Preparing to Read

The Cremation of Sam McGee / The Dying Cowboy

Literary Focus

Ballads and Hyperbole A **ballad** is a song or a songlike poem that tells a story, usually about lost love, betrayal, or death. Ballads usually use simple language and much repetition. Most ballads have **refrains,** repeated words, phrases, lines, or group of lines. Some ballads, such as "The Cremation of Sam McGee" use **hyperbole,** or exaggeration, to make a point.

Literary Perspectives Apply the literary perspective described on page 723 as you read "The Dying Cowboy."

Reading Focus

Using Form to Find Meaning Many poems are in the form of **stanzas**—groups of consecutive lines that form a single unit. Determining the main idea or the events described in each stanza can help you understand the ballads you will read.

Into Action Use a chart to record the main idea of each stanza of the following poems. Add a row for each stanza.

Poem: The Cremation of Sam McGee

Stanza Number	Main Idea or Events
1	The speaker tells us that the poem will be about the night he cremated Sam McGee.
2	

Writing Focus

Think as a Reader/Writer

Find It in Your Reading As you read, note in your *Reader/Writer Notebook* the poets' use of **imagery,** language that appeals to the senses. How does the imagery enliven the stories?

Reader/Writer Notebook

Use your **RWN** to complete the activities for these selections.

Vocabulary

The Cremation of Sam McGee

tax (taks) *v.:* here, burden; strain. *Sam's request will tax his friend, emotionally and physically.*

loathed (lohthd) *v.:* hated. *Sam loathed the cold.*

spent (spehnt) *adj.:* worn-out. *Sam McGee was spent from trying to stay warm.*

The Dying Cowboy

comrade (KAHM rad) *n.:* companion; friend; associate. *The cowboy and Sam McGee both ask favors of their comrades.*

Language Coach

Multiple-Meaning Words In day-to-day life, you might say you **spent** money to pay a **tax** you owed. Both *spent* and *tax,* however, have very different meanings as used in "The Cremation of Sam McGee." What meanings do those words have in the poem? Look at the definitions above to find out.

Learn It Online

Use Word Watch to investigate these words at:

go.hrw.com L8-715 Go

SKILLS FOCUS pp. 715–724

Literary Skills
- Understand and analyze the characteristics of ballads.
- Understand and analyze hyperbole.
- Understand refrain.

Reading Skills
- Use a poem's form to find its meaning.

Writing Skills
- Identify and analyze literary elements.

Preteach

Introducing Vocabulary

- Review the Vocabulary words, definitions, and sentences with students.
- Explain that in "The Cremation of Sam McGee," the title character hates (**loathes**) the cold and burdens (**taxes**) his friend with a request that eventually leaves his friend worn-out (**spent**). In "The Dying Cowboy," the speaker tells of the death of a friend (**comrade**).

Language Coach

Use **Language Coach** to help English-language learners acquire word knowledge. ***Answer:*** burden, worn-out

Literary Focus

As you read and discuss the selections with students, have them identify refrains and look for examples of hyperbole.

Reading Focus

Give students a copy of the Reading Focus graphic organizer before they read (**Collection 7 Resources**). Tell them to use their responses to answer the questions on the Applying Your Skills page.

Writing Focus

Have students record examples of imagery in their **Reader/Writer Notebooks**. Students can use their notes to complete the Writing Focus activity.

Learn It Online

Send students to **Word Watch** for audio pronunciations, synonyms and antonyms, and brief histories of word origins.Preview at **go.hrw.com.**

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Selection Introduction

More About the Writer

Robert Service first came to the Yukon gold rush area in 1904 when the bank he worked for sent him there. His poems were immediate successes and became among the most popular poems of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Think About the Writer

Have students combine their own knowledge and experiences with details about Service's background to draw conclusions about Service. Ask volunteers to share their conclusions.

For Independent Reading

- Students who enjoyed these poems might enjoy *The Collected Poems of Robert Service*. This book includes the well-known poem "The Shooting of Dan McGrew."
- For students interested in reading about life in Alaska, recommend *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London. This story is about Buck, a dog stolen from his comfortable home and forced to work as an Alaskan sled dog.

MEET THE WRITER

Robert W. Service

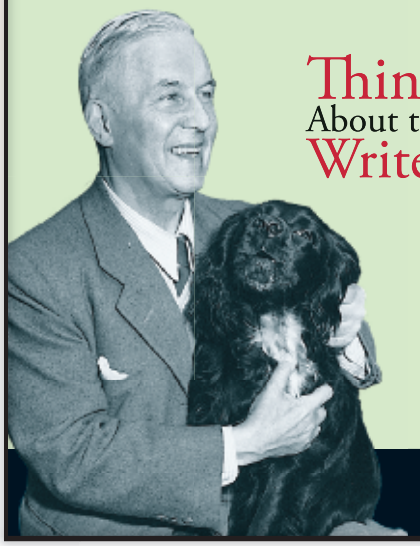
(1874–1958)

"A Story Jack London Never Got"

Born in Lancashire, England, Robert W. Service immigrated to Canada in his early twenties. After traveling along the Canadian Pacific coast, he took a job with a bank and was transferred to the Yukon Territory. He wrote his most popular poems there, including "The Cremation of Sam McGee." The poem was inspired by a story Service heard at a party where he was feeling awkward and out of place:

> "I was staring gloomily at a fat fellow across the table. . . . Suddenly he said, 'I'll tell you a story Jack London never got.' Then he spun a yarn of a man who cremated his pal. It had a surprise climax which occasioned much laughter. I did not join, for I had a feeling that here was a decisive moment of destiny. I still remember how a great excitement usurped me. Here was a perfect ballad subject. The fat man who ignored me went his way to bankruptcy, but he had pointed me the road to fortune."

Service left the party and spent the next six hours wandering through the frozen woods, verses in his head. When he went to bed, the poem was complete; he didn't even put it on paper until the next day.



Think About the Writer What do the details of Service's background suggest about him?

Build Background

The Cremation of Sam McGee

In the 1890s, thousands of fortune hunters rushed north, braving bitter cold and deep snow. Gold had been found in northwestern Canada, in the Klondike region of the Yukon Territory. The town of Dawson, at the center of the region, became the Yukon's capital. (Cremation is the burning of a body to ashes.)

The Dying Cowboy

Ballads like this one were sung by cowboys in the American West. This ballad is based on an eighteenth-century Irish tune, and it gave rise to the famous blues song "St. James Infirmary." The ballad also provided the title and the haunting theme music for *Bang the Drum Slowly,* a movie about the death of a young baseball player.

Preview the Selections

The two ballads you are about to read are both about a man dying before his time who asks a friend to honor his last request. The main characters of the poems are **Sam McGee** in "The Cremation of Sam McGee" and simply **a handsome young cowboy** in "The Dying Cowboy."

Selection Readability	
Easily Accessible Accessible Challenging	These poems have accessible themes and vocabulary.
Lexile	**N/A**

Selection Summaries

"The Cremation of Sam McGee" tells the story of a would-be gold miner who, freezing to death, makes his partner promise to cremate his body. "The Dying Cowboy" tells of a dying cowboy who gives his friends instructions regarding his funeral and burial.

Read with a Purpose Read the poems to learn what last requests the speakers have been asked to honor.

The Cremation of Sam McGee

by **Robert W. Service**

There are strange things done in the midnight sun
By the men who moil° for gold;
The Arctic trails have their secret tales
That would make your blood run cold;
The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,
But the queerest they ever did see
Was that night on the marge° of Lake Lebarge
I cremated Sam McGee. Ⓐ

Now Sam McGee was from Tennessee, where the cotton blooms and blows.
Why he left his home in the South to roam 'round the Pole, God only knows.
He was always cold, but the land of gold seemed to hold him like a spell;
Though he'd often say in his homely way that he'd "sooner live in hell." Ⓑ

On a Christmas Day we were mushing our way over the Dawson trail.
Talk of your cold! through the parka's fold it stabbed like a driven nail.

2. **moil:** labor.

7. **marge:** edge.

Ⓐ **Read and Discuss** What has the poet told us so far?

Ⓑ **Reading Focus** **Using Form to Find Meaning** What do we learn about McGee in this stanza?

Differentiating Instruction

English-Language Learners

To make sure students understand the poem, explain the meaning of the following phrases:

- "Midnight sun": In summer in the Arctic, the sun does not set.
- "Northern lights": colored lights that flash in the Arctic sky
- "'round the Pole": around the North Pole
- "in his homely way": in his outspoken way
- "mushing our way": traveling through snow with sled dogs. The command for the sled dogs to move is "Mush!"

Advanced Learners

Acceleration Tell students to imagine that the story of the cremation of Sam McGee takes place in the opposite kind of environment; for example, a person in the jungle or desert is suffering from the intense heat and asks that his body be frozen after his death. Have them rewrite "The Cremation of Sam McGee" using this or another premise.

Direct Teach

Think About/Talk About

Read With a Purpose Have students read the Read With a Purpose statement. Ask students to predict what the "last requests" of a freezing gold miner and a gunfighter cowboy might be. List students' ideas on the board to review after they finish reading the poems.

Comprehension

Ⓐ Read and Discuss

Possible response: *The poet has set up a tale about a strange event connected with a cremation.*

Ⓑ Reading Focus

Possible response: *We learn that McGee is from a warm climate, which causes him to suffer from the cold more than his companions.*

? Extend the Discussion

Drawing Conclusions What can you conclude about Sam McGee's motivations based on the second stanza?
Possible response: *McGee's motivation to find gold is stronger than his intense hatred of the cold.*

Guided Practice

Model and Apply

- Provide students with copies of the Reading Focus graphic organizer. (**Collection 7 Resources**), or have them use a piece of their own paper.
- Remind students that narrative poems tell a story and are usually separated into **stanzas.** Tell students that determining the events that take place in each stanza will help them understand the narrative as a whole.
- Have students read stanza 6 (lines 25–28). Then, model adding the events below to the chart.

Poem: The Creation of Sam McGee

Stanza Number	Main Idea or Events
6	The speaker promises to cremate Sam McGee when he dies. The next day, McGee dies.

- **Read-Talk-Write** Have students read the next stanza (lines 29–32) and then discuss it in pairs. Tell students to record the main idea of the stanza in their charts.

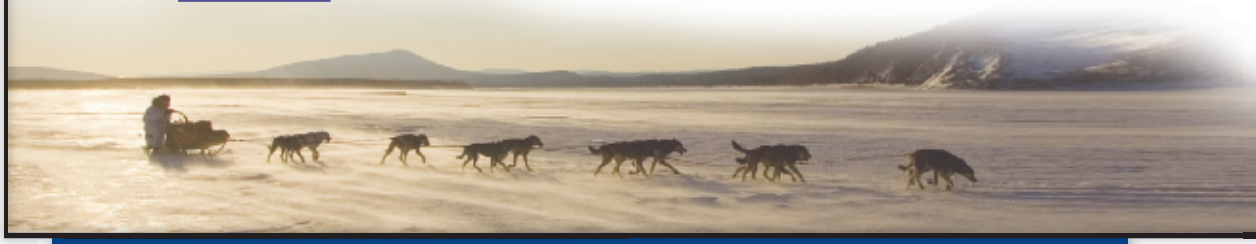
If our eyes we'd close, then the lashes froze till sometimes
15 we couldn't see;
It wasn't much fun, but the only one to whimper was
Sam McGee.

And that very night, as we lay packed tight in our robes
beneath the snow,
And the dogs were fed, and the stars o'erhead were
dancing heel and toe,
He turned to me, and "Cap," says he, "I'll cash in this
trip, I guess;
And if I do, I'm asking that you won't refuse my last
20 request."

Well, he seemed so low that I couldn't say no; then he
says with a sort of moan:
"It's the cursèd cold, and it's got right hold till I'm chilled
clean through to the bone.
Yet 'tain't being dead—it's my awful dread of the icy
grave that pains;
So I want you to swear that, foul or fair, you'll cremate
my last remains." C

A pal's last need is a thing to heed, so I swore I would
25 not fail;
And we started on at the streak of dawn; but God! he
looked ghastly pale.
He crouched on the sleigh, and he raved all day of his
home in Tennessee;
And before nightfall a corpse was all that was left of Sam
McGee.

C **Read and Discuss** Why is cremation so important to Sam McGee?



Cross-Curricular Connection

SOCIAL STUDIES: History

Share the following information with students:

- Gold was discovered in Alaska in the 1870s.
- The first finding was in Sitka in 1871.
- In 1880, two prospectors made a huge find in a creek now called Gold Creek.
- Word that gold was in Alaska caused thousands of hopeful prospectors to pour into the state in the 1890s.
- In spite of the harsh climate, miners persisted in their efforts to find "the big strike."

Activity Have students research the Alaskan gold rush and write narrative poems or short stories about this historic event. Ask volunteers to share their work with the class.



There wasn't a breath in that land of death, and
I hurried, horror-driven,
With a corpse half hid that I couldn't get rid, because of
a promise given;
It was lashed to the sleigh, and it seemed to say: "You
may tax your brawn and brains,
But you promised true, and it's up to you to cremate
those last remains." D

Now a promise made is a debt unpaid, and the trail has
its own stern code.
In the days to come, though my lips were dumb, in my
heart how I cursed that load.
In the long, long night, by the lone firelight, while the
huskies, round in a ring,
Howled out their woes to the homeless snows—O God!
how I loathed the thing.

D **Literary Focus** **Hyperbole** How do the exaggerations in this stanza convey the way the speaker feels about the corpse?

Vocabulary **tax** (taks) *v.*: here, burden; strain.
loathed (lohthd) *v.*: hated.

Think About/Talk About

Comprehension

C Read and Discuss

Possible response: *Cremation is important to Sam McGee because he fears the cold of the grave and wishes instead for the warmth of fire.*

Analysis

D Literary Focus

Possible responses: *The exaggerations convey that the speaker feels that the corpse represents a burden—a promise unfulfilled. The exaggerations also show that the speaker is frightened of the corpse.*

Extend the Discussion

Interpreting Why does the speaker tie Sam McGee's body to his sled instead of cremating it immediately after Sam passes away? ***Possible response:*** *The speaker cannot cremate McGee's body immediately because he needs to find a large amount of wood to do so. Because he is in the Arctic, there are few trees available.*

Differentiating Instruction

Visual/Spatial Learners

Students may struggle to write the main idea of each stanza of the poem. Instead, have students use a computer to list the major events of the poem or convey the main ideas through a series of numbered drawings.

Naturalist Learners

Tell students to think about a time when they or someone they know had to face a challenge set by nature, such as seeking shelter during a thunderstorm or making a trip during a blizzard. Have each student create a Venn diagram comparing this experience with the challenge the speaker of "The Cremation of Sam McGee" faces in the Arctic environment.

Guided Practice

Model and Apply

- Remind students that a **ballad** tells a story using simple language and repetition.
- Have students read lines 37–40. Point out examples of simple language in the stanza, such as "the grub was getting low" and "the trail was bad." Tell students that this type of everyday language is common in ballads.
- Then, point out the repetition in line 37 ("heavy and heavier"). Explain that this repetition emphasizes the weight of the speaker's burden.
- **Turn-and-Talk** Have students read the following stanza (lines 41–44). Then, have them discuss in pairs how the stanza exemplifies characteristics of a ballad.

Think as a Reader/Writer

Find It in Your Reading Point out the following examples of imagery in lines 50–51, and tell students what senses they appeal to: "the heavens scowled" (sight); "the huskies howled" (hearing); "the hot sweat rolled down my cheeks" (touch).

Use It in Your Writing Have students write two sentences using imagery to describe an experience involving extreme weather. Suggest that students appeal to a different sense in each sentence.

And every day that quiet clay seemed to heavy and heavier grow;
And on I went, though the dogs were spent and the grub was getting low;
The trail was bad, and I felt half mad, but I swore I would not give in;
And I'd often sing to the hateful thing, and it hearkened° with a grin.

Till I came to the marge of Lake Lebarge, and a derelict° there lay;
It was jammed in the ice, but I saw in a trice it was called the "Alice May."
And I looked at it, and I thought a bit, and I looked at my frozen chum;
Then "Here," said I, with a sudden cry, "is my cre-ma-tor-ium." E

Some planks I tore from the cabin floor, and I lit the boiler fire;
Some coal I found that was lying around, and I heaped the fuel higher;
The flames just soared, and the furnace roared—such a blaze you seldom see;
And I burrowed a hole in the glowing coal, and I stuffed in Sam McGee.

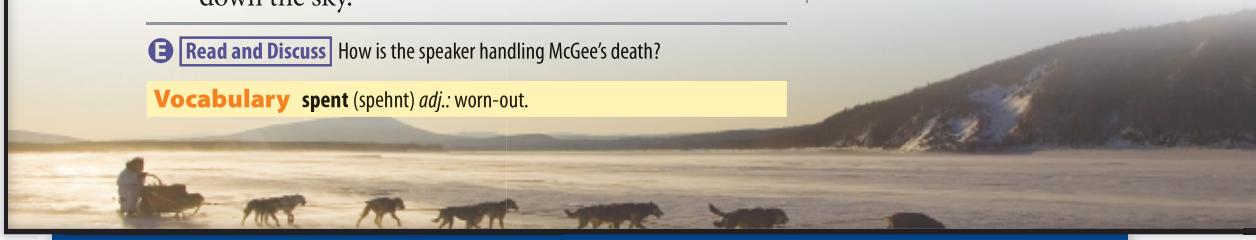
Then I made a hike, for I didn't like to hear him sizzle so;
And the heavens scowled, and the huskies howled, and the wind began to blow.
It was icy cold, but the hot sweat rolled down my cheeks, and I don't know why;
And the greasy smoke in an inky cloak went streaking down the sky.

40. hearkened (HAHR kuhnd): listened carefully.

41. derelict (DEHR uh lihkt): abandoned ship.

E **Read and Discuss** How is the speaker handling McGee's death?

Vocabulary **spent** (spehnt) *adj.*: worn-out.



Developing Oral Fluency

Use the exchange between Sam McGee and the speaker (lines 53–60) to give students practice in reading poetry that includes dialogue. Tell students that the poem contains clues that explain how the lines of dialogue should be read. For example, the speaker feels "sick with dread" but speaks to himself "bravely" (line 55). In contrast, Sam McGee appears "cool and calm" (line 57) and is smiling with pleasure at the heat of the fire.

Paired activity Have students take notes about dialogue details as you play the recording of the exchange from the **Holt Audio Library.** Then, have students work in pairs to practice reading the lines. To conclude, have volunteers perform the scene for the class.

I do not know how long in the snow I wrestled with
grisly° fear;
But the stars came out and they danced about ere again
I ventured near;
I was sick with dread, but I bravely said: "I'll just take a
peep inside.
I guess he's cooked, and it's time I looked"; . . . then the
door I opened wide.

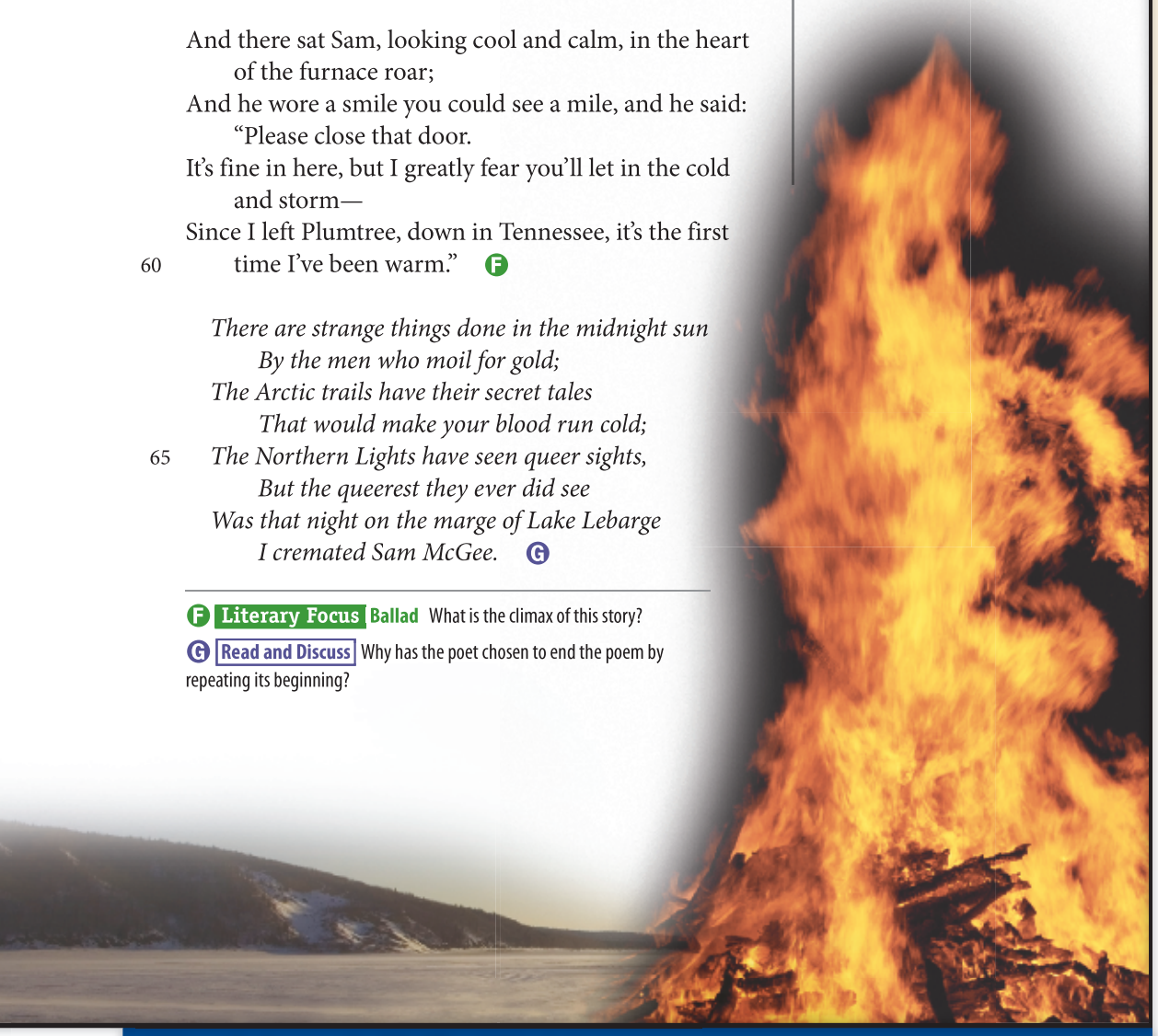
And there sat Sam, looking cool and calm, in the heart
of the furnace roar;
And he wore a smile you could see a mile, and he said:
"Please close that door.
It's fine in here, but I greatly fear you'll let in the cold
and storm—
Since I left Plumtree, down in Tennessee, it's the first
time I've been warm." F

There are strange things done in the midnight sun
By the men who moil for gold;
The Arctic trails have their secret tales
That would make your blood run cold;
The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,
But the queerest they ever did see
Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge
I cremated Sam McGee. G

53. grisly (GRIHZ lee): here, caused by something horrible.

F **Literary Focus** **Ballad** What is the climax of this story?

G **Read and Discuss** Why has the poet chosen to end the poem by repeating its beginning?



Word-Attack Skills Mini-Lesson

Words with *th*

Write the words *thin* and *then* on the board. Have students compare the sounds of /th/ in the two words. Then, write the words *loath* and *loathe* on the board. Read them aloud, and have students compare the sounds of /th/. Help them recognize that /th/ in *loath* has the same sound as /th/ in *thin,* and /th/ in *loathe* has the same sound as /th/ in *then*. Explain that an *e* after *th* at the end of a word is often, but not always, a clue that *th* should be pronounced as it is in *then*.

Activity Write these sentences on the board. Have students tell whether *th* in the underlined words has the sound of /th/ in *thin* or *then*.

1. Sam McGee loathed the cold. [*then*]
2. With his last breath, he asked to be cremated. [*thin*]
3. His friend promised and kept his oath. [*thin*]
4. He returned to find Sam in a wreath of flames. [*then*]
5. He was writhing happily in the warmth. [*then; thin*]

Think About/Talk About

Comprehension

E Read and Discuss

Possible response: *The speaker is having a difficult time handling McGee's death. He feels that his task is making him "half mad," and he has come to despise McGee for asking him to make such a difficult promise.*

G Read and Discuss

Possible response: *Repeating the beginning clarifies that the sight of Sam McGee standing in the fire is the "queerest" of the "queer sights" seen in this part of the world.*

Analysis

F Literary Focus

Possible response: *The climax is when the speaker sees Sam inside the fire, smiling and telling him to close the door to keep out the cold.*

? Extend the Discussion

Foreshadowing Which events in the poem foreshadow the ending?

Possible responses: *The ending is foreshadowed by McGee's fear of the cold, his desire to be cremated, his death from the cold, and the way the corpse grins when the speaker opens the door.*