Before I got my eye put out

POEM TEXT

Before I got my eye put out —
I liked as well to see
As other creatures, that have eyes —
And know no other way —

But were it told to me, Today,
That I might have the Sky
For mine, I tell you that my Heart
Would split, for size of me —

The Meadows — mine —
The Mountains — mine —
All Forests — Stintless stars —
As much of noon, as I could take —
Between my finite eyes —

The Motions of the Dipping Birds —
The Morning's Amber Road —
For mine — to look at when I liked,
The news would strike me dead —

So safer — guess — with just my soul
Upon the window pane
Where other creatures put their eyes —
Incautious — of the Sun —

SUMMARY

Before I lost my eyesight, I liked seeing as much as anything else with eyes does, and I took sight for granted, because I was so used to it.

But if someone told me today that I could see the sky again, my heart would break in taking in its sheer size (especially compared to how small I am).

The meadows and mountains would be mine, and the forests and endless stars too. I could look out at noon for as long as I could bear, taking in as much as my limited eyes would allow.

I'd see birds soaring and diving, and the honeyed morning light falling on the road. These sights would be mine to look at whenever I wanted—and this idea scares me to death.

It's safer to imagine the world in my soul, just resting at the window—while other people go on using their eyes, not caring about the sun's danger.

THEMES

SIGHT, AWARENESS, AND UNDERSTANDING

Having lost their vision, the speaker of "Before I got my eye put out" comments on what it is like to remember seeing. The speaker at first seems to suggest that their blindness has given them a renewed appreciation of sight itself—something the speaker may have taken for granted in the past. By the poem's end, however, the speaker declares that it's in fact safer to see "with just my soul"—a phrase that implies the speaker has discovered a deeper, more meaningful kind of vision. Ironically, having their eye "put out" allows the speaker to "see" (perhaps, symbolically, to understand) the world in a new and powerful way.

The speaker suggests that sight is a power that people take for granted every day. Before the speaker lost their sight, they were just like any other creature with eyes: they knew "no other way" to experience their environment. Note that sight here can be read literally, but also metaphorically suggests general awareness and appreciation. The speaker might be implying that most "creatures" take things in visually without truly understanding them, or that they all make sense of the world in the same casual, rather thoughtless way.

That casual ability to see, the poem goes on, is actually a kind of ignorance of just how awe-inspiring and spectacular the world really is. The speaker suggests that the world is, in fact, so big and beautiful that "finite" human eyes can't truly grasp it at all. When the speaker imagines having their sight restored, they feel that the majesty of "the Sky," "meadows," "mountains," "forests [and] Stintless Stars"—in short, the sheer scale of the world—would "split" their heart, overwhelming them with an awareness of their own comparative smallness and insignificance.

The speaker's blindness thus ironically brings them to a deeper kind of "seeing"—an understanding that the world is too large, complicated, and wondrous to be fully comprehended. The loss of the speaker's "eye" becomes a means toward a more truthful, humble kind of seeing. While other people and creatures continue using their vision in the same old ways, taking it for granted, the speaker's contemplation of the world now takes place through the "soul." And the speaker actively prefers their new inner sight, finding it "safer." Perhaps this suggests their blindness itself was *caused* by an "incautious" attempt to fully

know the world.

With all this in mind, it's important not to take the poem too literally. Again, sight here can be read as a symbol of wisdom and understanding. The speaker's story might thus be a kind of allegory for knowing one's place in a beautiful and complex universe—and recognizing the impossibility of containing the infinite in one's own "finite" mind.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21

NATURE'S OVERWHELMING WONDER AND BEAUTY

"Before I got my eye put out" portrays nature as sublime: beautiful, vast, and not a little terrifying. The speaker (who has been blinded, either literally or metaphorically, and can no longer see the world) is astonished by how casually they used to look at the "meadows," "mountains," and "stars." Now, they're overawed by the mere thought of nature's splendor—and shocked that anyone can look straight at the astonishing natural world without being shaken to the core.

Remembering the "Stintless stars," the "Morning's Amber Road," and the "Motion of the Dipping Birds," the speaker marvels at the beauty and the grandeur of the natural world. In its awe-inspiring variety and vastness, nature is in fact quite frightening. If people thought deeply, even for a moment, about the sheer scale of the natural world, they would feel "[un]safe." That is, the poem suggests that nature is *too* beautiful and too complex to really wrap one's head around. The speaker would rather *not* have their sight back, then, because they fear seeing nature in all its glory again: nature is so overwhelming that the speaker feels their "heart" might "split" at the realization of how small and insignificant they are in comparison.

Nature even seems to speak to powers beyond human comprehension: infinite forces next to which the speaker feels just how "finite," how tiny and mortal, they really are. Most people, the speaker suggests, get by in life only by not fully acknowledging the terrifying natural beauty that's right in front of their eyes. Perhaps "incautious[ly]" going about one's business is the only way not to be frightened and overawed by nature all the time! The speaker is thus grateful for their blindness: it's actually a revelation, allowing them to understand the natural world's sublime splendor as it really is.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Before I got my eye put out —
I liked as well to see
As other creatures, that have eyes —
And know no other way —

The poem's first line is as arresting as it is mysterious. The speaker tells the reader that they have had their "eye put out," meaning they have lost their sight. (Note that it's possible to take this literally—that the speaker has gone blind—or to read the speaker's "eye" as a metaphor for their awareness of the word, sense of self, or even their very life.)

The reader might well think that this is a pretty remarkable—and horrific—event, and justifiably want to know more. But the poem doesn't clarify what happened—or even who is speaking. The omission of such fundamental details ensures that the focus is not on the speaker's blinding, but on what they've discovered in their blindness.

Back in the sighted days, the speaker remembers being just like any other "creature" with eyes:

> I liked as well to see
> As other creatures, that have eyes —
> And know no other way —

"Liked" here is an understated word, perhaps suggesting the speaker never really thought about what it meant to see when the seeing was good. In other words, the speaker took their vision for granted and didn't know any better. Their perception of the world was shaped by their sight and that was just the way it was. The mention of "creatures," as opposed to people specifically, suggests that taking seeing for granted is a natural, even instinctive state: animals do it as automatically as humans do.

Again, these lines might be read literally, but there are clearly some metaphorical possibilities here, too. Perhaps "seeing" here suggests the way that people experience the world in general—and the way that people take the world for granted. This poem will go on to explore what one can learn from *losing* one's everyday perceptions (and maybe even going beyond them).

LINES 5-8

But were it told to me, Today,
That I might have the Sky
For mine, I tell you that my Heart
Would split, for size of me —

In the second stanza, the speaker considers a hypothetical situation: how they would react if they were told suddenly that they could have their sight back. The answer isn't simple! The

speaker wouldn't be straightforwardly delighted to see again. In fact, they feel as if regaining their sight would be totally overwhelming. Now that they know what it's like to *not* be able to see, the speaker can appreciate just what an incredible thing it is to look at the world and behold its wonders. The speaker thus has a heightened awareness of what it *means* to see.

Blindness, in other words, means the speaker no longer takes the world (or the ability to perceive it) for granted. When they imagine their sight returning, the first thing they think of is the ability to see "the Sky"—and to them, *seeing* the sky would also mean *possessing* the sky. In other words, part of what's incredible about vision is the way that it fits something as huge as the sky into one person's "eye." And if vision is a metaphor for understanding (or trying to), then it's also incredible that people feel they can fit the *idea* of the sky into their own minds.

In fact, the speaker doesn't altogether believe that they'd be able to handle the sky anymore, knowing what they know now. If they were to see the sky again, they feel that their "Heart / Would split, for size of me." in other words, the speaker feels that, if they saw the sky now, its sheer size might knock them dead. (Even the sharp consonant /t/ sounds in "Heart" and "split" evokes their heart breaking in two.) The difference in scale between the infinite sky and the speaker's own little self would be just too overwhelming.

Again, these lines suggest that the speaker's blindness has given them a new kind of understanding. No longer able to look at the sky whenever they wish, they've come to a deeper knowledge of just how awe-inspiring the sky really is, and how small and humble they are.

It's worth noting, too, how the end-stop at the stanza break in line 8 creates a brief, hushed pause, capturing the speaker's awe towards the "Sky." It's as if they've fallen silent at the very thought of it.

Finally, the poem's form is by now clear: each quatrain uses common meter, meaning that odd-numbered lines are written in iambic tetrameter and even-numbered lines are written in iambic trimeter. An iamb is a poetic foot that consists of two syllables in an unstressed-stressed pattern (da-DUM); tetramter means there are four iambs (eight syllables) per line, while trimeter means there are three:

> But were | it told | to me, | Today,
> That I | might have | the Sky

These are also called ballad stanzas, which typically follow an ABCB rhyme scheme: the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme. Here, as in much of Dickinson's poetry, those rhymes are slant: "Sky"/"me" echo each other, but aren't a perfect match sound-wise.

LINES 9-13

> *The Meadows — mine —*
> *The Mountains — mine —*
> *All Forests — Stintless stars —*
> *As much of noon, as I could take —*
> *Between my finite eyes —*

In the third stanza, the speaker fantasizes about what it would be like to regain their vision. Knowing what it's like to *not* see changes the speaker's perspective on what it would mean to see. Seeing things, the speaker again observes, would be like possessing them, a point the poem makes by repeating the word "mine" in lines 9 and 10:

> The Meadows — mine —
> The Mountains — mine —

These lines' parallelism and strong /m/ alliteration (highlighted above) make these imaginings feel even more intense. The speaker even breaks from the poem's form here to underline how incredible they feel it would be to see (and thus, to somehow encompass or own) a "meadow" or a "mountain."

So far, the poem has used ballad stanzas: quatrains in common meter. Now, it breaks one line of iambic tetrameter (that is, a line of four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm) into two lines of iambic dimeter (lines of *two* iambs). It's as if the speaker can't even fit all their awe at the thought of the visible world into a single line:

> The Mead- | ows — mine —
> The Moun- | tains — mine —

And the speaker only sounds more overwhelmed as the stanza goes on. These lines use asyndeton to create a seemingly endless list of nature's wonders: with no "and" to mark the last item, it seems as if the speaker could go on listing natural beauties forever.

The speaker doesn't just imagine seeing one forest but "all" of them; not just the "stars," but a limitless ("stintless") array of them. Even ordinary "noon" sunlight would be hard to "take."

To this speaker, then, nature is sublime: beautiful, various, vast, and more than a little frightening in its scale and power. Ironically, the speaker has only come to "see" this truth through their blindness. When people can just look at whatever they want, the poem suggests, they don't really appreciate the world in all its mind-boggling glory: they mostly just see instinctually, like "other creatures," without giving either the world or their power of sight a second thought.

Not seeing, then, becomes the speaker's way of accessing a deeper truth: the loss of sight grants the speaker a new *internal* kind of vision.

LINES 14-17

The Motions of the Dipping Birds —
The Morning's Amber Road —
For mine — to look at when I liked,
The news would strike me dead —

These lines pick up where the last stanza left off, continuing to list all the sights the speaker would marvel at if their vision were restored. To the meadows, mountains, forests, and endless stars, the speaker now adds:

> The Motions of the Dipping Birds —
> The Morning's Amber Road —

These images are longer and more sensuously imagined than those in the previous stanza; it's as though the speaker is slipping deeper into their inner vision of nature's beauty. Their image of "Morning's Amber Road" even suggests that they're remembering dawn sunlight as a kind of enchantment: that "amber road" might be a sunbeam, or it might evoke the way early light can seem to bejewel an ordinary street.

The meter here does evocative work, too. The steady iambs in line 14 create a "dipping" motion to match the image:

> The Mo- | tions of | the Dip- | ping Birds —

The up-and-down rhythm conjures a picture of birds soaring and diving in the sky.

Bringing this list to a conclusion, the speaker declares that, if all these everyday and astonishing sights were restored to them, "The news would strike me dead." In other words, the speaker insists that seeing any one of these sights would be too much to bear.

Of course, this could all mean something beyond literal sight. The speaker has realized the sheer splendor of the world, and accordingly feels terrified at experiencing that world afresh. They know, now, that their own perception *can't* contain the world in its totality. Going back to ordinary seeing, then, would "strike" the speaker "dead"—they wouldn't be able to handle it!

LINES 18-21

So safer — guess — with just my soul
Upon the window pane
Where other creatures put their eyes —
Incautious — of the Sun —

In the final stanza, the speaker explains that it's "safer" to have had their "eye put out" and no longer see: instead, they prefer to sit quietly by the window, using their "soul" to see. Sight, in other words, is replaced by a kind of inner vision, in which the speaker understands that no creature, human or otherwise, can fully comprehend the awe-inspiring wonder of the world. That reference to the soul again suggests that this poem is more metaphorical than literal: the kind of sight the speaker is dealing with here isn't just to do with one's physical eyes.

The caesurae in line 18 place great emphasis on the word they frame:

> So safer — guess — with just my soul
> Upon the window pane

This "guess" works as a verb: the speaker isn't saying "I guess," but that they feel it is better to "guess" (that is, imagine) how the world looks than to actually see it. Meanwhile, "other creatures" look willy-nilly at the "Sun" itself, not even noticing how astonishing and terrifying it is.

Being "blind," in other words, paradoxically means seeing the truth about the world more clearly. People who rush around the world "incautious[ly]" looking at things don't see what the blind speaker can: that *no one* can really comprehend the profound power and vastness of nature. Any knowledge of the world, by necessity, will always be incomplete.

By losing their vision, the speaker has thus "seen" their own limitations. Other people might look at the world and think they can know it at a glance. But the speaker understands that this kind of vision is itself a kind of blindness—a failure to see how small and feeble any one person is in the face of the infinite universe.

That said, there is also something tentative about this last stanza. It might be "safe" to live as the speaker does, but perhaps it's also less exciting. The speaker won't be overwhelmed, but maybe they'll miss out on something, too. The caesura in the last line creates hesitation, with the poem concluding on a deeply ambiguous note. This poem about the limits of understanding itself resists being easily understood.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

This poem's alliteration creates a sense of overwhelming natural abundance and evokes the speaker's fear and awe as they think of that abundance.

In the second stanza, for example, the speaker imagines regaining their sight, saying that their "Heart / Would split, for size of me[.]" These quickly repeated /s/ sounds draw extra attention to the speaker's *fear* of what it would be like to see again: they worry that the sheer scale of the world might break them!

That sense of overwhelm continues into the next stanza:

> The Meadows — mine —
> The Mountains — mine —
> All Forests — Stintless stars —

As much of noon, as I could take —
Between my finite eyes —

This stanza is packed full of alliterative sounds, creating an intensity that matches the speaker's mood. The sheer amount of alliteration here mirrors the limitlessness of the natural world—the meadows, mountains, forests, stars.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "told," "Today"
- **Line 6:** "might"
- **Line 7:** "mine"
- **Line 8:** "split," "size"
- **Line 9:** "Meadows — mine"
- **Line 10:** "Mountains — mine"
- **Line 11:** "Stintless stars"
- **Line 14:** "Motions"
- **Line 15:** "Morning's"
- **Line 16:** "look," "liked"
- **Line 18:** "So safer," "soul"
- **Line 20:** "creatures"
- **Line 21:** "Incautious"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton—the lack of conjunctions like "and"—evokes the sublime power and scale of nature by compressing image after image into a small space on the page.

The device occurs throughout lines 9 to 15, creating a seemingly unending list of the world's natural beauty:

The Meadows — mine —
The Mountains — mine —
All Forests — Stintless stars —
As much of noon, as I could take —
Between my finite eyes —
The Motions of the Dipping Birds —
The Morning's Amber Road —

The lack of conjunctions in this list makes it sound as if the speaker could go on forever—which is kind of the speaker's point! That is, there is so much beauty in the natural world that to be able to see it all again (and to fully appreciate seeing it) would be too much for the speaker to take. "Finite eyes," the speaker has learned through their blindness, can't contain the infinite majesty of the world—just as this stanza feels like it can barely contain all the mighty and beautiful things it describes.

Asyndeton thus reflects the speaker's state of mind, and the deeper understanding of the world they've gained through their blindness.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-15:** "The Meadows — mine — / The Mountains — mine — / All Forests — Stintless stars — / As much of noon, as I could take — / Between my finite eyes — / The Motions of the Dipping Birds — / The Morning's Amber Road —"

CAESURA

Caesurae occur throughout the poem, both in the form of commas and characteristic Dickinson em-dashes. These caesurae often evoke what the speaker is describing—whether that's an experience, a mood, or a vision of overwhelming natural beauty.

For example, check out how the poem uses caesurae in the second stanza. Here, the speaker says that their heart would break if they were told they could have their vision back:

But were it told to me, Today,
That I might have the Sky
For mine, || I tell you that my Heart
Would split, || for size of me —

These two commas divide their respective lines, mirroring the very "split" that the speaker is describing.

In the following stanza, the speaker expands on what it would mean to see again, listing all the marvels of the natural world that they'd be able to look at every day:

The Meadows — || mine —
The Mountains — || mine —
All Forests — || Stintless stars —

Caesura here compresses more and more nature into the stanza's small container, threatening to overwhelm the poem (just as the speaker feels seeing would overwhelm their mind).

At the end, the speaker concludes that it's "safer" *not* to see:

So safer — || guess — || with just my soul
Upon the window pane
Where other creatures put their eyes —
Incautious — || of the Sun —

This is not an emphatic, triumphant ending: the caesurae here feel halting and nervous. The speaker feels that perhaps they are better off with just an inner vision, but there is doubt here too—and caesura helps to evoke that hesitancy.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "creatures, that"
- **Line 7:** "mine, I"
- **Line 8:** "split, for"

- **Line 9:** "Meadows — mine"
- **Line 10:** "Mountains — mine"
- **Line 11:** "Forests — Stintless"
- **Line 12:** "noon, as"
- **Line 16:** "mine — to"
- **Line 18:** "safer — guess — with"
- **Line 21:** "Incautious — of"

CONSONANCE

Most of the consonance in "Before I got my eye put out" is also alliteration, occurring at the start of words. Consonance makes the poem's language more vivid, bringing images and ideas to life.

Take the first line, for example. Here, the speaker bluntly states that "I got my eye put out." Though the reader doesn't learn how the speaker lost their eye, it can't have been pleasant! The /t/ sound in "got [...] put out" is spiky and harsh, suggesting the violence of this mysterious event.

The speaker goes on to imagine all the natural wonders they might see if their vision returned:

> All Forests — Stintless stars —

These hushed /st/ sounds—which sound a lot like quietly shifting branches on a starry night—are packed in tight, suggesting intensity and abundance. In other words, this consonance mirrors the speaker's awed memory of the natural (and visual) world.

Lines 18 and 21, meanwhile, uses sibilant sounds to different effect:

> So safer — guess — with just my soul

These /s/ sounds have a whispery, hushed quality that matches the speaker's awestruck resolution: it's better, in their view, *not* to try and fully comprehend the world's magnitude, but to sit quietly with one's "soul."

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "got," "put out"
- **Line 5:** "told," "to," "Today"
- **Line 6:** "That," "might"
- **Line 7:** "tell," "that," "Heart"
- **Line 8:** "split," "size"
- **Line 9:** "Meadows — mine"
- **Line 10:** "Mountains — mine"
- **Line 11:** "Forests — Stintless stars"
- **Line 12:** "take"
- **Line 13:** "Between," "finite"
- **Line 14:** "Dipping," "Birds"
- **Line 15:** "Morning's Amber Road"
- **Line 16:** "look," "liked"
- **Line 17:** "strike"
- **Line 18:** "So safer," "guess," "just," "soul"
- **Line 19:** "Upon," "window pane"
- **Line 20:** "creatures"
- **Line 21:** "Incautious," "Sun"

END-STOPPED LINE

End-stopped lines help to make the poem feel fractured and doubtful, preventing the speaker's thoughts from unfolding too smoothly. Each end stop interrupts the poem's flow like rocks in a river:

> Before I got my eye put out —
> I liked as well to see
> As other creatures, that have eyes —
> And know no other way —

Notice that the end stops here are also characteristic of Dickinson's poetry more generally: all of them use her signature em-dash, which creates a suspenseful effect, rather like a held breath.

To really understand this effect, check out the first stanza with the em-dash end-stops taken away:

> Before I got my eye put out
> I liked as well to see
> As other creatures, that have eyes
> And know no other way

This version's confident tone would be at odds with this poem's interest in the limits of human understanding!

End stops also make the poem's last lines especially dramatic:

> So safer — guess — with just my soul
> Upon the window pane
> Where other creatures put their eyes —
> Incautious — of the Sun —

These spiky, halting end-stops suggest danger, and the fate—perhaps the speaker's own—that awaits those "creatures" reckless enough to stare directly at the sun.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "out —"
- **Line 3:** "eyes —"
- **Line 4:** "way —"
- **Line 8:** "me —"
- **Line 9:** "mine —"

- **Line 10:** "mine —"
- **Line 11:** "stars —"
- **Line 12:** "take —"
- **Line 13:** "eyes —"
- **Line 14:** "Birds —"
- **Line 15:** "Road —"
- **Line 16:** "liked,"
- **Line 17:** "dead —"
- **Line 20:** "eyes —"
- **Line 21:** "Sun —"

ENJAMBMENT

Most lines in "Before I got my eye put out" use end stops, but a handful are enjambed.

Some of these enjambments appear in lines to do with vision: the white space at the end of the line suggests the ability to see clearly. Lines 2 and 3, for example, talk about what life was like for the speaker *before* they had their "eye put out":

> I liked as well to see
> As other creatures, that have eyes —

The enjambment here mirrors the speaker's previous state. The end of the line is uncluttered and flows freely into white space; similarly, the speaker's vision was once unobstructed.

The speaker feels overwhelmed at the thought of having their vision restored—mainly because, having lost their sight, they now know how incredible it is to look at the world. Check out the enjambments between lines 6-8:

> But were it told to me, Today,
> That I might have the Sky
> For mine, I tell you that my Heart
> Would split, for size of me —

Here, white space suggests the vastness of nature: the word "Sky," for instance, is left hanging for a moment in a blank space that evokes its own huge, airy emptiness. By cutting through phrases, these enjambments also mirror the speaker's overwhelmed heart as it "split[s]."

The enjambments in the last stanza, like those in the first, suggest a kind of clarity:

> So safer — guess — with just my soul
> Upon the window pane
> Where other creatures put their eyes —

The speaker decides that it is better *not* to see—or rather, to see inwardly with the "soul." The enjambment shows that the speaker has made their mind up: the lines' lack of visual clutter mimics the speaker's own firm decision to value their inner—rather than outer—vision.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "see / As"
- **Lines 6-7:** "Sky / For"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Heart / Would"
- **Lines 18-19:** "soul / Upon"
- **Lines 19-20:** "pane / Where"

IRONY

The poem hinges on a central irony: through losing their sight, the speaker can see more clearly that the world is an incredible and unfathomable place. The speaker has had their "eye put out" but has come to prefer it that way, the loss of vision leading to a kind of inner vision based on the "soul" rather than the eyes.

The speaker compares two moments in time—before they "got [their] eye put out," and after—and comes to a surprising conclusion. Now that speaker has a better appreciation of what it means to look at the world, they are a little frightened by the prospect. To look at nature would be to look at something that "finite eyes" can't really contain.

Most "creatures," people included, don't appreciate the visual marvels of the world, the poem suggests. But through blindness, the speaker gains heightened respect for—and fear of—nature's limitless beauty, and now prefers a more inward kind of contemplation.

Ironically, then, *not* seeing allows the speaker to see more deeply; coming face to face with limitation allows the speaker to realize that *all* perception is limited. Perhaps the imagination can understand the vastness of the world better than the senses—and perhaps it better understands its own limits, too.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21

JUXTAPOSITION

"Before I got my eye put out" juxtaposes two different ways of experiencing the world: vision and blindness. (Of course, this shouldn't be taken too literally; the poem is really about the limits of human understanding and the extent to which humans acknowledge those limits.)

The speaker compares themselves to "other creatures, that have eyes," juxtaposing their experiences *before* having their eye "put out" and *after*. This allows the speaker to consider the world from a unique vantage point, knowing what it is like to both see and not see. Through this comparison, they become acutely aware that any understanding of the world is "finite" and incomplete. While those "other creatures" see without really appreciating what it *means to see*, remaining "incautious,"

the speaker prefers to contemplate the world more inwardly through the "soul."

In the second and third stanza, the poem also juxtaposes the speaker (who feels tiny and limited) with the natural world (which seems infinite and powerful). This forms part of the speaker's argument that the world cannot be contained by "finite eyes." The speaker feels that, in the face of nature's vast and frightening beauty, their "heart" might just "split, for size of me"—that is, they fear they might drop dead from realizing just how tiny they are. Dwarfed by "stintless" nature, the speaker understands that sight might just be too much to bear.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-13
- Lines 18-21

METAPHOR

It's fair to read the entire poem as a metaphor, in which sight represents understanding and perception. The "eye" the speaker loses here might relate more to the senses, whereas the "soul" represents a more inward vision. The speaker's loss of vision shows them that *all* experience of the world is filtered through limited human perceptions. That is, no "finite eyes"—no singular perspective—can contain the full magnitude of the world.

"Before I got my eye put out" also uses two smaller metaphors. The first is an old classic: the speaker uses the "Heart" to mean their emotional state in line 7. (Note that this is also a moment of metonymy.) But the poem refreshes this idea by talking about the heart *splitting*, as opposed to the more conventional *breaking*—an image that suggests the heart being sliced cleanly through, all in one terrible blow.

In the next two stanzas, the poem lists marvels of the natural world—those sights that would overwhelm the speaker if they had their vision back. One of these, "the Morning's Amber Road" could be a metaphor for a sunbeam, a path of glowing golden light. But it could also describe a literal road! Think about the way dawn light can seem to make an ordinary wet road seem shining and jewellike. Even the most mundane aspects of the world are potentially too beautiful! This magical image relates to the speaker's newfound appreciation of the world's visual beauty—which, in fact, would be too much for them to bear.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "I tell you that my Heart / Would split,"
- **Line 15:** "The Morning's Amber Road —"

REPETITION

The poem's repetitions help to evoke the speaker's awe and fear in the face of natural beauty.

In the third and fourth stanzas, the speaker imagines what it would be like to have their vision restored—to go back to their old way of seeing and experiencing the world. Since going blind, the speaker has a newfound appreciation for the beauty of the world, but this comes with a kind of terror. To see again would be overwhelming: there would be *too much* beauty for the speaker's "finite eyes" to contain. Repetition helps to communicate this feeling.

For instance, take a look at the repetition of the word "mine" in the third and fourth stanzas:

> The Meadows — **mine** —
> The Mountains — **mine** —
> [...]
> The Morning's Amber Road —
> For **mine** — to look at when I liked,

These repeated "mine[s]" makes the speaker sound awestruck as they imagine—and marvel at—different elements of nature one by one. If seeing these wonders feels like possessing them, these lines suggest, the speaker might easily feel they couldn't possibly handle such riches: they would be too much for any one person to bear.

The parallelism in lines 9 and 10 also evokes awe:

> **The** Meadows — **mine** —
> **The** Mountains — **mine** —

This phrasing creates a list format that seems like it could go on and on: these are just *some* of the marvels the speaker could name.

The same flavor of anaphora picks up again in lines 14-15 and creates a similar effect:

> **The** Motions of the Dipping Birds —
> **The** Morning's Amber Road —

Again, there's a sense here that the speaker could go on listing nature's glories forever.

Repetition thus captures the speaker's wonder and fear as they think back on nature's sublime beauty.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "The Meadows — mine —"
- **Line 10:** "The Mountains — mine —"
- **Lines 14-15:** "The Motions of the Dipping Birds — / The Morning's Amber Road —"

- **Line 16:** "mine"

VOCABULARY

Put out (Line 1) - Removed, gouged out.

Well (Line 2) - Much.

Stintless (Line 11) - Limitless, unending.

Incautious (Line 21) - Careless.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

For the most part, "Before I got my eye put out" uses Dickinson's characteristic quatrains. There are four of these (stanzas 1, 2, 4, and 5), while the third stanza has five lines (technically known as a quintain). Based on their meter and rhyme scheme, these are more specifically known as ballad stanzas.

The regular, limited shape of the quatrains fits a poem that's all about the limits of human understanding—that is, the impossibility of fully comprehending or *containing* the world with "finite eyes." With that in mind, the five-line stanza in the middle of the poem is no accident! In this section of the poem, the speaker marvels at not just the beauty of the natural world but its sheer, overwhelming sense of scale:

> The Meadows — mine —
> The Mountains — mine —
> All Forests — Stintless stars —
> As much of noon, as I could take —
> Between my finite eyes —

The stanza here overflows the regular quatrain shape, right at the moment when the speaker highlights the awe-inspiring limitlessness of nature. Threatening to break the poem's regular form, this stanza thus mirrors the speaker's view that regaining their sight "would strike me dead" by showing them more than they "could take."

METER

Most Dickinson poems are written in common meter, and this one is no exception. Common meter is built from alternating lines of iambic tetrameter (that is, lines of four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm) and trimeter (lines of *three* iambs). Here is common meter at work in the second stanza:

> But were | it told | to me, | Today,
> That I | might have | the Sky
> For mine, | I tell | you that | my Heart
> Would split, | for size | of me —

Iambs give the poem a lively forward momentum —a momentum the speaker often disrupts with caesurae and end-stops. This stop-start approach matches with the speaker's thoughtful, inquisitive, awestruck mood.

The poem breaks briefly from this pattern in lines 9 and 10:

> The Mead- | ows — mine —
> The Moun- | tains — mine —

Technically speaking, this is one line of iambic tetrameter split into lines of iambic dimeter (that is, lines of two iambs). This broken line makes the third stanza look as if it has burst its boundaries—evoking the awe-inspiring limitlessness of the natural world.

Iambic rhythms also bring line 14 to life:

> The Mo- | tions of | the Dip- | ping Birds —

Notice how this line seems to go up and down—to soar and "dip"—just like the birds it describes.

RHYME SCHEME

"Before I got my eye put out" uses one of Dickinson's favorite rhyme schemes, taken from the ballad stanza. It runs like this:

> ABCB

But those B rhymes are never perfect, and they sometimes fall away altogether. In fact, most rhymes in this poem are slant. For instance, "Road" and "dead" in lines 15 and 17 share a dull /d/ sound, but not a vowel. "Mine" and "eyes" in lines 10 and 13 share a long /i/ sound, but have mismatched consonants. And "Sky" and "me" in lines 6 and 8 match a long /i/ with a long /ee/—there's a vowel family resemblance, but no real rhyme there!

Dickinson often used slant rhymes, but here, they feel particularly appropriate. The mismatch between the poem's rhymes reflects the mismatch between people's ability to *see* the world and their ability to really *understand* the magnitude of what they're seeing.

SPEAKER

The poem uses a first-person speaker, which is common in Dickinson's poetry. And like a lot of Dickinson's speakers, this one remains anonymous: they're just a kind of vessel through which the poem can explore an idea or a philosophy.

What readers *do* learn about this speaker is that they've had their "eye put out"—perhaps literally, perhaps metaphorically. Either way, they've now become, in some sense, blind.

Through this physical change, the speaker has undergone a deeper kind of transformation. They are now acutely aware of the limitations of perception: the "finite[ness]" of eyes (or any other sense) as a way of knowing and comprehending the world. The speaker has acquired an *inner* vision based on the contemplation of the "soul," and actually thinks it is better this way. In other words, they feel that to see again would be to risk being overwhelmed.

The speaker thus comes across as a reverent, awestruck, and humble person.

SETTING

The poem is set in the speaker's mind. Comparing two moments in time—before they had their "eye put out" and after—the speaker concludes that they're "safer" now that they cannot see. But as the speaker remembers everything they used to look at, the poem also paints vivid pictures of the natural world, from the "Motions of the Dipping Birds" to the "Stintless stars."

The sheer amount of nature packed into the poem portrays the natural world as sublime—vast, various, beautiful, awe-inspiring, and a little frightening. In other words, the world itself, when considered through "finite eyes," is too much for the speaker to bear, now that they've come to understand the limits of human perception. The world, they conclude, *can't* be known or comprehended all at once.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) is one of the foremost poets in the English language. Dickinson spent her whole life in Amherst, Massachusetts, and was notoriously reclusive, avoiding most company besides her family and close friends. Perhaps that reclusiveness informs the speaker's attitude in this poem: their sense that it is better to sit one's "soul" at the windowpane than to look out with "finite eyes."

"Before I got my eye put out" is a great example of Dickinson's distinctive and innovative style. The ballad stanzas, the capitalization of notable nouns, the numerous em-dashes, the deep questioning of the nature of existence—all of these are typical for a Dickinson poem. All of these qualities also set her apart from the poetic conventions of her time; like her contemporary Walt Whitman, she blazed a completely new stylistic path.

This poem also addresses the recurring Dickinson theme of human limitation; another of her poems, "Renunciation—is a piercing Virtue," also suggests that there is a kind of power in limitation. That is, both poems argue that there is something deep and truthful about *not* knowing, and about renouncing the desire to fully comprehend the world.

Dickinson's poetry frequently uses imagery from the natural world. This poem in particular seems influenced by the Romantic concept of the sublime: the idea that nature is vast, various, and beautiful, but also incomprehensible and frightening. Dickinson was influenced by the work of a number of English Romantic poets, including William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge; their poetry often speaks to the limits of human understanding and the "unintelligible" nature of the world (as Wordsworth puts it in one of his most famous poems).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dickinson lived and wrote in the same town in which she grew up: Amherst, Massachusetts. Though she attended Amherst Academy and, briefly, Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, she generally shunned the outside world. Instead, she preferred to stay at home and work on her craft. While she wrote thousands of poems, most of them remained unpublished during her lifetime; her sister Lavinia discovered a treasure trove of them in Dickinson's room after her death.

Though Dickinson was never blind, she did suffer from various eye ailments. It's thought that she had iritis (an inflammation of the eye) and one stage feared that she would lose her sight. Around the time of the poem's composition, Dickinson underwent two courses of treatment in Boston for her eye condition, and these trips were her last outside of Amherst. It's also possible that Dickinson suffered from epilepsy and anxiety. Perhaps these struggles inform this poem's perspective that is "safer" to retreat from the world—and that there's plenty to be learned from seeing with the "soul" rather than the "finite eyes."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Brief Biography — Visit the Poetry Foundation to learn more about Dickinson's life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)
- A Discussion of Dickinson — Listen to a podcast in which an expert panel discusses Dickinson. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDBADIHwchQ)
- The Emily Dickinson Museum — Visit the official site of the Dickinson Museum, which publishes a wide range of resources for students. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org)
- Dickinson's Eye Ailment — Read an article about Dickinson's real-life struggles with her eyesight. (https://www.nytimes.com/1979/12/18/archives/did-eye-

ailment-add-to-emily-dickinsons-woes-sister-reportedly.html)

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the actor Frances Sterhagen performing the poem. (https://youtu.be/By7r3ubKoKE)

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 —
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I dwell in Possibility –
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- 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
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- Success is counted sweetest
- Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
- The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
- There is no Frigate like a Book
- There's a certain Slant of light
- The Sky is low — the Clouds are mean
- The Soul selects her own Society
- 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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