince him to get well again.

Bargaining is one of the first stages of grief. The speaker still wants to believe there is a way out of this. The question also shows childish naivety, as the speaker implies it is in the grandfather's control whether he dies or not. The speaker fears being powerless, and fears being without his grandfather.

The speaker makes it clear that, while he wants his grandfather to recover, he will be there for him no matter not. His family and he will do everything they can to make life easier for him.

"Aye" is an old Scottish word for "forever".

the neverending love he feels for his family. The verb "serving" has connotations of the military, showing the boy's fierce loyalty and duty. The image of "when the weary fire burns blue" could be a metaphor for the grandfather's dying spirit.

A "partlet" is a hen. The image of a hen and her chicks symbolises family and the paternal bond between grandfather and child.

Baillie's use of natural imagery is characteristic of Romantic poetry. The "greedy cunning fox" coming in the "dead" of night appears to be a fable for death, as death comes to destroy the peaceful family in the same way the fox takes away the chicks. It seems that the child cannot stop fixating on death, despite his best efforts.

"Nod" and "wink" suggest the grandfather is falling asleep, and so are euphemisms for what is really happening: he is dying. Substituting death with sleep is an act of childish purity and innocence. "Wink", too, has mischievous connotations, implying the grandfather retains his character even in death.

I'll sit and talk with you.

I have a tale both long and good,

About a partlet and her brood,

And greedy cunning fox that stole

By dead of midnight through a hole,

Which slyly to the hen-roost led,--

You love a story, dad?

And then I have a wondrous tale

Of men all clad in coats of mail,

With glittering swords,--you nod,--I think

Your heavy eyes begin to wink;--

Down on your bosom sinks your head:--

You do not hear me, Dad.

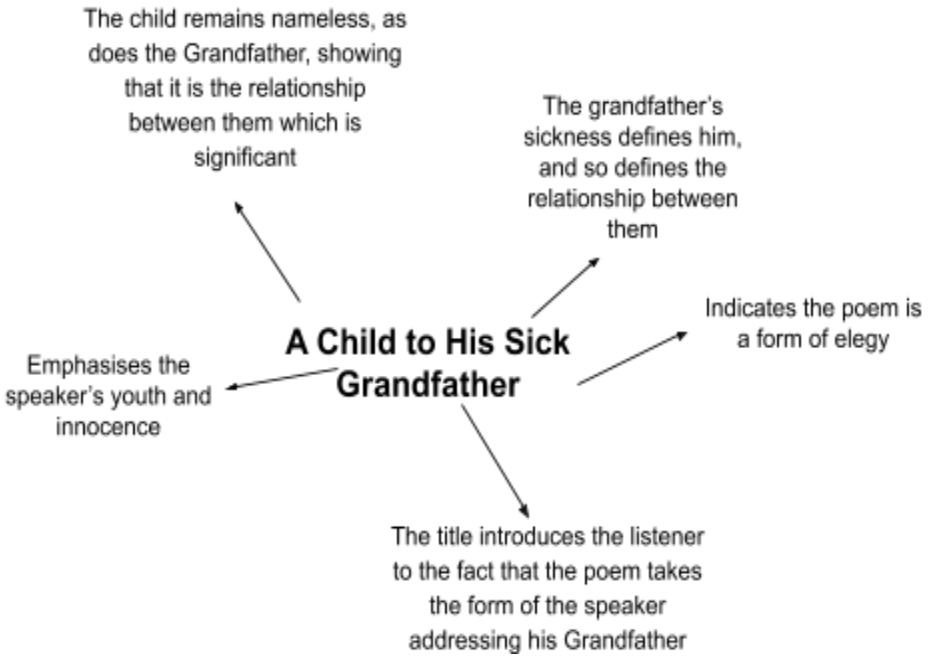
The speaker returns to childish fantasy and whimsy as a way to cope with his grief and confusion. The world of stories is familiar and as such a source of comfort. It also seems like the speaker thinks he can ward off death if only he can talk for long enough and keep his grandfather distracted.

The question suggests the speaker is starting to doubt himself. Alternatively, he is struggling to get a response from his grandfather.

The child's efforts to distract himself and help his grandfather increase. The heroic imagery and association with knights shows his interest with good vanquishing evil. He wants to rescue his grandfather from death the same way these heroes outwit peril in his tales. The adjectives "wondrous" and "glittering" show the power of his imagination, creating a supernatural feel.

The speaker recognises how tired and burdened his grandfather is from living such a long life. "Bosom", in comparison, holds connotations with nurture and comfort, suggesting the speaker has come to terms with his grandfather's death.

The title "A Child to his Sick Grandfather"



Perspective

A Child

Note that Baillie chose to have the **speaker** in her poem be a child talking to his grandfather, rather than a man talking to his ageing father. We should recognise that Baillie wanted to convey a **child's perspective of death**, and the innocence and confusion that comes with it, through her poem. You could link this to Romanticism's view of the child as a truly pure being, untainted by the hardships of the world. The poem documents a child experiencing, for the first time, the harshness of loss and death.

The poem explores **two stages or types of grief**: firstly, the child loses the grandfather he once knew, before eventually losing him altogether. From this, Baillie shows how familial relationships are shaped by youth and hope. She shows that loved ones are incredibly important to children, and a child's naivety impacts the way in which they love.

The speaker's youthfulness and confusion is made clear by the **pleading tone** adopted at times. This is created by Baillie's use of the **interrogatives** ***"You will not die and leave us then?"*** and ***"You love a story, Dad?"***. This pleading emphasises the hurt felt by the speaker as he adapts to the grieving process. The **use of questions** introduces uncertainty. We never hear the grandfather's replies or get any indication of what his replies are, if he replies at all. This puts us, the reader, in the same disoriented position as the boy. Furthermore, it highlights how grief is an isolating process. The speaker is already alone, abandoned with his worries,

before the grandfather's death. Baillie's choice to have a sole speaker, as in a dramatic monologue, suggests she intends to demonstrate how grief is an experience by an individual. Though the child sees the grief and worry of others, all he truly feels is his own loss.

Tense

The poem is predominantly in the **present tense**, so that we experience grief and death alongside the speaker. The present tense gives the reader **direct insight** into his confusion and growth as he experiences death for the first time. It can also be argued that the present tense makes the moment captured in the poem feel **eternal or never ending**, representing how grief is a never ending, universal experience. Baillie could even be suggesting that every death of a loved one is felt the same as the first: inside, we are all the child who mourns for the first time.

Baillie intersperses **past tense** in the poem to convey the speaker's memories, showing his longing for an earlier, easier time. This documents the speaker's journey to gradually letting go of the past. Using past tense also allows Baillie to give the reader a clearer impression of the relationship between the grandfather and the child. She fleshes the characters out and gives them narratives that go beyond the scope of the poem, making them feel more like real people that the reader can empathise and relate to. By including the grandfather's past, his death is more painful, as we as readers understand exactly what has been lost.

https://pixabay.com/photos/grandpa-beach-grandson-play-2814816/

First Person Address

The speaker's use of **direct address** towards his grandfather creates an **intimate relationship**. As readers, we feel like we are intruding on a private moment. This impression is perpetuated by the fact that the only other people mentioned by the speaker are the ***"housewives"***, ***"gossips"***, a ***"neighbour"*** and ***"good men"***, who are only referenced very briefly in one stanza. These are vague descriptions that offer the absolute minimum insight into the outside world. This shows the overwhelming love the speaker feels for his grandfather.

Dramatic Monologue

'A Child to His Sick Grandfather', it can be argued, is a form of **dramatic monologue.** It features only one speaker, who talks about one key aspect or moment in their life. Everything we learn about the child and his relationship with his grandfather is taken from his speech, which is an important aspect of dramatic monologues. By using this form, Baillie shows how grief can bring things out in people that otherwise we wouldn't see.

The Opening

"Grand-dad, they say you're old and frail,
Your stocked legs begin to fail:
Your knobbed stick (that was my horse)
Can scarce support your bended corse,
While back to wall, you lean so sad,
I'm vexed to see you, dad."

The poem opens by **directly addressing the grandfather** which indicates who the poem is about. This emphasises how important he is to the speaker. Baillie therefore immediately sets up a **close bond** between the speaker and his subject (the grandfather, the person the poem is about).

However, for a poem that barely mentions the outside world, it is interesting that one of the only mentions of others occurs in the first line. In fact, the only time ***"they"*** is used at all is in this opening line. This shows how, at the start, the speaker wants to distance himself from his grandfather's death. He is not ready to accept that he is dying, and thus presents his death as a rumour or lie. By saying it is something he has been told by 'them', the speaker is asking the grandfather to dismiss the rumours.

https://www.wallpaperflare.com/search?wallpaper=grandpa&sort=relevance

"Begin to fail" implies that the grandfather is only just starting to feel his old age. As he dies at the end of the poem, this could suggest that at this point, the child is still in denial about the severity of his illness. Alternatively, it could imply that, despite the use of present tense, a long time passes throughout the duration of the poem.

The **imagery** "***Your knobbed stick (that was my horse) / Can scarce support your bended corse"*** shows the cruel contrast between youth and old age, life and death. The jarring **dichotomy** (difference) is emphasised by rhyming ***"horse"*** directly with ***"corse"***. The ***"horse"*** the speaker refers to is a hobby horse, a **symbol for youth and imagination**, while ***"corse"*** is a **symbol of death**. The grandfather used to let his grandson play with his walking cane, but now he needs it to cope with the pain. Baillie implies that death and suffering put a stop to childish imagination and playfulness.

"You lean so sad, / I'm vexed to see you, dad," shows that the grandfather's pain and sadness is mirrored in the speaker. Baillie suggests that when a family member suffers, the pain is felt by the whole family.

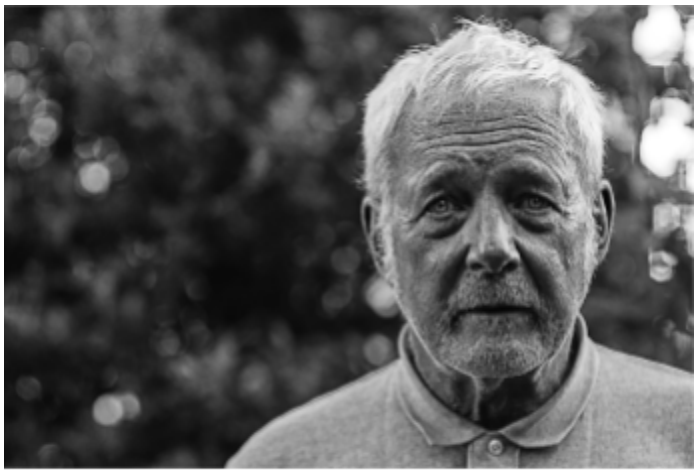
The Ending

" – you nod, I think?
Your fixed eyes begin to wink;
Down on your bosom sinks your head –
You do not hear me, dad."

The ending of the poem is marked with the same childish uncertainty and innocence as the opening, but there are signs of character development and maturity. The **verbs** ***"nod"*** and ***"wink"*** imply the grandfather is falling asleep, though as an audience we know it is more likely that he has passed away. Therefore, describing him as asleep can be read as a **form of naive euphemism**, as the speaker still cannot admit to himself the reality of the situation.

Furthermore, it shows a child's attempt to understand something that, fundamentally, they cannot understand: a child's purity and warmth, represented in the image of 'sleep', doesn't fit with the darkness of death. Either the speaker doesn't realise his grandfather is dead, or he is unwilling to put it into words. Both situations imply a **form of separation or detachment** between the grandfather and child, because they are no longer on the same page.

Alternatively, the child's interpretation of death as a type of sleep may be a welcome comfort to many. Baillie suggests that childish naivety allows for reassurance, as **sleep is a symbol for peace** and renewal. The **noun** ***"bosom"*** connotes warmth and love, supporting this interpretation.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Through her speaker, Baillie shows that death, though painful, is needed to bring relief to those who have lived. The grandfather is no longer burdened with his ***"bended corse"***. The **metaphor of sleep** portrays death as a **natural conclusion to life**, as sleep is to the wakeful day. In this case, the speaker has **undergone a transformation**. The harshness of experience has matured him, and now he is able to recognise how death is unavoidable, and accept his grief for what it is. Baillie suggests that our familial relationships help to strengthen us and develop us as people.

The ending of the poem is bittersweet. The em dash ***"–"*** only features in the final two stanzas of the poem. It is used to **slow the pace** and cause fragmentation, marking the grandfather's final moments as he draws further away from his grandson. Similarly, the final line, ***"You do not hear me, dad,"*** is **plaintive** (sad or mournful). You could interpret it as the upset accusation of a child who wants attention, but of course the consequences are much more extreme and long lasting. Using the **verb** ***"hear"*** indicates how this scene represents the ultimate breakdown of communication between the characters. If the grandfather can no longer ***"hear"***, the purpose of the poem is made pointless. The boy was only speaking to his grandfather, and now his audience has gone.

Baillie shows that, though love goes beyond death, the passing of a loved one creates a barrier that cannot be broken. The speaker is left with his memories. Furthermore, the reader's insight into their relationship is based entirely on what the boy says to his grandfather. When he stops being able to ***"hear"***, the boy stops talking, so we lose our access to their relationship. The poem is forced to a close. Therefore, Baillie's choice of a **dramatic monologue form** makes the grandfather's death more tragic and emphasises the separation and feeling of purposelessness that death brings.

Structure

Overall Structure

Baillie uses a **uniform structure**. There are **eight stanzas**, each with **six lines** and an **AABBCC rhyme scheme**. Each stanza has a distinct topic, showing how the child's feelings are changing over time. In addition, each line has roughly the same number of syllables, except for the last line of each stanza, which is indented and shorter. These final lines are used to illustrate the **key characteristics and feelings** of the speaker. All but one feature the word ***"dad"***, giving the poem a **cyclic feel** as the speaker always returns to his main subject and the love he feels for his grandfather. Though the rest of the poem shows some character progression, his love for his grandfather is unwavering.

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The uniform structure used lends a **sense of composure** and coldness to the speaker. This is unusual for a poem about death, particularly in the Romantic era, when emotions were praised and logic discarded. In this case, the poem's unconventional control could be a way to emphasise how foreign the feeling of loss is. The speaker is seeking order, familiarity, and sense in this time of chaos. Alternatively, the rigid structure could be seen to **mimic the sombre tone of a funeral tone** or piece of church liturgy (prayer).

Another impact of such a strict structure is that any deviations from it are easily noticeable, and disrupt the rhythm of the poem in the same way death disrupts life. Baillie works in small changes in pace and rhyme, and in the context of this uniform structure, the child's disorientation and confusion are emphasised. One instance of deviation is in the final line. Though most of the poem uses **perfect rhyme**, ***"head"*** and ***"dad"*** only share a **half-rhyme**. Thus, the poem ends without true resolution. The grandfather's death doesn't fit properly into the boy's life.

Caesura

Baillie uses **caesura** to disrupt the rhythm of the poem, mimicking the way the child is being forced into new, unsettling experiences. The most notable example is in the final stanza: ***"With glittering swords – you nod, I think?"***. The caesura brings the reader into the room and gives a sense of real time: we are there with the speaker as he realises his grandfather is drifting away. The **placement of the caesura is symbolic**, too: the speaker's tale of heroism and fantasy is interrupted by the grim reality of death.

CAESURA | A pause in the middle of a line of poetry, often from the use of a comma or full stop.

Exclamations and Interrogations

The frequent use of **exclamation marks and question marks** gives the speaker a clear personality and emphasises his youth. The exclamations show how shocking and sudden the speaker's observations are for him. Baillie demonstrates how change and senility (old age) make the grandson feel awkward and clumsy. He is scared of an uncertain future.

Language

Frailty

The image the reader gets of the grandfather is one of **fragility and decay**. Though the speaker makes it clear these are sudden, recent changes, we aren't given such a vivid description of how he used to look. **Verbs and actions** are used to describe how the grandfather used to be, such as ***"You used to smile and stroke my head"***, while mainly **adjectives** are used to describe how he is in the present, such as ***"How wan and hollow are your cheeks!"***.

Therefore, the grandfather the speaker used to know is defined by **action and life**, while the grandfather now is defined by **inactivity and decline**.

Baillie's use of language **highlights the grandfather's fragility**. She uses **fricatives** in her description of him as ***"frail"*** as well as his legs as ***"stiffened"*** and about to ***"fail"***. The **verbs** ***"stiffen"*** and ***"fail"*** convey change and deterioration, and suggest it is the grandfather's body that is failing him, rather than his soul. Baillie suggests the human body isn't made to last: it ***"stiffen[s]"*** and ***"fail[s]"*** like a machine. His appearance is ***"lank"*** and ***"hollow"***, creating a **semantic field of emptiness**. The grandfather is drained of substance. The line ***"Your brow is crossed with many streaks"*** emphasises how wise and experienced the old man is, but implies it is this experience that has worn away and weakened him.

Nature and the Outside World

All outsiders and outside elements are presented as **forces of evil or chaos**, such as the ***"gossips"*** and women brewing ***"potions"***. This draws attention to the grandfather and child, and portrays the relationship between them as a precious, pure bond that shields them from the world around them.

In the **penultimate stanza**, the speaker tries to entertain his grandfather with **fantastical stories**. The first tale revolves around nature: this attention to the natural world is typical of Romantic poetry. The ***"partlet and her brood"*** is a symbol of protection and familial instinct.

On the other hand, the fox is **personified** as ***"greedy"*** and ***"cunning"***, stealing ***"slyly"*** at the ***"dead of midnight"***. These **adjectives** connote thievery and sin. The fox threatens the hen and her chicks in the same way death threatens the child and his grandfather. The tale is an **allegory** for the death of a loved one. Baillie links the speaker's experience to the experience of a hen to show how our treatment of death is, and will always be, very animalistic and natural. Despite the way mankind has distinguished itself from the animal world, familial instinct and fear of death are things animals and humans have in common. Because the speaker's bond with his grandfather is linked to the natural world, Baillie demonstrates how **familial love is eternal and universal**, as old as the earth itself.

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Companionship and Heroism

The overwhelming message in the poem is that **love continues after death**. Though the child sees how his grandfather is declining, he is determined to ***"sit beside"*** him. This is a poignant image of loyalty and companionship. Baillie implies that what we need most, when facing death,

is the company of our family. Even though he ***"wot not how it be"***, the speaker knows he is **grateful** for all the time he can spend with his grandfather. This suggests that his love is stronger than his confusion. The speaker reiterates, ***"for all his strength be fled, / I love my own old dad,"*** showing that love is not tied to physical features such as ***"strength"***.

The tales the speaker promises reveal how concerned he is with being a hero and protecting his grandfather from old age. The story of the hen presents the fox as a villain that must be defeated. The final stanza provides the speaker and reader with an **image of strength and hope**, encompassed by ***"men all clad in coats of mail"***, before the grandfather's death. Knights in folklore are viewed as examples of **perfect bravery and loyalty**, characters that people should aim to copy. Baillie suggests the speaker wants to be a knight for his grandfather. The contrast between these **symbols of heroism** and the **reality of his grandfather's ailments** demonstrate how he wants to be there for his loved one in his time of need. He wants badly to make things better, and struggles to come to terms with the fact there is nothing he can do. Eventually, Baillie presents him accepting that he can offer his company and love, and that these offerings are enough.