Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight”

The Frost performs its secret ministry,
Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry
Came loud--and hark, again ! loud as before.
The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
Have left me to that solitude, which suits
Abstruser musings : save that at my side
My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.

* The opening—the frost’s secret ministry—sets up the spiritual tone linked with nature that permeates this poem.

* The speaker (Coleridge) is alone with his thoughts, thinking about the frost while his infant Hartley sleeps by his side.
In a sense, this is a poem about a piece of soot, highlighting that even the most common, most insignificant of objects can serve as poetic inspiration.

the thin blue flame
Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;
Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,       15
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
Making it a companionable form,
Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
By its own moods interprets, every where
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
And makes a toy of Thought.

The fluttering piece of film on the grate protecting a low-burning fire is just a piece of soot, but since it's the only thing that shows any motion in this tranquil scene, the speaker relates to it—he personifies it.
But O! how oft,
How oft, at school, with most believing mind,
Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars,
To watch that fluttering stranger! and as oft
With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt
Of my sweet birth-place, and the old church-tower,
Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang
From morn to evening, all the hot Fair-day,
So sweetly, that they stirred and haunted me
With a wild pleasure, falling on mine ear
Most like articulate sounds of things to come!
So gazed I, till the soothing things, I dreamt,
Lulled me to sleep, and sleep prolonged my dreams!
And so I brooded all the following morn,
Awed by the stern preceptor's face, mine eye
Fixed with mock study on my swimming book:
Save if the door half opened, and I snatched
A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up,
For still I hoped to see the stranger's face,
Townsman, or aunt, or sister more beloved,
My play-mate when we both were clothed alike!

Coleridge’s note:
In all parts of the kingdom these films are called strangers and supposed to portend [predict] the arrival of some absent friend.

The soot reminds Coleridge of how he would daydream as a kid at school and how he used to muse upon the same thing—he’d think of the soot and the arrival of a friend.

Wordsworth wrote “my heart leaps up when I behold a rainbow in the sky.” Both celebrate nature, not the prision-like school room.
Dear Babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,
Whose gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm,
Fill up the intersperséd vacancies
And momentary pauses of the thought!
My babe so beautiful! it thrills my heart
With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,
And think that thou shalt learn far other lore,
And in far other scenes! For I was reared
In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,
And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.
But thou, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself.

Coleridge rouses from his recollection of his pathetic past and now looks ahead—thinking about how his son’s life will be different.

Coleridge spent much of his youth in London, which he suggests was like living in a dark cell (but he was born in a small rural town—see line 29).

The idea that Hartley, in contrast, will get to “wander like a breeze” is a feeling echoed in Wordsworth’s famous line “I wandered lonely as a cloud / That floats on high…”
Great universal Teacher! he shall mould
Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.
Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple-tree, while the nigh thatch
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.

Hartley will be molded by living in a more natural setting, and thus he will grow up loving nature.

“The child is father of the man.”

(note: even Coleridge does the same thing as an adult he did as a child: daydream about nature and companionship.)

Hartley’s environment will shape him and his spirit—so he will always ask for nature, and it will always sustain him. He’ll always have a friend in nature...

All seasons shall be sweet to him.

Coleridge makes clear his ideas about child development: