A Murmur in the Trees—to note—

POEM TEXT

A Murmur in the Trees—to note—
Not loud enough—for Wind—
A star—not far enough to seek—
Nor near enough—to find—

A long—long Yellow—on the Lawn—
A Hubbub—as of feet—
Not audible—as Ours—to us—
But dapperer—more sweet—

A Hurrying Home of little Men
To Houses unperceived—
All this—and more—if I should tell—
Would never be believed—

Of Robins in the Trundle bed
How many I espy
Whose Nightgowns could not hide the Wings—
Although I heard them try—

But then I promised ne'er to tell—
How could I break My word?
So go your way—and I'll go Mine—
No fear you'll miss the Road.

SUMMARY

Sometimes I notice a low muttering sound in the trees that's not quite loud enough to be the wind, or I see a star that's neither far away enough to go hunting after nor close enough to find.

Sometimes I observe a long yellow light on the grass and hear a busy sound like footsteps—not loud footsteps like our own, but neater, lighter, and more musical.

It's the sound of the fairy folk I see making their way home to their secret houses. If I were to describe all these strange sights (and more), no one would believe me.

I've seen many robins in roll-out beds, trying unsuccessfully to hide their wings under their nightgowns.

But I swore I'd never tell anyone about these sights, and how could I go back on my promise? So be on your way, and I'll go the other direction; you certainly won't miss your broad, open road.

THEMES

THE MAGIC AND MYSTERY OF NATURE

The speaker of Emily Dickinson's "A Murmur in the Trees—to note" believes that there's a lot more to the world than cold reason and sensible explanations can contain. Their visions of scuttling fairy folk in the woods, mysterious lights in the sky, and low sun on a golden evening suggest that the natural world can feel riddled with strange, mysterious magic that exists beyond our understanding.

The speaker has had (or almost had) more than one encounter with a world that seems to run parallel to the normal, everyday one. Subtle, curious sounds and sights—a "Murmur in the Trees" that's a bit too quiet to be the wind, the pattering feet of "little Men" as they return to their secret homes—have convinced the speaker that the world is full of delightful, mysterious presences of which human beings may catch only the briefest glimpses.

The woods might hold whole fairy civilizations, in fact, and "Robins" might hide in the "Trundle bed" disguised as children. The beauty of nature isn't necessarily all *super*natural, of course. To this speaker, even what might seem like ordinary moments, like a "long—long Yellow" slant of sunlight across a lawn, can feel both enchanted and enchanting.

In short, the speaker sees the natural world as being full of beauty, wonder, mystery, and the poem broadly suggests that those who can open their minds to the unknown will find that nature has much more to offer than first meets the eye. Even something as familiar as golden afternoon light can be a sign that the world is a magical place—if you know how to look at it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

OPENNESS TO ENCHANTMENT

The speaker of Dickinson's poem has sensed countless strange and inexplicable things in nature, from mysterious stars that seem to hover just out of reach to "little Men" hurrying to their hidden homes at dusk. But not everyone can see what the speaker does. Most people, the poem implies, aren't born to strange sights, preferring to walk down a "Road" that there's "no fear" they might get lost on: the broad, dull path of common sense. The world is an enchanted

place, this poem suggests, but only to those curious and perceptive enough to be enchanted.

Much magic, the speaker suggests, can only be perceived by those receptive and sensitive enough to know what they're looking for. If the speaker didn't know better, for instance, they might mistake a mysterious "Murmur in the Trees" for the "Wind." It's only because they're listening carefully that they know it's "not loud enough" to be that. Similarly, one has to believe that the magic hour in the late afternoon when "long—long Yellow' light falls across the lawn is *really* magic to know to look for "little Men" around that time.

If the speaker were to describe these wonders to most people, though, they know they'd "never be believed." People have to be *alert* to magic to find it in the world, the speaker suggests, willing to open their minds to the possibility that they might encounter something out of the ordinary. Most people aren't willing to do so.

"Go your way—and I'll go mine," the speaker thus tells the reader who isn't willing to enter an enchanted world. The speaker has no interest in taking the predictable, mundane "Road" that most people follow. Their allegiances lie with the magic they glimpse in nature, a magic they give their solemn "Word" they'll keep secret from those who don't already know it's there.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

A Murmur in the Trees—to note—
Not loud enough—for Wind—
A star—not far enough to seek—
Nor near enough—to find—

As the poem opens, the speaker pays careful attention as something peculiar happens nearby. There's a "Murmur in the Trees," they observe—a gentle sound, "not loud enough" to be a wind, though you might almost mistake it for one.

The speaker is sensitive to the sound's strangeness, but they're not alarmed, not wondering *What on earth could that be?* They know that there's something odd about this sound, but they accept it patiently, calmly, almost matter-of-factly: they merely "note" it.

As it happens, the murmur is only one of the odd things in the landscape around them. They also note:

A star—not far enough to seek—
Nor near enough—to find—

This "star," in other words, tantalizes: it's not so far away that the speaker feels compelled to go hunting after it, but not so close that they feel they could reach it, either. It hovers at an ambiguous, unguessable distance. Maybe it's a real star; maybe it's just a glowing spark in the woods, a light carried by whatever is murmuring in there.

This vision of a winking star that looks both close and unreachable introduces this poem's emotional world. This will be an exploration of the mysterious, the inexplicable, and the magical. To this speaker, the world is full of presences that, while they never come "near enough—to find," are nonetheless *real*. Those who want to encounter such presences, these first lines suggest, will have to be open, sensitive, and patient, willing to accept sights that they'll never be able to explain or understand.

The speaker's parallelism in this first stanza prepares readers to understand how delicate such discernment might be. The murmur is "not loud enough—for Wind"; the star is "not far enough to seek." Perceiving magic in the world, then, demands an understanding of what *isn't*. The mysteries the speaker has described so far could be written off as the wind or an ordinary star. You'd have to know the wind and the stars very well to distinguish between them and the sounds and sights the speaker describes now.

Dickinson will use one of her favorite forms in this poem: the ballad stanza. That means that each of this poem's five quatrains is written in common meter, an alternating pattern of iambic tetrameter (lines of four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm) and iambic trimeter (lines of three iambs). Here's how that sounds in the first lines:

A Mur- | mur in | the Trees— | to note—
Not loud | enough— | for Wind—

This rhythm turns up often in folk songs and hymns. Here, appropriately enough, Dickinson will use a familiar form to describe magic hiding in plain sight.

LINES 5-8

A long—long Yellow—on the Lawn—
A Hubbub—as of feet—
Not audible—as Ours—to us—
But dapperer—more sweet—

In the second stanza, the speaker extends their list of strange sights. They start with some vivid imagery, describing "a long—long Yellow—on the Lawn." This "long Yellow" stretching across the grass evokes the low light of late afternoon—a time sometimes known as the "magic hour," when the shadows are tall and the light is golden.

If this is a sign of magic or mystery, it's even subtler than the "Murmur in the Trees." After all, at certain times of year such a light, gorgeous though it may be, is an everyday phenomenon.

For that matter, it's happening on the "Lawn," in an ordinary back garden. Once again, the speaker has to be acute and sensitive to discern that there's something enchanted in this long yellow light.

Attuned to signs of wonder in the natural world, the speaker is ready to experience something less ambiguous. Clearer and sharper than the murmur, the hovering star, or the long yellow light comes:

> A Hubbub—as of feet—
> Not audible—as Ours—to us—
> But dapperer—more sweet—

This sound of a scuttling crowd's footsteps isn't like "Ours," not like a human hubbub, and not "audible" in quite the same way, either. Again, the poem suggests you have to know what you're listening for to perceive it. But it is nevertheless perceptible, and it does give some hint of what made it: it doesn't sound like the wind, it sounds like the little "feet" of creatures other than humans. The onomatopoeic word "dapperer" evokes the "sweet," musical, miniature pitter-pat of these feet as they pass.

LINES 9-12

> *A Hurrying Home of little Men*
> *To Houses unperceived—*
> *All this—and more—if I should tell—*
> *Would never be believed—*

The speaker's visions have moved from shifty ambiguity—murmurs *almost* like the wind, lights that *could* just be stars—to the out-and-out strangeness of tiny, nonhuman feet scuttling in the woods. Now, the speaker gets bold. The "hubbub" of those feet, they say, is:

> A Hurrying Home of little Men
> To Houses unperceived—

This clear, direct vision of something magical—fairy men making their way through the woods—feels like a revelation the speaker has had to work their way up to. Even the hushed /h/ alliteration of these lines ("Hurrying Home," "Houses") suggests that the speaker can only breathe the full story of what they've seen.

It's an eerie sight. Even the turn of phrase "little Men" suggests something uncanny: these fairies are *like* men, but *not* men. (See William Allingham's "The Faeries" for another contemporary example of a shivery encounter with "little men.") *All* of the speaker's visions, in fact, seem to walk along the border between the everyday and the utterly strange; that's what makes them so unsettling and so exciting.

Even as the speaker unveils them, these "little Men" are still partly "unperceived." They're secretive, making their way to hidden homes, perhaps not *wanting* to be recognized by blundering humanity. The speaker has had to be watchful, patient, receptive, and quiet to catch even this glimpse.

The speaker might feel a little secretive, too:

> All this—and more—if I should tell—
> Would never be believed—

That "and more" suggests this vision is just the tiniest peek at the speaker's experiences. Dickinson's characteristic dashed caesurae around the words make the speaker sound halting, suggesting that they feel hesitant to reveal even *this* much. They've seen many, many sights like this. But they know that, if they were to tell anyone about them, they'd "never be believed"—a pretty good reason to keep quiet.

There's an obvious irony here, though. The speaker *has* told, in this very poem. Their careful, hesitant movement toward even this brief revelation suggests that, in some sense, they know they shouldn't talk about what they've seen, but that they want to all the same.

LINES 13-16

> *Of Robins in the Trundle bed*
> *How many I espy*
> *Whose Nightgowns could not hide the Wings—*
> *Although I heard them try—*

The speaker has just described their reluctance to share their uncanny experiences of magic and their fear that they'll "never be believed." But they still seem to feel the need to talk about what they've seen.

So far, all of the speaker's experiences have happened outdoors. Now, magic creeps out of the natural world and right into human homes. The speaker remembers seeing many, many "Robins in the Trundle bed" (rollaway beds, in which 19th-century children often slept) trying unsuccessfully to "hide the Wings" under their "Nightgowns." The speaker sees right through this disguise. Again, though, they don't raise the alarm or confront the sneaking birds; they just observe, *Ah yes, that's a robin pretending to be a child, not a real child.*

This is a vision at once sweet and disturbing. It's pretty cute to imagine little birds cozy in a trundle bed, trying to hide their wings in nightgowns, whispering to each other as the speaker listens just outside the door. But maybe it's sinister, too. How did these robins get there, and what happened to the children they're imitating? In a world haunted by "little Men," these robins feel like changelings, fairy replacements for stolen human children.

Perhaps the speaker is even seeing something magical or strange in ordinary children, imagining them as closer to the enchanted fairy world than most adults are. Babies might, in some sense, be more like robins trying to adjust to the world of people than they're like the grown-ups who care for them.

More innocently still, children might *pretend* to be robins, involving the speaker in their game, still close enough to the world of magic that they begin to believe the story they're telling...

Charming, eerie, and ambiguous, this juxtaposition between the magical and the domestic suggests that magic doesn't stay safely outdoors. Even the close and cozy indoor world, in this speaker's eyes, flickers between the everyday and the enchanted.

LINES 17-20

But then I promised ne'er to tell—
How could I break My word?
So go your way—and I'll go Mine—
No fear you'll miss the Road.

The speaker pulls sharply back from their tale of "Robins in the Trundle bed," saying:

> But then I promised ne'er to tell—
> How could I break My word?

This abrupt about-face raises a lot of questions. Who, exactly, did the speaker make this promise "ne'er to tell" *to*? The little men? The disguised robins? Some other, unmentioned denizen of the fairy world? Or did they just privately swear *themselves* to secrecy, knowing better than to describe what they know can "never be believed" to the rational adult world?

Well, it's too late now: ironically, the speaker has already done what they swear they won't do. In the poem's surprising last lines, the speaker reveals that they know they've been speaking to an audience all along. Brusquely, they conclude:

> So go your way—and I'll go Mine—
> No fear you'll miss the Road.

This summary dismissal of someone who's apparently been there this whole time comes as a surprise to the reader, who might feel implicated in that "you." Whoever this "you" is, the speaker is certain they don't have what it takes to meet "little Men" and clandestine robins. Instead, they must take a road there's "no fear" they might miss: a symbolic road that suggests the clear, well-lit trail of dull rationality and common sense.

Those who aren't careful, open, and alert—who aren't willing to pay attention when they notice that the sound in the woods isn't "loud enough—for Wind"—will never understand what the speaker has seen. The everyday world, this poem suggests, is anything but. The border between the human world and fairyland is so fine and porous that it's hardly a border at all. Magic's closeness is precisely what makes it hard to see; enchantment hides in plain sight.

Crossing this border is wildly exciting and a little frightening. It's an experience the speaker wants to share, and an experience they know they must keep scrupulously private from those who would discount it.

SYMBOLS

THE ROAD

The poem ends with a firm symbolic farewell to those who can't believe in the magic the speaker knows to be real. The speaker "promised ne'er to tell" about the things they've seen, especially not to those who doubt—and so, having gone against their "word" in this very poem, they send the person they're talking to on their way:

> So go your way—and I'll go Mine—
> No fear you'll miss the Road.

The "Road," here, is not just a physical path, but a symbolic one: the clear, well-lit, signposted road of everyday common sense. The speaker's dismissal suggests that a lot of important things can only be perceived when you head off that road and onto rambling, brambly, twilit paths through the woods.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-20:** "So go your way—and I'll go Mine— / No fear you'll miss the Road."

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

Through subtle imagery, the speaker suggests that magic lies just beneath the skin of the natural world.

The poem opens on a "Murmur in the Trees" that the speaker is wise enough to take "note" of: there's something a little strange about it. You might *think* it's the wind, but if you're paying careful attention, you'll find it's "not loud enough" for that—a distinction so fine that you really have to know what you're listening for to grasp that you're hearing voices, not breezes.

Similarly, the "long—long Yellow" the speaker sees stretching across the "Lawn" vividly evokes rich late-afternoon sunlight falling over grass. But again, the speaker knows that there's something special about this light. Readers might here imagine the way the world looks when the light is low in summer and autumn. The speaker picks up on the gold-lit, enchanted feeling of those fleeting times to suggest that the "magic hour" really *is* magic. This image also suggests that magic appears in in-between times and places, like the hours when day and night shade into each other.

When supernatural beings finally put in a direct appearance, they introduce themselves through a "Hubbub—as of feet," a ruckus that isn't "audible" in quite the same way ordinary footsteps are; it sounds "dapperer—more sweet" than human plodding. Notice the way the speaker plays with onomatopoeia here: the word "dapperer" itself sounds like the patter of light feet over leaves.

All of this imagery is shifty, elusive, just on the edge of perception; even when the speaker hears fairies going about their business, the sounds they make simply aren't "audible" in the same way human noises are. Catching a glimpse of the enchanted world, the poem suggests, demands careful, patient attention, a respect for what you can sense out on the very boundaries of your understanding.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "A Murmur in the Trees—to note— / Not loud enough—for Wind—"
- **Lines 5-8:** "A long—long Yellow—on the Lawn— / A Hubbub—as of feet— / Not audible—as Ours—to us— / But dapperer—more sweet—"

PARALLELISM

The speaker begins the poem by remembering all the strange sights they've seen, using parallelism to link these experiences to each other. The grammatical family resemblance between the lines subtly suggests that what might (to some) appear to be ordinary natural phenomena feel, to the speaker, charged with magic.

Take a look at the anaphora that links these lines:

> A Murmur in the Trees—to note—
> Not loud enough—for Wind—
> A star—not far enough to seek—
> Nor near enough—to find—
> A long—long Yellow—on the Lawn—
> A Hubbub—as of feet—
> [...]
> A Hurrying Home of little Men [...]

At first, these visions seem natural, not supernatural: it's only the speaker's fine discernment that lets them know the "murmur" they hear isn't the wind, or that the "long Yellow" on the grass isn't just the late-afternoon light. Slowly, the speaker builds up to a less ambiguous sign: the "Hubbub" that "little Men" make "Hurrying Home." By introducing all of these images with the same phrasing, the speaker makes it clear that the everyday and the mysterious don't just live alongside each other, but overlap.

Another flavor of parallelism suggests that discovering the porous border of the enchanted world takes great sensitivity:

> A Murmur in the Trees—to note—
> Not loud enough—for Wind—
> A star—not far enough to seek—
> Nor near enough—to find—

To know what they're sensing, the speaker has to know what they're *not* sensing. The "Murmur in the Trees" is "not loud enough" to be the wind; the star is neither infinitely far away nor close enough to capture. The parallelism here suggests that perceiving magic involves knowing how subtly it reveals itself; perhaps you can only "note" it out of the corner of your eye.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "A Murmur in the Trees"
- **Line 2:** "Not loud enough"
- **Line 3:** "A star"
- **Lines 3-4:** "not far enough to seek— / Nor near enough—to find—"
- **Line 5:** "A long—long Yellow"
- **Line 6:** "A Hubbub"
- **Line 9:** "A Hurrying Home"

IRONY

The poem's quiet irony suggests that being able to see into the more mysterious side of the world can feel at once like a deep secret and an experience one is desperate to share.

As the poem begins, the speaker recounts all the strange things they've seen, moments when the enchanted world crossed over into the everyday one. Their list, it transpires, is one long sentence building up to this conclusion:

> All this—and more—if I should tell—
> Would never be believed—

Of course, the speaker *has* just told. These lines thus come as a challenge to the reader, asking, *Do* you *believe?* They also suggest that the speaker is holding something back, venturing to describe only a fragment of their experiences, waiting to see if they can trust their listener.

The irony deepens at the end of the poem when the speaker says:

> But then I promised ne'er to tell—
> How could I break My word?

Too late: the speaker has already broken their word, a point they emphasize when they tell their reader to "go your way" a line later, suggesting that they know someone is there and listening. These lines raise all sorts of questions. Who did the speaker swear secrecy *to*? Why do they feel compelled to speak anyway? And why do they send their listener away so brusquely

and suddenly?

The poem's hesitant-but-fervent tone makes it feel as if experiences of enchantment are fragile, private, and deeply meaningful. The speaker seems to want to share what they've seen, but to hold back, too, knowing that magic exposed to the light of day is all too likely to evaporate.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "All this—and more—if I should tell— / Would never be believed—"
- **Lines 17-18:** "But then I promised ne'er to tell— / How could I break My word?"

ALLITERATION

Moments of alliteration give this poem a faint, hushed music.

For instance, listen to the alliterative sounds in the first stanza:

> A Murmur in the Trees—to note—
> Not loud enough—for Wind—
> A star—not far enough to seek—
> Nor near enough—to find—

The paired alliterative words here—two /n/ sounds, two /s/ sounds, two /f/ sounds—make these lines feel hypnotically steady and balanced, as if the speaker is staying still and quiet, waiting patiently to catch a glimpse of whatever is murmuring in the woods, hardly daring to breathe.

In the second stanza, meanwhile, the "long—long Yellow—on the Lawn" gets a repeated, lilting /l/ sound, which feels as long and languorous as the golden shaft of late-afternoon light these words describe. The /l/ in "Yellow" makes the effect even stronger.

In stanzas 2 and 3, quiet /h/ sounds evoke the hushed "Hurrying Home of little Men / To Houses unperceived," just barely "audible" even to the clued-in listener.

More /h/ alliteration suits the secrecy of the Robins trying to "hide" their wings in spite of the fact the speaker has already "heard" them. Those breathy, aspirated /h/ sounds might even suggest the brush of feathers against nightgowns and the shifting of sheets under little clawed feet.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "note"
- **Line 2:** "Not"
- **Line 3:** "far"
- **Line 4:** "find"
- **Line 5:** "long," "Lawn"
- **Line 9:** "Hurrying Home"
- **Line 10:** "Houses"
- **Line 15:** "hide"
- **Line 16:** "heard"

VOCABULARY

Murmur (Line 1) - A gentle, indistinct sound.

Hubbub (Line 6) - The noise of a crowd.

Audible (Line 7) - Perceptible to hearing.

Dapperer (Line 8) - Neater; more stylish and elegant. (Notice that the word "dapper" sounds a lot like tiny pattering feet!)

Trundle bed (Line 13) - A low bed on wheels that rolls out from beneath a bigger bed.

Espy (Line 14) - Glimpse.

Ne'er (Line 17) - A contraction of "never."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A Murmur in the Trees—to note—" uses one of Dickinson's favorite forms: ballad stanzas. That means that each of this poem's five quatrains (or four-line stanzas) uses common meter and an ABCB rhyme scheme, just as many old folk songs and hymns do.

Dickinson used this shape all the time, for poems about everything from being drunk with joy to dying. The ballad stanza's plainness and flexibility must have appealed to her: in this unassuming shape, she could examine the whole sweep of human experience with deceptive simplicity.

That deceptive simplicity is especially fitting in a poem about the magic that lurks just inside, alongside, or behind everyday natural phenomena. Noticing late light spilling across the lawn and hearing a "Murmur" just a little too quiet to be the wind in the trees, the speaker has to know what they're looking for to understand that they're hearing fairy folk moving in the woods. The ordinary world, this speaker knows, is full of magic; so is this poem's ordinary form.

This poem also uses plenty of Dickinson's characteristic dashes. Thanks to all these caesurae, lines seem to hold their breath in astonishment.

METER

Like lots of Dickinson's verse, this poem is written in common meter. That means that its quatrains alternate between iambic tetrameter (lines of four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm) and iambic trimeter (just three iambs). This pattern gives the poem the swaying, to-and-fro rhythm that readers can hear in lines 3-4:

A star— | not far | enough | to seek—
Nor near | enough— | to find—

Dickinson often wrote in common meter, using its simple rhythms as a plain cover for deep thought and feeling. A master of this meter, she also played around with its rhythms for effect—for instance, in line 8, when the speaker describes the sound of fairy feet. Their footsteps aren't as loud as ours, the speaker says:

But dapperer—more sweet—

Here, the poem mutes its beat a little. Rather than using the vigorous iambic trimeter that would usually fall here, Dickinson uses only two strong stresses, replacing one with the extra unstressed syllable in "dap-per-er." This quiet, subtle effect suggests the light-footed scurrying of the "little Men" the speaker watches.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's rhyme scheme runs like this:

ABCB

The second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme with each other, while the first and third lines do not. This is the standard pattern for ballad stanzas.

Dickinson complicates this simple pattern with occasional slant rhymes—for instance, matching "wind" with "find" in the first stanza. Dickinson often used slant rhyme in her poetry, which is part of what gives much of her verse its curious music. Here, one moment of slant rhyme mirrors the speaker's meaning, too. When the speaker rhymes "word" and "Road" at the end of the poem, the rhymes part ways with each other just as the speaker parts ways with those who aren't willing to see magic in the world.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is at once solemn and full of excitement. Deadly serious about the signs of magic they see in the world, they're also delighted by them, relishing the "dapper[]" sounds of elfish feet and the sweetness of robins disguised in nightgowns. They feel more of an allegiance to the enchanted world than to the ordinary one, in fact; those who can't share their pleasure in the "murmur" of mystery are free to "go [their] way" down the broad road of reason, but the speaker won't be joining them.

SETTING

This poem is set on the boundary between the everyday and the enchanted. The speaker seems to be sitting in an ordinary back garden, watching the "long—long Yellow" of late afternoon spill across the lawn and listening to what might almost be the wind in the trees. But they know better: that yellow light heralds the time of day when "little Men" scurry off to their secret homes; the "murmur" in the trees is no wind, but voices on the edge of hearing.

The speaker isn't the only one tiptoeing across the border between the human world and fairyland, either. The disguised "Robins in the Trundle bed" seem to be trying to pass themselves off as human children, hiding their wings beneath nightgowns. Those who know how to look, the speaker says, will observe that these kinds of border-crossings happen all the time.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) published almost nothing during her lifetime, and after 1865 she rarely even left her family home in Amherst, Massachusetts. But from within her circumscribed world, she explored the heights and depths of human experience through her groundbreaking poetry.

No one else sounds quite like Dickinson. Her poems use simple, folky forms—ballad stanzas, for instance—to explore profound philosophical questions, passionate loves, and the mysteries of nature.

While Dickinson didn't get too involved in the literary world of her time, she was still part of a swell of 19th-century American innovation. Her contemporary Walt Whitman (who became as famous as Dickinson was obscure) was similarly developing an unprecedented and unique poetic voice, and the Transcendentalists (like Emerson and Thoreau) shared her deep belief in the spiritual power of nature.

Dickinson herself was inspired by English writers like William Wordsworth and Charlotte Brontë, whose works similarly found paths through the everyday world into the sublime, terrifying, and astonishing. This poem's insistence that there are more things in heaven and earth than the rational mind can explain is as capital-R Romantic as John Keats.

After Dickinson died, her sister Lavinia discovered a trunk of nearly 1,800 secret poems squirreled away in a bedroom. Published at last, Dickinson's poetry became internationally famous and beloved. Dickinson's work and her life story still influence all kinds of artists.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dickinson's vision of mysterious stars and "little Men" in the woods fit into the 19th century's renewed interest in the magical, mystical, and sublime. Artists like Christina Rossetti (Dickinson's near-exact contemporary across the pond), William Morris, and Richard Dadd explored fairyland in their

works, finding in it a tantalizing wildness and strangeness—and a reflection of their own secret selves.

Some of this fascination with magic was a reaction against the growing dominance of reason, science, and materialism during the Industrial Revolution. In this period of rapid technological advancement, wonderful discoveries in medicine and biology came alongside destructive mining and logging, merciless working conditions in newly-built factories, and choking pollution.

Many artists of this era worried that humanity was beginning to see the world as something to be mastered and exploited; they feared that both the beauty and the spiritual power of nature might be lost forever to shortsighted greed. Poems like Dickinson's defy a worldview that would deny the inexplicable and refuse to see the fairies for the trees.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem in Manuscript — See a copy of the poem in Dickinson's hand. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/12170009)
- The Dickinson Museum — Visit the website of the Emily Dickinson Museum to find a treasure trove of information on the poet's life and work. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/)
- The Poem Set to Music — Listen to an eerie musical interpretation of the poem. (https://youtu.be/nYBUgUW1kaU)
- Dickinson's Legacy — Read an article about the unlikely survival of Dickinson's poetry, most of which was written on scraps of paper and concealed in a trunk. (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/12/05/emily-dickinsons-singular-scrap-poetry)
- Dickinson's Influence — Read contemporary writer Helen Oyeyemi's appreciation of Dickinson. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/04/emily-dickinson-hero-helen-oyeyemi)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- A Bird, came down the Walk
- After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
- A narrow Fellow in the Grass
- An awful Tempest mashed the air—
- As imperceptibly as grief
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- Before I got my eye put out
- Fame is a fickle food
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I cannot live with You –
- I cautious, scanned my little life
- I died for Beauty—but was scarce
- I dwell in Possibility –
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- If I can stop one heart from breaking
- I had been hungry, all the Years
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I like a look of Agony
- I like to see it lap the Miles
- I measure every Grief I meet
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- I started Early — Took my Dog —
- I taste a liquor never brewed
- It was not Death, for I stood up
- I—Years—had been—from Home—
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- Nature is what we see
- One need not be a Chamber — to be Haunted
- Publication — is the Auction
- Safe in their Alabaster Chambers
- Success is counted sweetest
- Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
- The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
- The Bustle in a House
- The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants
- There came a Wind like a Bugle
- There is no Frigate like a Book
- There's a certain Slant of light
- There's been a Death, in the Opposite House
- The saddest noise, the sweetest noise
- The Sky is low — the Clouds are mean
- The Soul has bandaged moments
- The Soul selects her own Society
- The Wind – tapped like a tired Man –
- They shut me up in Prose –
- This is my letter to the world
- We grow accustomed to the Dark
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

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