I did not reach Thee

POEM TEXT

I did not reach Thee
But my feet slip nearer every day
Three Rivers and a Hill to cross
One Desert and a Sea
I shall not count the journey one
When I am telling thee

Two deserts but the year is cold
So that will help the sand
One desert crossed—
The second one
Will feel as cool as land
Sahara is too little price
To pay for thy Right hand

The Sea comes last—Step merry feet
So short we have to go
To play together we are prone
But we must labor now
The last shall be the lightest load
That we have had to draw

The Sun goes crooked—
That is Night
Before he makes the bend
We must have passed the Middle Sea
Almost we wish the End
Were further off
Too great it seems
So near the Whole to stand

We step like Plush
We stand like snow
The water murmur new
Three rivers and the Hill are passed
Two deserts and the Sea!
Now Death usurps my Premium
And gets the look at Thee—

SUMMARY

I didn't get to You—but my feet carry me closer to you every day. I have three rivers, a hill, a desert, and a sea to cross, but when I at last tell you the story of my journey, I'll feel like it was hardly any distance at all.

I have *two* deserts to cross, in fact—but the weather's been cold, so the sand won't burn me. I've made it across one desert already, and the second one will feel as cool as solid, grassy ground. Crossing the Sahara itself would be a small price to pay to win your hand.

Last of all, I have to cross the sea. Walk cheerfully, feet—there's only a little ways to go! We usually enjoy ourselves, but now we have to work. This last part of our journey will be the easiest.

The sun traces a different path now and night is coming, showing that we must have made our way past the middle of the ocean. We almost wish we were further away from our destination: it seems overwhelming to stand so near to the great Whole.

We walk softly, as if our feet were cushioned; we stand still as the snow. We hear the water murmuring as if for the first time. We've crossed the three rivers, the hill, the deserts, and the sea! Now, Death cuts ahead of me and gets the first look at You—

THEMES

THE DIFFICULT JOURNEY TOWARD GOD

Emily Dickinson's "I did not reach Thee" depicts life as a difficult journey toward God's embrace. The speaker has been traveling for a long, long time; they've crossed "Three Rivers and a Hill" and "two deserts" already, and they know they still have a "Sea" to go. They don't have any doubts about this pilgrimage, though, for they know that their reward will be a meeting with a divine beloved they address only as "Thee." Through the extended metaphor of the journey, the speaker suggests that life is a long hard road that's all worth it, since the great "Whole" that is God lies at the end.

The speaker takes their daunting journey in stride. Though they have to cross not one but two deserts, three rivers, a hill, and a sea, they remain enthusiastic for the long walk. For instance, while the second desert comes as a surprise—at first they thought they'd only have to cross "One Desert"—they cheerfully observe that at least the "year is cold,' so the sand won't burn so badly. In short, nothing can faze them.

That's because, no matter how arduous the travel, it's "too little

price" to pay for the reward at the end of the journey: the "Right hand" of a beloved. This might make the speaker sound like a knight in a medieval romance, questing to earn their lover's hand in marriage. But there's more going on here. To reach this beloved, the speaker says, is to approach the "Whole"—language that suggests their lover is none other than the omnipresent God.

That idea gets even clearer when the speaker finally comes to the end of their journey and finds that someone else has gotten there first. At the last moment, a personified Death cuts in line in front of them to get the first look at the beloved. Death has to *precede* the speaker's meeting with God, in other words: the final part of the speaker's journey is to die.

The poem's extended metaphor suggests that life is often a struggle through a difficult landscape of pains and sorrows. The thought that a loving and beloved God lies at the end of these troubles gives the journey lightness and meaning.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-34

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

I did not reach Thee
But my feet slip nearer every day
Three Rivers and a Hill to cross
One Desert and a Sea
I shall not count the journey one
When I am telling thee

As the poem begins, its speaker is making a journey toward a beloved "Thee" ("You") who's terribly far away. The past tense phrase "did not reach" in line 1 implies that the speaker is journeying toward someone they tried and *failed* to "reach" earlier. They've got a long way still to go: the speaker must cross "Three Rivers," "a Hill," "One desert and a Sea." Still, the speaker finds that their "feet slip nearer every day" to the person they're looking for.

What's more, the journey has a destination that makes long, hard travel worth it:

> I shall not count the journey one
> When I am telling thee

Once they've found the person they're addressing, in other words, the journey that got them there will seem like nothing at all. This beloved is worth any trek.

All the language here suggests that this is not just the story of someone going to visit a faraway friend:

- Consider those slipping feet: the landscape the speaker describes, an imposing wilderness of rocks and hills and sands and waters, isn't one that it would seem all that easy to "slip" over. But somehow, the speaker's journey happens almost involuntarily.
- The capitalized "Three Rivers," "a Hill," "One desert and a Sea" further hint that this is an *archetypal* landscape rather than a *literal* one.
- This journey, then, might be the metaphorical journey that everyone makes "every day" whether they like it or not: the slippery, unstoppable journey through life toward death.

More specifically, this long journey through life's wilderness toward an all-desirable but hard-to-reach beloved represents the speaker making their way toward *God*. The speaker's humble admission that "I did not reach thee" suggests that a mere mortal can't necessarily get as close to God as they'd like in life. But the speaker trusts that life will carry them toward God nonetheless—and that, once they've "slip[ped]" their way to the divine, the rewards will be so great that the difficult journey will seem like nothing.

Read aloud, and this poem sounds like it's written in Dickinson's go-to rhythm, common meter: lines of alternating iambic tetrameter (four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm) and iambic trimeter (just three iambs). Take lines 5-6:

> I shall | not count | the jour- | ney one
> When I | am tell- | ing thee

On the page, though, the poem *looks* more complicated. Take lines 1 and 2. While this doesn't *look* like common meter, it *sounds* like it when spoken. Line 1 is enjambed, meaning that the phrase stretches smoothly across the line break without pause. Out loud, the poem falls into the expected rhythm:

> I did | not reach | Thee / But | my feet |
> slip near- | er eve- | ry day

By breaking that common-meter rhythm in irregular places across unpredictable numbers of lines, Dickinson gives the poem a halting, breathless shape that reflects the speaker's difficult journey and gives dramatic moments plenty of space. Beneath that odd, broken form, the iambic meter pulses, steady as the speaker's faith.

LINES 7-13

Two deserts but the year is cold
So that will help the sand
One desert crossed—
The second one
Will feel as cool as land

Sahara is too little price
To pay for thy Right hand

In the first stanza, the speaker described the epic journey they know they'll have to make to reach the "Thee" they long for—a serious hike that will cross "Three Rivers and a Hill," "One Desert and a Sea." Now, they revise that plan slightly:

> Two deserts but the year is cold
> So that will help the sand
> One desert crossed—

Notice how the diacope on "desert[s]" picks up on the language of the first stanza, giving the speaker the air of a friendly person offering directions at the roadside: *Then you go across a desert—no, wait, I tell a lie*, two *deserts*.

The speaker doesn't sound at all fazed by the realization that they've got an unexpected extra desert to cross. In fact, they seem perfectly cheerful, observing that the weather has been cold, so the sand won't burn their feet so badly in the second desert; it will feel, they say optimistically, "as cool as land," a simile that suggests the speaker will enjoy their sandy slog as much as a stroll through dewy spring grass.

To the reader, the thought of cooler-than-usual sand might seem like small comfort in the face of so terrible a journey. But the speaker takes a romantic view of their situation:

> Sahara is too little price
> To pay for thy Right hand

Now, the speaker sounds rather like a knight questing to win a beautiful beloved's "Right hand" in marriage. At just the same time, they sound like a religious pilgrim. The idea of taking God's "Right hand" echoes the language of the Apostle's Creed, the basic statement of Christian faith, in which Christ is said to be seated in Heaven "at the right hand of God the Father almighty."

The quiet allusion suggests that the speaker is doing what an earthly Christian is supposed to: following in Christ's footsteps. For a seat at the right hand of a beloved God, "Sahara is too little price" to pay: the speaker would walk across all the deserts of the world to reach their goal.

In that light, readers might also imagine the longed-for "Thee" here as a lost *mortal* beloved whom the speaker wishes to embrace after death. But the mixture of romance and divinity here fits into a grand tradition. The speaker's attitude seems not unlike Saint Teresa's or Dante's: to them, God isn't a menacing, bearded figure, but a desirable and longed-for lover.

LINES 14-19

The Sea comes last—Step merry feet
So short we have to go
To play together we are prone
But we must labor now
The last shall be the lightest load
That we have had to draw

Here, the poem makes an abrupt time jump. All of a sudden, the speaker has put those two deserts behind them and reached the final leg of their journey: "the Sea comes last." Perhaps this leap in time suggests the very human feeling of looking up and going: *Wait, wasn't I in high school just a minute ago? Didn't I just have that baby yesterday? Aren't I still 50?* Time passes quickly and often unremarked; the speaker only takes note of time as one stage of their life ends and another—the last—begins.

Still blithe and dauntless, the speaker prepares for this momentous step:

> The Sea comes last—Step merry feet
> So short we have to go
> To play together we are prone
> But we must labor now

In this moment of personification, the speaker reveals a warm relationship with their body. Their own feet, here, are less like parts of them and more like old playmates, friends from way back.

The fun and games are over for the time being, though. "[W]e must labor now," the speaker warns their feet—as if the three rivers, the hill, and the two deserts they've already trekked across hadn't been work at all. Crossing this sea will be a new kind of challenge, apparently. Still, the speaker stands ready to spur their feet on:

> The last shall be the lightest load
> That we have had to draw

The sweet, light /l/ alliteration here ("last"/"lightest") captures the speaker's doughty cheer as they face the final part of their journey.

There are many surprises in these lines. Besides the speaker's sense of their body as a companion, there's the implication that *footsteps* will be involved in the passage through this sea—not swimming, not rowing, but walking.

The image might ring a distant biblical bell. Will the speaker and their feet will cross the sea as Moses and the Israelites did in the book of Exodus, miraculously parting the waters to walk through on dry(ish) land? Or will they make like Jesus and walk on water?

Either way, this ocean passage feels momentous, the last and greatest challenge the speaker will have to face on their journey—and one with which they might have some divine assistance.

LINES 20-27

The Sun goes crooked—
That is Night
Before he makes the bend
We must have passed the Middle Sea
Almost we wish the End
Were further off
Too great it seems
So near the Whole to stand

The poem again leaps forward in time, and readers find the speaker just past the "Middle Sea," the middle of the ocean. From here—standing on the waters?—they look up at a personified "Sun" whose path has gone "crooked" as he follows a new course across the sky. "That is Night," the speaker observes; this astronomical sign shows them that they're getting close to the end of their journey. They've passed into a new hemisphere, and the heavens move differently here.

Notice that the speaker is no longer an "I" here, but a "we." They and their feet remain friendly companions, then. But the plural pronoun might also remind readers that the speaker's journey isn't just their own.

Pause for a moment to reflect on the speaker's overarching metaphor. If this journey is life itself, then passing the "Middle Sea" might suggest passing middle *age*, entering a new era in one's existence—and seeing "Night" (a classic metaphor for death) gathering on the horizon. Those readers who are lucky enough to pass the Middle Sea of life will stand just where the speaker stands and be included in their "we": this moment of crossing the border between youth and old age is a shared human experience.

Here at that turning point:

> Almost we wish the End
> Were further off

That is, "we wish" the end of the journey—death—were further away. That's not because the speaker fears "the End," however. It's because they've been anticipating what they'll find there for so long that they're overwhelmed:

> Too great it seems
> So near the Whole to stand

The beloved "Thee" here becomes the "Whole," the great totality, the alpha and the omega. To finally be in God's presence, the speaker realizes, will be something beyond what they could ever have imagined. No matter how much they've longed to reach their destination, there's no way to fully prepare for what they're about to experience—and as they cross the Middle Sea, they feel the weight of the coming encounter.

LINES 28-32

We step like Plush
We stand like snow
The water murmur new
Three rivers and the Hill are passed
Two deserts and the Sea!

When the fifth and final stanza begins, readers know what to expect—to a point. So far, every time the speaker has begun a new stanza, they've begun it with a great leap across a span of their journey. Now, readers can guess, the speaker has made their way over that last stretch of the sea; their journey is done.

The last scene opens with the speaker's final soft steps:

> We step like Plush
> We stand like snow
> The water murmur new

The slow, reverent parataxis here evokes the speaker's moment-by-moment experience as they approach the "Whole":

- First come their final steps. Feet and ground alike are velvety and hushed here; every footfall is as luxurious as thick "Plush."
- Then, the speaker stops and stands "like snow." The simile evokes both the white stillness of a snowy field and the speaker's inner experience: perhaps, as they come to a standstill, they feel a shiver of awe.
- In the silence, they hear "the water murmur new"—perhaps the sound of the sea hitting their ears as if for the first time, perhaps the sound of new water, as yet uncharted. Note that it's the "water," singular, not "waters," plural, that murmurs here: it's as if the speaker is hearing *all* water collectively making one great murmur.

They've completed their journey:

> Three rivers and the Hill are passed
> Two deserts and the Sea!

This echo of the first stanza here suggests that the speaker turns back, just for a second, to marvel at how far they've come. Repeating the steps of their journey over to themselves, they sound as if they can hardly believe that it's over.

LINES 33-34

Now Death usurps my Premium
And gets the look at Thee—

In this poem's very last moment, readers might expect the speaker to at last lay eyes on the "Whole," to embrace the beloved "Thee." Instead, someone cuts in front of them:

Now Death usurps my Premium
And gets the look at Thee—

A personified Death leaps out like a line jumper and gets the first glance at the "Whole" the speaker has longed for this whole time. This is a final shock—and a necessary one. Death *has* to come before the last step of the speaker's journey; Death *is* the last step of the speaker's journey.

But Death's startling, eager, even funny appearance here suggests that, no matter how long the speaker has prepared to reach their journey's end, some things just can't be prepared for. Death, as the poet Alice Oswald once said, "is similar to nothing else": it's an experience that can't be described because no one has come back to describe it.

Indescribable, too, is what happens after Death usurps the speaker's place in line. The final, all-desirable meeting with the "Whole" will have to stay in the realm of the unspoken. All that readers can know, here at the end of the poem, is that the speaker got to where they were going.

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

"I did not reach Thee" embellishes its overarching extended metaphor with flickers of personification, making an old trope—life as a journey—feel fresh and strange.

In the central extended metaphor, the speaker's journey is life itself: a long, arduous, and ultimately rewarding trek. The speaker's adventure across deserts, hills, rivers, and seas can be read as an image of life's long, strange trip, which inevitably crosses deserts of loneliness, rivers of tears, hills of difficulty. Those with faith, though, can take courage from the thought that they're heading toward the beloved "Whole": God, with whom they'll rest after death.

This is a classic metaphor; Dante and Bunyan are only a couple of the writers who famously used it before Dickinson did. As ever, though, Dickinson makes it her own. It's the details within this metaphor that make the poem lively, strange, and distinct.

Consider, for instance, the moment when the speaker personifies their own feet:

The Sea comes last—Step merry feet
So short we have to go
To play together we are prone
But we must labor now
The last shall be the lightest load
That we have had to draw

This could just be read as a "feet, don't fail me now!" moment, in which the speaker is encouraging themselves more than anything—if it weren't for the fact that the speaker *goes on* behaving as if their feet are their companion on the journey throughout the rest of the poem. After this passage, they're no longer an "I," but a "we."

Personified, the feet become companions; it's as if the speaker recognizes their body as a separate being with a shared goal. There's a sweetness in this relationship, too. Though the speaker and their feet have trekked over endless sands together, the speaker thinks of their feet as playmates, cheerful friends with whom they've had some good times.

On their personified feet, the speaker travels through a personified world. The "Sun" is a "he" here, traveling a new and "crooked" path as the speaker makes their way into another hemisphere—an image that hints that the sun offers a kind of personal encouragement, showing by its new bend that the speaker is on the right course.

Last but not least, and not for the first time in Dickinson, Death itself is a person here. As the speaker at last makes the last few reverent steps toward the "Whole," Death—who has apparently been there all along—springs out in front of them and "usurps" their place in line, stealing the first look at the sight the speaker has quested their whole life to see. Of course, considering the extended metaphor, Death might *have* to get out in front of the speaker in order for their journey to reach its end: to meet God face to face, one must die.

Again, there's a strange sweetness here. Death isn't some serious robed reaper here, but something more like an eager kid. In this speaker's animate world, all is hope and excitement—even if life's journey is long and hard.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-19:** "The Sea comes last—Step merry feet / So short we have to go / To play together we are prone / But we must labor now / The last shall be the lightest load / That we have had to draw"
- **Lines 20-22:** "The Sun goes crooked— / That is Night / Before he makes the bend"

ALLUSION

Subtle allusions to the language and stories of the Bible ground the speaker's story in religious faith. For example, the speaker's trek across river, desert, and sea echoes the biblical book of Exodus:

- In the Exodus story, the prophet Moses, with the miracle-working help of God, leads the enslaved Israelites out of captivity in Egypt.
- The first step of their journey is the last step of this speaker's journey: a dramatic sea crossing. Escaping Egypt, Moses miraculously parts the waters of the Red Sea to let his people walk across.

- The freed Israelites then wander the wilderness for 40 years, searching for their promised homeland. Moses himself dies before they make it there—an idea that Dickinson gestures at when Death beats her speaker to getting the first look at the beloved "Whole."

Dickinson was far from the first poet to use the story of Exodus as an image for every soul's journey. Living in this world, the allusion suggests, often feels like an arduous trek through a wilderness. With faith, though, that trek can at least feel purposeful, a journey toward an all-desirable destination.

The speaker's sea crossing might also evoke later stories from the Bible. Notice that the speaker seems to cross the waters on their "feet," not in a boat. Besides the Red Sea crossing, this image might evoke one of the miracles of Christ: walking on water.

Christian language arises again when the speaker declares:

> Sahara is too little price
> To pay for thy Right hand

Besides suggesting that the speaker wants to be mystically married to their beloved God, these words call up the words of the Apostle's Creed, the basic declaration of Christian faith, which says that Christ is "seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty." Both of these allusions place the speaker in Christ's shoes, suggesting that they're embodying an old Christian principle: all Christians are said to be part of the "body of Christ."

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Three Rivers and a Hill to cross / One Desert and a Sea"
- **Lines 12-13:** "Sahara is too little price / To pay for thy Right hand"

REPETITION

The poem's repetitions evoke both the speaker's dogged persistence on their journey and the cheerful resolve that keeps them going.

As the poem begins, the speaker maps out the journey they'll have to make to reach their longed-for "Whole":

> Three Rivers and a Hill to cross
> One Desert and a Sea

That sounds intimidating enough on its own. Then, the next stanza begins:

> Two deserts but the year is cold
> So that will help the sand
> One desert crossed—

In this moment of revision (and diacope), the speaker corrects their "One Desert" to "two deserts," an even more daunting prospect. If they're taken aback for a moment by the realization that they have a whole extra desert to cross, they don't let it show for long: they simply cheer themselves up by observing that they've already got "one desert crossed" and that the second one, at least, won't be so blazing hot, since "the year is cool." The repetitions here introduce readers to a dauntless, optimistic speaker.

Much of the speaker's optimism comes from the thought of who they'll find at their destination: God, the beloved "Thee," who's in their thoughts at the start of the journey ("I did not reach Thee") and at the end ("And gets the look at Thee"). This figure's appearance in both the first and last lines of the poem suggests that they're the beginning and end of the speaker's thoughts.

As the speaker draws close to the "Whole" they're questing for, their language becomes reverently repetitive:

> We step like Plush
> We stand like snow

The anaphora (the repetition of "We") and broader parallelism here give each of these slow, soft similes a reverent weight, making the speaker's approach to their destination feel like a sacred ritual.

Then, at last:

> Three rivers and the Hill are passed
> Two deserts and the Sea!

At the beginning of the poem, these words laid out the daunting journey still to be made; at the end, they're a cry of triumph.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Thee"
- **Lines 3-4:** "Three Rivers and a Hill to cross / One Desert and a Sea"
- **Line 7:** "Two deserts"
- **Line 9:** "One desert"
- **Line 28:** "We step"
- **Line 29:** "We stand"
- **Lines 31-32:** "Three rivers and the Hill are passed / Two deserts and the Sea!"
- **Line 34:** "Thee"

SIMILE

The poem's rich, tactile similes let readers follow in the

speaker's footsteps. The first appears in the second stanza. The speaker has just crossed a whole desert, only to realize that there's *another* one in their way. They face this discovery with dauntless good cheer:

> One desert crossed—
> The second one
> Will feel as cool as land

Besides drawing a surprising distinction between desert and "land," creating an image of a desert as a kind of sandy sea, this image captures the speaker's optimism, courage, and passionate love of God. If this second exhausting desert will feel "cool as land," it'll strike them as a mere stroll through a dewy spring meadow—all because they know that the "Right hand" of their great beloved awaits them at the end.

At the end of the poem, two hushed, strange similes summon up the speaker's awe as they reach their destination at last. After hard trekking over river, hill, desert, and sea, the final steps of the speaker's journey land quietly:

> We step like Plush
> We stand like snow

Both of these images are soft and still:

- To "step like Plush" might be to walk as if upon dense, velvety fabric, or to walk as if one's very feet were made of such a fabric, or both. There's a sense not just of softness and silence here, but of relief. After all that trekking over desert and sea, the last steps of the speaker's journey feel padded and luxuriant as if they were pacing over a thick carpet.
- To "stand like snow," meanwhile, evokes a moment of deep wonder. Besides conjuring up the soft, noiseless stillness of a snowy field, this image suggests that the speaker experiences a *chill*, a shiver of awe over their whole body.

Deploying these similes one after the other, Dickinson brings her speaker through a few last delicious steps to a final stillness. The journey, at last, is over, and its last seconds are rich as velvet, bright as snow.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-11:** "One desert crossed— / The second one / Will feel as cool as land"
- **Lines 28-29:** "We step like Plush / We stand like snow"

PARATAXIS

The poem's final stanza begins with a striking moment of parataxis. After long, arduous travel, the speaker at last comes right up to the brink of the end:

> We step like Plush
> We stand like snow
> The water murmur new

The lack of conjunctions here means that each of these lines rests in a pocket of unrushed space:

- First, the speaker takes their final slow steps—soft, velvety, and silent as "plush."
- Then, after so long, they come to a stop, standing as still as a landscape beneath snow (and perhaps feeling a chilly shiver of awe).
- As they stand there, a sound strikes them: the "water murmur new." The sound of the sea they've just crossed hits their ear as if for the first time. Or perhaps they're hearing the sound of new waters altogether, ones they haven't even seen yet.

The parataxis here conjures up the speaker's wonder as they reach the destination of their lifelong pilgrimage. As one line after another lands, the reader can put themselves in the speaker's shoes, sharing that slow-motion sensitivity that often accompanies the most important moments in a life. There's no hurry in these final steps: only a calm, quiet *noticing* of every new sensation as it arrives.

Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 28-30:** "We step like Plush / We stand like snow / The water murmur new"

VOCABULARY

Thee (Line 1, Line 6, Line 34) - You. Here, when the speaker addresses the capital-T "Thee," they're specifically calling out to God.

Draw (Line 19) - Carry. The speaker is saying that this part of the journey will be the easiest.

Whole (Line 27) - That is, everything. The speaker is talking about what it will be like to be in God's overwhelming, all-encompassing presence.

Plush (Line 28) - A kind of luxuriously soft, thick fabric, often used for upholstery.

Usurps (Line 33) - Takes someone's position or place.

Premium (Line 33) - Here, the speaker uses the word "premium" to suggest both a reward and the right to see something first.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Through surprising line breaks, "I did not reach Thee" reshapes a straightforward form into something stranger and wilder.

At first glance, this poem looks irregular: its five stanzas don't stick to a pattern, but range between six and eight lines long. That's how the stanzas appear on the page, anyway. To the *ear*, though, this poem sounds a lot like it's written in regular six-line stanzas.

That's because the poem uses the same rhythms that it would use if it were written in common meter:

- In common meter, four-line stanzas alternate between lines of iambic tetrameter (lines of four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "We must | have passed | the Mid- | dle Sea") and iambic trimeter (*three* iambs, as in "But we | must la- | bor now").
- Here, it just sounds as if Dickinson has tacked an extra pair of lines onto a common meter stanza.

That's not how the stanzas *look*, however, because Dickinson introduces line breaks at unpredictable places. Take a look at what happens in the fourth stanza, for instance (with the meter marked up to show how the regular iambs sometimes split across lines):

The Sun | goes crook- | ed—
That | is Night
Before | he makes | the bend
We must | have passed | the Mid- | dle Sea
Almost | we wish | the End
Were fur- | ther off
Too great | it seems
So near | the Whole | to stand

To the ear, it sounds just like standard alternating lines of tetrameter and trimeter (line breaks are marked with /):

The Sun | goes crook- | ed— / That | is Night
Before | he makes | the bend
We must | have passed | the Mid- | dle Sea
Almost | we wish | the End
Were fur- | ther off / Too great | it seems
So near | the Whole | to stand

By stretching these words over eight lines (while preserving that steady, alternating iambic rhythm), Dickinson mirrors the stalwart speaker's experience in the poem's appearance. Marching steadily toward their destination, the speaker nonetheless hesitates a little as they approach their goal, overawed by the thought that they'll soon be in the presence of the "Whole" itself.

METER

Though it doesn't look like it at first, "I did not reach Thee" has a regular meter. The lines break in unpredictable places, but beneath those breaks, there's a rhythm rather like Dickinson's favorite common meter.

In common meter, four-line stanzas alternate between lines of iambic tetrameter—lines of four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm—and iambic trimeter, just three iambs. Lines 5-6 offer an example of what that sounds like:

I shall | not count | the jour- | ney one
When I | am tell- | ing thee

Now, this poem's irregular stanzas at first don't seem to have any pattern so predictable. Listen to the rhythm of the first lines, for instance:

I did not reach Thee
But my feet slip nearer every day

This appears to be a short line of dimeter (two beats) followed by a long line of pentameter (five beats). Read it aloud, though, and one will notice that these two lines use the same number of beats and the same stress pattern as the common meter lines above. Rearrange the lines slightly and readers can *see* what they *hear*:

I did | not reach | Thee / But | my feet
Slip near- | er ev- | ery day

Each stanza, then, *sounds* as if it's built from six alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. It *looks* very different. By breaking up the lines in unpredictable ways, Dickinson modulates the poem's rhythm, making the verse seem to struggle through its journey just as the speaker does. The steady pulse running through the irregularities keeps these strange stanzas on course.

RHYME SCHEME

Though the poem's irregular line breaks obscure the rhyme scheme a bit, there's still a pattern here. In essence, the poem uses an ABCBDB pattern. But since the speaker often breaks what might usually be one line into bits, that pattern can be hard to trace.

The first stanza, for instance, ends up *looking* like an ABCABA pattern. But if readers *listen* to the poem's meter rather than judging by its line breaks, they'll find that the scheme here actually use a slant rhyme, linking *day* to *Sea* and *thee*; the first *Thee* thus creates an internal rhyme. Rearrange the lines a little,

and it all comes together like this:

> I did not reach Thee / But my feet
> slip nearer every day
> Three Rivers and a Hill to cross
> One Desert and a Sea
> I shall not count the journey one
> When I am telling thee

And there you have it:

> ABCBDB

The same disguised pattern recurs across the poem. There's a hidden form within the irregularities here, and the rhyme scheme helps readers to feel what that form is.

These ideas perfectly suit the speaker's story, in which a long and arduous journey eventually carries them to God. No matter how strange and confused the journey, the speaker trusts that their "feet slip nearer every day," divinely guided.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a dauntless traveler on a sacred—and arduous—journey. As the poem begins, the speaker discovers that they'll have to travel over, not only "Three Rivers and a Hill," a "Desert and a Sea," but also an extra second desert they weren't expecting. And yet, at this disheartening news, they only cheerfully observe that the weather's been cold, so the sands of the second desert won't be as burning hot as the sands of the first were.

If this speaker is unfazed by their perilous trek, it's because they know there's something wonderful at the end. They're making their way toward an encounter with God, the great "Whole" that they address as "Thee" throughout the poem. This speaker's energy and hope derive from love: they want to be with God as one might want to be with a faraway lover.

Their journey, it transpires, is a lifelong one. Just after they cross the final sea, a personified Death (who seems to have been quietly traveling with them all along) leaps out in front of them and gets the first glimpse of that desired "Whole." Perhaps Death *has* to precede a full encounter with God: the speaker "did not reach" in life what they at last find at the end of their journey.

The speaker, then, can be read as an image of anyone who travels through life with the hope that a glorious encounter awaits them at the end.

SETTING

This poem's setting is, in one sense, the whole world. The speaker's journey carries them across a vast landscape of rivers, hills, deserts, and seas—including the center of an ocean, the "Middle Sea," which might suggest middle age. For this landscape is as symbolic as it is real: the journey the speaker describes is the journey through life.

At the same time, the specific features of the poem's landscape suggest that Dickinson was thinking of the Book of Exodus, in which Moses and the Israelites cross the Red Sea and wander the desert looking for the promised land. To this poem's speaker (and to many metaphorical travelers before them), the landscape of Exodus is also the landscape of the soul's trek toward God.

Mingling archetypal images with concrete, particular imagery—consider the sands that are cooler than usual because of a cold year—Dickinson makes this poem's world feel at once timeless, mythic, and alive.

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. This poem was one of many that she wrote with the smallest of audiences in mind: she sent it to her beloved friend (and likely lover) Susan Gilbert. It wouldn't appear in print until Dickinson's niece published the posthumous 1914 collection *A Single Hound: Poems of a Lifetime*. (This niece was also Susan's daughter: Susan ended up marrying Dickinson's brother Austin, much to Dickinson's dismay.)

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 also 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.

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 most active writing years coincided with one of the most tumultuous times in American history: the Civil War (1861–1865). However, Dickinson rarely addressed the political world directly in her poetry, preferring either to write about her immediate surroundings or to take a much wider philosophical perspective.

Dickinson also grew up in a religious community (her father was a noted minister) and came of age during the religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening. Dickinson herself was even swept up by this religious movement for a time. Though she ultimately questioned and moved away from organized religion, her poems remain preoccupied with theological concerns. Many express wonder about the afterlife, speculating on what it's like to meet God—if that's what happens when people die (something Dickinson wasn't sure about). This poem reflects her more romantic, passionate, and hopeful feelings on the matter.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem in Manuscript — See images of the poem in Dickinson's own handwriting. (http://www.emilydickinson.org/manuscripts/I-did-not-reach-thee-1)
- The Emily Dickinson Museum — Visit the website of the Emily Dickinson Museum to find a treasure trove of information about Dickinson's life and work. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/)
- A Brief Biography — Read the Poetry Foundation's short introduction to Dickinson. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70260/emily-dickinson-101)
- Dickinson's Legacy — Read a tribute to Dickinson by contemporary writer Helen Oyeyemi. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/04/emily-dickinson-hero-helen-oyeyemi)
- The Poem Set to Music — Listen to a charmingly strange musical rendition of the poem. (https://youtu.be/CPO6D0AQ-Vk)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- A Bird, came down the Walk
- After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
- A Light exists in Spring
- A Murmur in the Trees—to note—
- A narrow Fellow in the Grass
- An awful Tempest mashed the air—
- As imperceptibly as grief
- A still—Volcano—Life—
- 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 could bring You Jewels—had I a mind to—
- 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 have a Bird in spring
- 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
- Whose cheek is this?
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

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