This is my letter to the world

POEM TEXT

This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me —
The simple News that Nature told
With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see —
For love of Her — Sweet — countrymen
Judge tenderly — of Me

SUMMARY

This is my message to the world, even though the world never sent me any messages. My message contains the basic facts that nature told me with tenderness and greatness.

Nature's news is carried in invisible hands. If you love nature, fellow citizens, don't judge me harshly.

THEMES

LONELINESS AND ISOLATION

On one level, this is a poem reflecting on the pain of isolation and affirming the human desire for connection. The speaker has written a "letter" addressed to the "World," which here can be read as everyone and everything apart from the speaker: it represents human life and community, even civilization itself. Yet though the speaker attempts to communicate with the "World" in writing, this World has failed—intentionally or simply through neglect—to extend this same courtesy to the speaker. It "never wrote to Me," the speaker complains in the poem's second line, thus beginning the poem with a sense of loneliness and frustration at being overlooked.

Importantly, although the speaker feels lonely and isolated, he or she still longs to be a part of the "World." The speaker signals this continued sense of belonging toward the end of the poem with the use of the word "countrymen." The word, which means "fellow citizens" or "fellow community members," suggests that the speaker continues to feel like a member of the "World" being addressed even if that World has not acknowledged the speaker. Despite the World's seeming rejection, the speaker considers him or herself to be one of those "countrymen" and attempts to reach out to others the way he or she knows how: via writing.

At the same time, however, perhaps the speaker has been so consumed with receiving and translating the "News that Nature told" that he or she has left little time or space for actual people. Writing, the poem thus seems to suggest, is ironically at once a tool of communication and a deeply isolating endeavor.

Though readers shouldn't necessarily take the speaker of this poem to be Dickinson herself, the context of the poet's life could be helpful here: Dickinson was famously reclusive and did not receive much recognition for her work during her lifetime. Dickinson was also intensely preoccupied with her own mortality. This poem, then, can perhaps be considered a contemplation of legacy—as Dickinson reaching out to the world in the hopes of being remembered fondly through her poetry, despite having essentially walled herself off from the rest of society at large.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

THE PURPOSE OF POETRY

Closely related to the poem's theme of isolation is its preoccupation with writing, which, as previously noted, is perhaps the cause of the speaker's isolation in the first place. Indeed, it's possible to interpret the poem as a meditation on the construction and purpose of poetry. The speaker presents his or her "letter"—which can be taken as a symbol for poetry—as a literal transcription of "the simple News that Nature" told the speaker, suggesting that poetry is a way to communicate some meaningful insight about the world to other people.

In this formulation, note how the speaker presents him or herself as a mere *conduit* for this "News," a being through which a mysterious "Message" is *passed* rather than the *creator* of that message. In other words, instead of expressing the speaker's *own* thoughts and feelings, the poem is (or should be) a transmission of "News" from the natural world. As a result, the speaker protests in the poem's final lines, his or her readers should "Judge tenderly": in other words, don't shoot the messenger! Not only does this distance the poet from the poem, but it also elevates poetry itself as something naturally—perhaps even divinely—inspired. After all, it is coming from some grand, "Majestic" force.

At the same time, however, the poet's task as a messenger is clearly isolating. For one thing, nature is presented as remote,

an inaccessible realm that the speaker does not fully understand. The message that the speaker carries arrives through mysterious means, via "Hands" that the speaker "cannot see." Although the speaker receives nature's message, the speaker does not seem to fully understand what nature is, or exactly how—or by whose hands—its message arrives. Perhaps the speaker does not even fully understand this "Message" itself, and instead is grappling with how to parse the "News" he or she has been given even as the speaker is tasked with sharing that "News." The speaker's loneliness is thus, to a certain extent, a consequence of being a poet: to be a poet involves being situated as a messenger between the "World" and "Nature"—but not being fully part of either.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me —
The simple News that Nature told
With tender Majesty

The poem begins by announcing that "this," meaning the poem itself, is a "letter" addressed to the "World." This "World" could refer to the whole of human society, and as such this opening line reveals that the speaker is somehow *separate* from that society. The capitalization of "World" also underscores its personification: the speaker views the World having the *ability* to write back, though it has never done so.

Already there's a sense of frustration and/or regret at the fact that the speaker is so isolated, and that the rest of the "World" has failed to acknowledge the speaker's existence. Nevertheless, the speaker wants to pass along some sort of message to this World that he or she has received from "Nature" (which is similarly personified).

These lines are both spare and dense; they use simple words that are at once rich with meaning and intensely ambiguous, raising as many questions as they do answers. Indeed, it's not yet clear what exactly this "News" actually *is*, but it's possible to interpret it as being a reference to poetry itself.

First off, note that this very "letter" that the speaker has written is, quite literally, a poem. This suggests that poetry is a form of *communication*, which makes sense: poems are ways for poets to express certain ideas, beliefs, or emotions to other people—they are a means of translating thoughts and feelings into words that other people can read and understand.

Yet this particular poem does not seem to be about the speaker's *personal* thoughts, but rather about some sort of "News" from "Nature." The speaker implies that poetry's task is to pass on some broader, objective message: taking nature's "simple News" and translating it, as best it can, into terms the "World" will understand. The alliteration of the /n/ sound in "Nature" and "News" underscores this connection: if this "News" is akin to poetry, then poetry itself is something plucked from the natural world. Poetry contains within in it grand natural truths, and it is the poet's job to write this "News" down.

The poem's form is appropriate for its moral and philosophical seriousness. It is written as a ballad, with alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, rhymed *ABCB*. This meter and rhyme scheme was often used for hymns—the religious songs sung in English Church. For Dickinson's first readers, pious New Englanders who spent a lot of time in Church, the poem's relationship to the hymn would've been obvious.

Dickinson appropriates the majesty of religious music, but not its rigidity: Dickinson's meter is consistently inconsistent, diverging widely from the expected rhythms of an iambic line. For example, the poem's very first line contains a spondee (two stresses) in its first foot:

This is my letter to the World

This emphasizes off the bat that this very document is something important and bold, a statement of intent.

LINES 5-8

Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see —
For love of Her — Sweet — countrymen
Judge tenderly — of Me

In the second half of the poem, the speaker describes the means by which he or she either receives or sends out this "News" from "Nature." It's possible to read lines 5 and 6 in two different ways:

- Nature's "Message" is entrusted to "Hands I cannot see," which then deliver that message *to the speaker*;
- Or the speaker entrusts Nature's "Message" *to those unseen Hands*.

Both are plausible readings and both employ synecdoche, with the messengers being represented through their hands alone. This reflects the fact that the speaker doesn't know who or what the messengers are—they're mysterious, unintelligible entities. The assonance in line 6 subtly underscores this point: the /a/ sound in "Hands" and "cannot" connects these messengers to the speaker's inability to see them.

The capitalization of these "Hands" also lends them a subtly

religious quality; perhaps they're angels or spirits of some sort, holy messengers to whom the speaker hands over his or her "letters"—letters that contain some "Message" from "Nature"—and who then deliver those letters to the "World." Or, again, perhaps these beings are relaying whatever Nature "told" to the speaker. It's a subtle difference, and either way presents the speaker as communicating with something he or she doesn't fully understand.

As these final four lines build on each other, the speaker thus seems increasingly lonely. The speaker passionately wants to reach out and connect with the world, but is unable to do so, and is even isolated from the very "Message" he or she seeks to spread.

The speaker seems to regard this as a personal failure: in the final lines, the speaker begs his or her "countrymen" to "judge tenderly." The speaker asks this indulgence *on behalf* of Nature (the "Her" in line 7). But the speaker withholds, briefly, *what* they should "judge tenderly": line 8 is broken up by a caesura. After the caesura, the speaker clarifies: these countrymen should judge the speaker kindly. Read within the context of Dickinson's own life, perhaps she is asking to be remembered fondly via her poetry.

That said, the caesura opens up an alternate possibility: perhaps the speaker is calling for his or her "countrymen" to "judge tenderly" in general. As the speaker begs for indulgence, he or she also suggests a sense of community that mimics the tenderness of "Nature" itself. Indeed, the speaker repeats the word "tender" in line 4 and line 8. This suggests that the tender judgment that the speaker urges comes close to approximating that way Nature works.

These lines continue the formal pattern established in the previous lines: they are rhymed *ABCB*, with alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. Their meter continues to be ambiguous and imperfect, however. For example, line 5 ends with a feminine ending.

It's also clear by now that the poem has only one rhyme sound throughout, based on a long /e/ sound. The poem even repeats its first rhyme word, "me," at the end of line 8—which also rhymes "Me." This gives the poem a circular feel. It repeats itself, a churning cycle, an obsessive pattern that reinforces the speaker's loneliness and alienation. This is perhaps fitting, given that the process of writing—exactly what the speaker is doing with this letter—is presented as an isolating experience.

SYMBOLS

LETTER

Literally, a letter is a written message which conveys information or news to a person or group of people. It's possible to interpret this "letter," however, as a symbol for poetry itself. Just like a letter, a poem communicates. It gives "News," and it is addressed to a specific person or group of people. Poetry is a means of connection, and is thus meant to be read. In this sense, the entire poem is about poetry and the way that it attempts to connect with—or fails to connect with—other people.

This understanding of poetry is reflected in Dickinson's own practices as a writer: she often circulated her poems in letters to specific friends or would write poems directly addressed to them, in response to major events in their lives.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "letter"

NEWS

The speaker specifies that the "News" he or she receives from "Nature" is "simple." But the speaker doesn't tell the reader what that "News" is. Perhaps the "News" is too simple to be expressed in language. Or perhaps the speaker simply doesn't want to share the wisdom that he or she has gleaned from "Nature." Either way, the speaker's reticence transforms the "News": it ceases to be literal information and becomes, instead, an ambiguous and rich symbol.

It may symbolize, for instance, the promise of Christian salvation—often called the "Good News." (This reading is strengthened by the widespread belief in the 19th century that nature supplied the evidence of God's creative power). Or it may be less dogmatically religious. (After all, as a student at Mount Holyoke, Dickinson reportedly refused to stand up when her pastor asked all the Christians in the room to rise!). It might symbolize poetic inspiration, which comes as "News" from "Nature." Or it might symbolize natural beauty more broadly.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "News"

POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

"This is my letter to the world" generally follows an alternating pattern of enjambed and end-stopped lines. The poem thus divides up into 2-line units: the speaker introduces a new thought in the beginning of the first line and completes it at the end of the second line. For example, line 5 reveals that Nature's "Message" is being committed (or given) to something, and line 6 reveals what that something is (i.e., "Hands" the speaker cannot see).

This is not unusual in a ballad or a hymn: since the lines alternate between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter (that is, iambic lines with either four or three feet) it makes sense to divide the poem conceptually into 2-line units. Further, these two line units might be said to model the relationship the poem describes, between the "World" and "Me." Just as the speaker has a complicated, ambiguous connection to the "World," so too each line in the poem's 2-line units has a complicated relationship with the line that follows it.

Note that line 1 is rather ambiguous, and technically could be classified as an end-stopped line despite its lack of punctuation because it contains a grammatically complete statement. Because line 2 does not make sense without line 1, however, readers will more likely experience line 1 as enjambed, which is why we have marked it as such here.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "World"
- **Line 2:** "That"
- **Lines 3-4:** "told / With"
- **Lines 5-6:** "committed / To"
- **Lines 7-8:** "countrymen / Judge"

END-STOPPED LINE

The poem contains four clear end-stops, falling in lines 2, 4, 6, and 8. Recall that it is best not to limit the concepts of end-stop and enjambment to punctuation, especially given that poems like Dickinson's were written out by hand—without the imposed structure of, say, a computer word processing system. Thus while, for example, line 4 lacks a punctuation mark, is nevertheless clearly the end of a complete grammatical and thematic unit. Ditto line 8: while the lack of punctuation allows the request of this moment to perhaps linger in the air, this is clearly and definitively the end of the poem.

As noted in our discussion of enjambment, line 1 is rather ambiguous; it arguably contains a weak end-stop because it is a complete grammatical unit, and does not clearly overflow onto the following line. Yet that same following line—that is, line 2—is grammatically incomplete without line 1. As such, a reader will likely *experience* line 1 as enjambed.

This weak end-stop/enjambment of line 1 does not significantly reshape the reader's experience of the poem: the poem still maintains has a strong pattern of alternating enjambed and end-stopped lines. These alternating enjambments divide the poem into 2-line units. In this sense, the poem's organization reflects its form. A ballad can be divided into 2-line units alternating iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter; the poem's alternating enjambments and end-stops follow this metrical alternation. As a result, the poem feels highly organized and structured—despite its ambiguous, mysterious content. Further, these two line units are themselves symbolically rich: they may be taken to represent the fraught relationship the speaker describes between "Me" and the "World": a relationship which is simultaneously intimate and distant.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Me —"
- **Line 4:** "Majesty"
- **Line 6:** "see —"
- **Line 8:** "Me"

CAESURA

"This is my letter to the world" does not use caesura until its final two lines, where three caesuras appear. The first two bracket the word "Sweet" in line 7. The word is apparently innocent. But the caesuras change the way it feels: the dashes have the same effect as putting the word in air-quotes: "my 'sweet' countrymen." In other words, because of the caesuras, the word seems ironic—as though the speaker has only very limited affection for his or her "countrymen."

Similarly, the caesura in line 8 has the effect of making an apparently ordinary sentence strange. There would be nothing particularly surprising about the sentence "For love of her, judge tenderly of me" (except for the slightly archaic sentence structure). But the caesura separates "Judge tenderly" from "of Me." There is a slight hiccup in the line, as the speaker isn't quite sure what she or he wants the "countrymen" to judge. The pause created by the caesura opens the possibility that the speaker wants his or her "countrymen" to judge *all* things tenderly. Because of the caesura, "of Me" feels like a late qualification, a sudden change of heart. In this sense, the poem's caesuras function like enjambments, opening brief possibilities, or dissident meanings, that the poem otherwise does not fully admit.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** " — ," " — "
- **Line 8:** " — "

ALLITERATION

Because "This is my letter to the world" is so short and so sparing in its language (the whole poem is only 40 words), its use of alliteration is relatively sparing as well. Instead of blanketing the poem in alliteration, the speaker uses the technique strategically, in a few key places.

For example, two sounds subtly echo across the second stanza, namely the /h/ of "Her" and "Hands," and the hard /c/ of "committed," "cannot," and "countrymen." Though these words are perhaps not exactly alliterative, in that they are spaced relatively far apart, they still can clearly be heard over the other sounds of the poem. The fact that lines 5, 6, and 7 all include an

early /h/ sound and a later /c/ lends them an intriguing sense of sonic parallelism, repeating the same letter sounds in the same spots even as the specific content of the lines change. Perhaps this reflects the speaker's own isolation from the message he or she has been tasked with sending: the speaker can hear that message, but does not entirely understand it.

The clearest alliteration, however, comes with the repeated /n/ sound in line 3, which links together "News" and "Nature." This alliteration gives readers a sense that nature's "News" is not only important, but it is also intimately related to "Nature" itself. The news that the speaker hopes to receive is a lesson about nature's essence, or its identity. Here, the alliteration calls attention to and reinforces the connection between otherwise disparate concepts. In a poem as ambiguous and gestural as "This is my letter to the World," this kind of sonic connection can be key to interpreting the poem.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Th," "th"
- **Line 2:** "Th," "n"
- **Line 3:** "Th," "N," "th," "N," "t"
- **Line 4:** "t"
- **Line 5:** "H," "c"
- **Line 6:** "H," "c"
- **Line 7:** "H," "c"

ASSONANCE

The poem uses assonance at key moments. The poem begins with assonance via the shared short /i/ sound is "this" and "is," which in fact creates an internal rhyme. This results in a rather bold opening, as the speaker sonically urges readers/listeners to pay attention to "This."

Later, in line 6, there is a shared /a/ sound in "Hands" and "cannot." The repeated sound emphasizes the speaker's simultaneous connection to and distance from these Hands: the two are connected via sound, yet the actual meaning of the words here underscores the speaker's isolation: he or she cannot see the beings that carry the message the speaker writes.

Similarly, in line 7-8, there is a repeated /e/ sound in "countrymen" and "tenderly." The speaker is here asking his or her "countrymen" to "judge tenderly"—a request that implies that their judgments are not, or are likely not to be, tender at the moment. The assonance thus underlines a connection the speaker hopes the "countrymen" will make: it calls into being a connection that does not already exist. In this sense, this use of assonance is aspirational: it does not reflect something that already exists, but instead articulates the speaker's hope for a changed and better world.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "i," "i"
- **Line 3:** "a," "a"
- **Line 5:** "i," "i"
- **Line 6:** "a," "a," "ee"
- **Line 7:** "o," "o," "ee," "y," "e"
- **Line 8:** "e," "y," "e"

CONSONANCE

"This is my letter to the world" uses assonance and alliteration sparingly, but it does contain a good deal of consonance. For instance, in the first two lines, there is a repeated /r/ sound that appears in "letter," "World," "never," and "wrote." These sounds add up over the course of the lines, giving the opening of the poem a subtle but sustained music that runs underneath its more sparing, but also more prominent, alliterations.

The consonance also suggests subtle connections between the things the speaker describes in these lines. The speaker has written a "letter" to the "World," and the speaker wants the world to write back. The shared /r/ sound between "letter," "World," and "wrote" emphasizes the parallels between these acts of writing. The speaker not only wants the "World" to write: the speaker also wants the "World" to write in much the same way that he or she writes, on his or her terms. In this instance, the consonance reveals important dynamics in the speaker's relationship with the "World."

There are smaller instances of consonance throughout the poem, for example the repeated /m/ sound in line 5, "Her Message is committed," and the /n/ sound in line 6, "To Hands I cannot see—". Since these sounds are fairly similar to each other, the consonance gives these lines a chiming, musical sound. But since that music is mostly buried in the middle of words, it does not become overly showy or literary: it serves instead as an underlying frame or structure for the poem.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Th," "tt," "r," "t," "th," "r"
- **Line 2:** "Th," "t," "n," "r," "r," "t," "t," "M"
- **Line 3:** "Th," "m," "N," "th," "t," "N," "t," "t," "d"
- **Line 4:** "th," "t," "n," "d," "M," "t"
- **Line 5:** "M," "c," "mm," "tt"
- **Line 6:** "n," "nn," "t"
- **Line 7:** "r," "v," "f," "H," "r," "t," "c," "t," "r," "m"
- **Line 8:** "t," "r," "M"

PERSONIFICATION

"This is my letter to the world" is a poem about the difficulty of translating the natural world into language. The speaker struggles throughout the poem to represent nature, to find the language the "World" will recognize. Part of the problem lies in

the mysterious way that "Nature" itself communicates. For example, the speaker uses synecdoche to represent the mysterious messengers that carry nature's "News"—in part, because more direct means of representing it are not available.

As the speaker struggles to represent nature, he or she often uses personification. For example, the "World" is personified as a being with the ability to write to the speaker (though it never has done so); the capitalization of "World" makes it seem almost like a name. The same goes for "Nature," which gets a female pronoun to boot. The speaker declares that Nature "told" its "News"—as though Nature spoke a human language. Similarly, Nature "committed" its message to messengers with "Hands." Nature seems to communicate, or to want to communicate, and to use human mechanisms to do so. It is even endowed with human body parts.

These "Hands" stand in for a body that the speaker seems unable to imagine or represent; the speaker uses the passive voice to describe the way the message is entrusted to those "Hands"—as though the speaker isn't quite sure how the message makes its way into the hands, or who puts it there. But even as the speaker represents these mysterious communications and the mysterious beings who carry it, he or she cannot refrain from personifying it and them: the speaker is unable to represent Nature without relating it to human life and human bodies. This accentuates and marks the poem's central difficulties: perhaps the speaker has trouble communicating nature because the speaker cannot fully conceive of nature itself without involving human life.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "the World / That never wrote to Me"
- **Line 3:** "Nature told"
- **Line 5:** "Her Message"
- **Line 6:** "Hands"
- **Line 7:** "Her"

PARALLELISM

In lines 4 and 8, the speaker uses variations on the word "tender." Further, the words appear in the same position in the line metrically: they both begin in the second syllable of the line (though the lines otherwise diverge in their metrical patterning—and the extra syllable in "tenderly" means that the word plays a slightly different role in line 8 than in line 4). The symmetrical use of the same word at the end of each of the poem's stanzas creates a strong sense of parallelism, which links together the two stanzas, creating connections that might not otherwise be apparent to the reader.

At the end of stanza 1, "Nature" tells the speaker its "News" with "tender majesty." At the end of stanza 2, the speaker expresses a wish that, for love of "Her"—presumably, "Nature"—the speaker's "countrymen" will "Judge tenderly."

The parallelism between the two stanzas' use of the word "tender" suggests that the speaker hopes the "countrymen" will learn from "Nature"—perhaps, that they will take on some of its characteristics, its ways of speaking and communicating. By implication, the speaker asks his or her countrymen to judge him or her as nature would judge him or her. The speaker does not directly admit this. But, as with so much in this poem, one of its most powerful and provocative claims emerges indirectly, through suggestion and implication.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "tender"
- **Line 8:** "tenderly"

SYNECDOCHE

In lines 6-7, the speaker describes nature's "Message" being "committed / To Hands I cannot see." The hands stand in for some larger entity—perhaps an angel or a spirit, who carries the message. The hands are thus a synecdoche for that entity. The speaker uses synecdoche here because the angel or spirit who carries the "Message" is fundamentally mysterious: the speaker doesn't know who or what that creature is, where it comes from, what it looks like, how it moves. The best the speaker can do is to partially represent it, to represent it through and as its parts.

The speaker's use of synecdoche thus suggests the mystery of nature. It does not work in ways that make sense to human beings and it does not communicate in the way that human beings do (that is, through writing). It uses instead mysterious and partially unintelligible methods to communicate. As a result, there is a mismatch at the heart of the poem between the way the speaker communicates and the way nature communicates. As a result, the speaker's "letter to the World" will be necessarily a translation—and an imperfect translation—of nature's "tender Majesty." This may account, in part, for the speaker's frustration. Try as he or she might, the speaker cannot fully communicate that "Majesty" to the "World."

Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Hands"

VOCABULARY

World (Line 1) - The speaker's use of this word is ambiguous. It might mean, literally, the Earth; it might refer to the universe and all of creation; or the speaker might be using it in a more constrained sense, to refer simply to human civilization. Depending on your interpretation, the word might mean any of these things—or all of them at once.

News (Line 3) - Information, a message or a dispatch. Nature has a message that it imparts to the speaker.

Nature (Line 3) - The non-human world, including plants and animals. More broadly, the word suggests God, since in 19th century philosophy and theology, nature was often taken as evidence for God's presence in the universe.

Majesty (Line 4) - Greatness or splendor. The word is often used in connection with kings and queens. (One refers to a king as "your majesty" for instance). "Tender majesty" is thus arguably an oxymoron: majesty is imposing and imperious; it is not tender.

Message (Line 5) - A piece of information or news, directed to a particular person. The "Message" here is equivalent to the "News" in line 3.

Committed (Line 5) - Given or entrusted. Nature gives her "message" to messengers; she does not communicate directly herself.

Countrymen (Line 7) - Fellow citizens, members of a shared group.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Like many of Dickinson's poems, "This is my letter to the world" is a modified ballad: alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, in quatrains rhymed *ABCB*.

The ballad was a popular form: it was used throughout the 16th, 17th, and 18th century for drinking songs and popular narratives about love and crime, printed cheaply on broadsheets and distributed to the general public. However, the ballad also became the standard form for hymns—the religious music sung in English and American churches. This is probably the key precursor to Dickinson's use of the form. Her poems often feel like secular hymns, invoking grand problems, religious complications, in compact, enigmatic phrases.

Though Dickinson uses a form associated with religious ritual, however, her poem is in no way dogmatic. Dickinson is not interested in upholding religious doctrine: instead, her poem is full of deep, implicit questions about the relationship between nature, the individual, and human society more broadly. These questions feel sharper and more pressing because they are framed in a form closely connected to religion and its rituals.

That said, Dickinson does not strictly adhere to the form in this poem. Her meter often contains substitutions, while her rhymes are sometimes weak or break the poem's rhythm. The poem thus calls the rhythms of a hymn to mind, without adhering precisely to those rhythms.

METER

"This is my letter to the world" is written in ballad meter. In ballad meter, lines of iambic tetrameter (four poetic feet with a da DUM rhythm, for a total of eight syllables) and iambic trimeter (three poetic feet with a da DUM rhythm, for a total of six syllables) alternate. The first and third lines of each stanza are in iambic tetrameter, while the second and fourth lines are in iambic trimeter. One can see this pattern at work in lines 7-8:

> For love | of Her | — Sweet — coun- | trymen |
> Judge ten- | derly | — of Me |

However, as is clear above, Dickinson's meter is rarely precise. Even these lines—arguably the most regular in the poem—have substitutions and ambiguities. Note the spondee (stressed-stressed) and pyrrhic (unstressed-unstressed) in line 8. "Sweet" in the third foot of line 7 could also be scanned as a stressed syllable, making yet another spondee. Her lines thus flirt with ballad meter, without strictly adhering to its demands.

For another example, note how the first line contains a pyrrhic in its third foot:

> This is | my lett- | er to | the World |

As a result, the line is short a stress: instead of the four stressed syllables one usually finds in a line of iambic tetrameter, this line only has three. Similarly, line 4 has only two stresses:

> With ten- | der Maj- | esty |

The line is somewhat ambiguous and could be scanned differently, but, in any case, the final syllable of the line is unstressed. This creates a break from the standard rhythm of an iambic line—which complicates the expected rhyme between lines 2 and 4, because these lines rhyme a stressed with an unstressed one ("me" with "majesty"). Where one expects metrical assurance and confidence, one finds instead complication.

It seems likely that this is intentional. Dickinson takes the solidity and confidence of the hymn and infuses it with rhythmic complication—in much the same way as her searching, questioning poem calls into question the relationships between the world and the individual.

RHYME SCHEME

"This is my letter to the world" follows the standard rhyme scheme of a ballad. Each quatrain is rhymed as:

ABCB

Indeed, the poem uses only one rhyme sound, which appears in both quatrains, a long /e/. This single rhyme binds the two stanzas together, so much so that they hardly feel separate at all. And the speaker even uses the same rhyme word twice: "Me" appears in line 2 and line 8. The poem thus has a circular feel: it returns to the place where it starts.

The speaker mostly rhymes words consisting of a single syllable, such as "see" and "me" in the second stanza. When the speaker uses a longer word in line 4—"majesty"—problems emerge. The final syllable of "majesty" rhymes with the "Me" in line 2, but the "y" in "majesty" is unstressed, while "Me" is stressed. The result is a rather awkward syncopation. The rhyme scheme thus calls to mind the regularity and certainty of a hymn—a kind of religious song, usually written in ballad meter—while complicating that certainty.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "This is my letter to the world" is anonymous. The poem does not provide the kind of details that would help its reader identify the speaker: his or her gender, profession, class, or personal circumstances. The word "Me" does appear in the poem twice, suggesting that the speaker's personality and ideas are important—but the poem does not provide any information about that personality or those ideas. The speaker's "Me" is ultimately as abstract as its other nouns, like "World" or "Nature." In this sense, the poem encourages its reader to avoid thinking of its speaker as a specific person. Instead, the speaker is a general figure, who represents the dynamics of the human condition more broadly: the general relationship between human beings and the world in which they live.

Despite the poem's lack of internal evidence to identify its speaker, many readers have assumed that the poem is autobiographical, reflecting on Dickinson's own situation: as a reclusive woman living in a provincial town in the 19th century, cut off from the wider world and thus feeling that she is unable to meaningfully to connect to it.

SETTING

"This is my letter to the world" does not describe its setting in detail. Though its speaker discusses "Nature," he or she does not specify a particular environment—for instance, the woods or the beach—as his or her particular concern. If the speaker's meditation on nature originates in a specific place or experience, he or she does not acknowledge it. Instead, the poem meditates on nature in general terms, as an abstraction. (And, as a result, the speaker's "Me" becomes equally as abstract). This encourages the reader to meditate in similarly general terms on the relationship between human beings and nature—and the "World" more broadly. The poem does not ask its readers to think about a specific setting or experience, but instead about the dynamics of experience more broadly: in what ways human beings interact with their world—and in what ways they are cut off from their world.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson is widely considered one of the most important—and most original—American poets. Although her work was not widely published until after her death, she has had a defining influence on several generations of American poets. Her poetry often seems to have no precedents: even now, 150 years after she wrote much of her work, it seems utterly original.

But Dickinson does have some important influences. She read Shakespeare with exceptional care. And she came from a prominent New England family, intimate with some of the leading intellectual figures of the day. Dickinson read carefully and corresponded with important philosophers, like Ralph Waldo Emerson, the leader of the "Transcendentalists," a philosophical movement that praised nature and often found religious solace in the natural world. She was also profoundly shaped by her own religious experience, and many of her poems closely imitate the ballad meter in which hymns were written. Her work thus combines an unlikely set of influences: cutting edge 19th century philosophy, religious music, and the classics of English literature.

Dickinson did not publish her work during her lifetime. Instead, she sent her poems to friends in letters and assembled them into small manuscript books, called "fascicles." Her manuscripts were written by hand and are often hard to decipher. Later editors have done much to regularize her work as they bring them into print. As a result, there are often considerable differences between different editions of Dickinson's poems, including their line breaks and punctuation. For example, Dickinson is famous for using an em dash in her work—but in her manuscripts it is not clear that she is actually using an em dash or some punctuation mark of her own making, something like a cross or a plus sign (or simply a much shorter dash). Her manuscripts also often contain multiple variants, with three or four possible words for each word in the poem. The line breaks differ from the printed version: they less clearly follow the format of the ballad. (This is a particular problem for "This is my letter to the world," which contains different line breaks in its different versions).

The printed texts of Dickinson's work are thus at best a poor approximation of the richness of her manuscripts. In the last thirty years, scholars have been to turn their attention to these manuscripts. Increasingly, any serious study of Dickinson's poems must begin with facsimiles of her manuscripts, such as Jen Bervin and Marta Werner's recent edition of poems that Dickinson wrote on envelopes, *The Gorgeous Nothings*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson was born into an important family in Amherst,

Massachusetts. In her early life, she attended prominent schools, including Mount Holyoke, then a seminary for women. But in adulthood, she retreated into her family home, becoming reclusive. (Indeed, in Dickinson's home in Amherst, one can see the tread she likely wore into the floorboards of her room, ostensibly from pacing back and forth over many years).

Though Dickinson spent much of her adult life in seclusion, distant from the world, she was a close observer of world affairs, as her many letters reveal. In her exchanges with friends and editors, she discusses everything from the deaths of pets to political events, like the American Civil War. Indeed, her greatest period of poetic creativity corresponds with the years of the Civil War, the violence of which Dickinson found deeply disturbing. Dickinson's work is thus simultaneously distant from and intimate with the circumstances of her culture. Though she does not engage directly with the radical transformations in American society that occurred during her life time, she and her work were profoundly marked by those transformations.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Dickinson's Own Words — Images from the Emily Dickinson archive of the original manuscripts for "This is my letter to the world," in her handwriting and with her original punctuation. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/75176)
- About Dickinson's Fascicles — A brief article on Dickinson's manuscript books—or fascicles—by Dorothy Huff Oberhaus. (https://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/dickinson/fascicles.htm)
- Emily Dickinson Biography — A detailed biography of Emily Dickinson from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)
- The History of Transcendentalism — A detailed article on the history and philosophy of transcendentalism, from Stanford University. (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/transcendentalism/)
- The Poem Out Loud — A reading of "This is my letter to the world." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHz59Ngv0lk)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- As imperceptibly as grief
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- Success is counted sweetest
- There's a certain Slant of light
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

HOW TO CITE

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