I died for Beauty—but was scarce

POEM TEXT

1   I died for Beauty—but was scarce
2   Adjusted in the Tomb
3   When One who died for Truth, was lain
4   In an adjoining Room—

5   He questioned softly "Why I failed?"
6   "For Beauty," I replied—
7   "And I—for Truth—Themself are One—
8   We Brethren, are," He said—

9   And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night—
10 We talked between the Rooms—
11 Until the Moss had reached our lips—
12 And covered up—Our names—

SUMMARY

I died for the sake of beauty—but I'd hardly been buried when someone who died for the sake of truth was buried in a neighboring grave.

He quietly asked me why I'd died, and I told him I'd died on behalf of beauty. He said that he'd died for truth, and that the two things are one and the same, so the two of us were like family.

And so, like relatives staying the night together, we kept talking between our graves, till the graveyard moss covered up our mouths and the names on our tombstones.

THEMES

BEAUTY, TRUTH, AND MARTYRDOM

"I died for Beauty, but was scarce" presents a kind of parable about martyrdom, or sacrificing yourself for high ideals. The speaker declares, from beyond the grave, that they "died for Beauty." When a man who "died for Truth" is buried in the adjacent grave, the two corpses strike up a supernatural dialogue, bonding over their shared idealism. Yet their friendship soon ends, as the "Moss" of their neglected graves covers up their mouths and even the "names" on their tombstones. The poem thus suggests that while people may die so that their ideals live on, they can't actually enjoy those ideals

from the grave. Meanwhile, the people who *do* get to enjoy such ideals—to appreciate beauty and truth, for example—won't remember the martyrs who died on their behalf.

The poem initially casts its two dead characters in a flattering light, portraying them as lofty idealists who find companionship in the afterlife. The speaker announces, with a touch of pride, that they've sacrificed themselves for a high ideal: "Beauty." Death doesn't seem to scare them or even make them lonely: another idealist, a man who died "for Truth," is soon buried in the "adjoining" grave.

The two corpses bond over their commitment to high ideals, talking like "Brethren" or "Kinsmen" (i.e., close family). The speaker's neighbor asserts that beauty and truth are "One" and the same, making this pair seem like two peas in a pod. Though it's not set in heaven, the poem starts to make death look rewarding—at least for noble martyrs.

As their brief afterlife fades, however, the poem suggests that there's something ineffective or disappointing about their martyrdom. Rather than asking how the speaker died, the man asks "Why" the speaker "failed," subtly linking their deaths with failure. (It's as if, having failed himself, he assumes the speaker has also.) The two corpses mention the abstractions they died for (beauty and truth), but not their concrete achievements, so it's impossible to know what kind of legacy they've left, if any. Finally, the graveyard "Moss" smothers their "lips" and the "names" on their headstones, putting an end to their dialogue (and, apparently, their afterlife). Symbolically, this detail suggests that, even if their martyrdom still impacts the world, their voices and identities are gone and forgotten.

In other words, this parable about idealists ends on a note of sobering realism. No matter what people "die for," the poem suggests, death is death. Even the highest ideals, such as beauty and truth, become irrelevant in the grave, along with any work we've produced or sacrifices we've made in their name. Meanwhile, the same world that forces martyrs to die for their ideals is quick to forget the legacies they leave.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

• Lines 1-12

DEATH, FINALITY, AND ETERNITY

Dickinson's poem alludes to one of the most iconic poems ever written: John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Keats's ode describes an ancient urn painted with lively scenes, a beautiful work of art that seems timeless. Famously, the ode sums up the urn's message to humankind: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." The characters in Dickinson's poem agree

with this message, but Dickinson's ending casts it in a deeply ironic light. Here, the grave-covering "Moss" has the final say, obscuring beauty, truth, and everything but the fact of death. Unlike Keats's ode, which shows beautiful art surviving for ages, Dickinson's poem suggests that only death (or nature) is eternal, outlasting everything human beings might create.

The dialogue between the poem's characters echoes, and seems to endorse, the moral of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The man who "died for Truth" declares that Beauty and Truth "are One," invoking the closing lines of Keats's ode: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." The easy companionship between these figures of "Beauty" and "Truth" (i.e., the way they feel like "Kinsmen") seems to confirm that these two ideals are intertwined. The way they seem to survive the grave at first also gives hope that these ideals will live on.

Yet Dickinson's poem ultimately makes Keats's message look ironic, or perhaps irrelevant. In Dickinson's poem, the message is expressed by two decaying corpses rather than a seemingly ageless work of art. This makes it sound a lot less lofty and stirring!

Moreover, Keats's poem centers on beautiful, truthful, lasting art while saying nothing about the artist. Dickinson's poem reverses this focus: it spotlights people who "died for" beauty and truth but says nothing about their life's work. Instead of showing beauty and truth surviving, it shows their defenders rotting away.

This shift in emphasis further undercuts the loftiness of Keats's sentiment. Keats's ode calls the urn a "foster-child of silence and slow time," suggesting that these factors helped produce a dazzling work of art. The urn's sheer age makes it seem like a vessel of wisdom, a silent but powerful messenger from the past. Yet Dickinson's "Moss" image shows silence and time having the *opposite* effect on human beings—stifling their voices and obscuring their legacies. "Moss" grows over graves, so it's associated here with both human decay and natural continuity. Symbolically, it suggests that humans die for good, while nature goes on forever. The way the moss covers even the "names" of the dead suggests that, ultimately, death (or nature) will erase everything humans do. Unlike Keats's ode, Dickinson's poem doesn't even imply that human art can achieve a form of "eternity."

Still, there are points of overlap between the two poems. Keats's ode acknowledges that there's something "Cold" about the urn's effect, and something "sorrowful" about the human scenes it supposedly immortalizes. Dickinson's poem suggests that whatever work outlives us (for a while) is cold comfort in light of death's permanence. Basically, Keats's poem suggests that art and truth can be immortal, while Dickinson's stresses that artists and truth-tellers are very mortal. But neither poem holds out any hope for *human* immortality, and in their different ways, both find something disturbing in the idea of eternity.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

🔍 LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

I died for Beauty—but was scarce
Adjusted in the Tomb
When One who died for Truth, was lain
In an adjoining Room—

The opening stanza introduces the poem's setting: a graveyard. It also introduces the poem's two characters, both of whom are dead. One is the speaker, who "died for Beauty"; the other is a man buried next to her, who "died for Truth."

The speaker reports that they'd hardly been buried themselves—"was scarce / Adjusted in the Tomb"—when the man "was lain" to rest in an adjacent grave, or, metaphorically, "an adjoining Room."

From the start, then, the poem establishes an eerie, Gothic atmosphere (pretty common in Emily Dickinson's poetry!). Though its scenario is supernatural, the speaker presents it matter-of-factly. The speaker doesn't explain *why* or *how* the two of them died for beauty and truth, but these claims suggest that they're both martyred idealists of some kind.

"I died for Beauty" hints that the speaker is an artistic or romantic type: someone who suffered for their art, suffered in love, or both. Dying "for Truth," meanwhile, might suggest a political or spiritual martyr: someone who stood up for their convictions and was killed for their honesty. Or it might refer to a scholar type who worked themselves to death in pursuit of knowledge. Then again, these two could have had the same temperament and/or occupation, since lines 5-8 go on to suggest that "Beauty" and "Truth" are the same thing!

It's impossible to know for sure what happened to these two, and that's part of the point. The closing lines of the poem will cast their idealistic sacrifice in a coldly ironic light, suggesting that it loses importance once they're in the grave. Their life experiences, and the very ideals they died for, soon fade from memory.

The first stanza establishes that the poem is a ballad, like most of Dickinson's poems; that is, it's a rhymed quatrain in common meter. Common meter refers to lines that alternate between iambic tetrameter (four iambs, or da-DUMs, in a row) and trimeter (three iambs) with an ABCB rhyme scheme. For example:

I **died** | for Beau- | ty—but | was **scarce**
Adjus- | ted **in** | the **Tomb**

Ballad stanzas are often used in narrative poetry, including poems about tragic love and death. The ballad stanza is also used in many Christian hymns, like the ones Dickinson grew up hearing; Dickinson often used this form to question traditional Christian ideas about death and the afterlife. (Again, as she does here!)

The stanza contains two of Dickinson's signature dashes: the one that marks the caesura in line 1 ("I died for Beauty—but was scarce") and the one that ends the stanza. Dickinson frequently used dashes in place of commas and periods, and she sometimes inserted them in places that wouldn't normally call for a grammatical pause. This effect gives her poems a slightly tense, staccato quality, which adds to their dramatic effect.

LINES 5-8

> *He questioned softly "Why I failed?"*
> *"For Beauty," I replied—*
> *"And I—for Truth—Themself are One—*
> *We Brethren, are," He said—*

Lines 5-8 contain a brief dialogue between the two dead characters, who inhabit some sort of afterlife or transitional state between life and death. The man buried next to the speaker strikes up a conversation.

Notice that, instead of straightforwardly asking *how* the speaker *died*, he asks "Why [the speaker] failed." The speaker's answer ("For Beauty") suggests that it means the same thing, but the emphasis is different. "Failed" can refer to the kind of physical collapse (e.g., heart failure) that causes death, but here the verb seems to hint at some broader kind of failure as well. It seems the speaker not only died but *failed* "For Beauty," and the other character *failed* "for Truth."

This language subtly implies that they fell short of their ideals, or that their self-sacrifice was somehow disappointing or insufficient—even if that's not what the characters themselves mean to imply.

The speaker's companion then declares that beauty and truth "are One," so he and the speaker are like "Brethren" (family). This is an allusion to John Keats's poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819), which famously ends:

> "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
> Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

The man is saying, in other words, that he and the speaker are kindred spirits, martyrs to the same basic ideal. It's even possible that both had the same beauty- or truth-seeking vocation, such as artist or scholar. (For more on the context behind the Keats allusion, see the Poetic Devices and Context sections of this guide.)

The repetition of "Beauty" and "Truth"—both mentioned in the previous stanza—underscores their importance to these two idealists. In the last stanza, however, all mention of ideals will end.

LINES 9-12

> *And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night—*
> *We talked between the Rooms—*
> *Until the Moss had reached our lips—*
> *And covered up—Our names—*

The final stanza circles back to the "Room" metaphor from the first stanza. The speaker compares the two characters, talking between their graves, to "Kinsmen" (relatives) lodging under the same roof and talking through a wall.

The phrase "met a Night" is drenched with irony: unlike relatives lodging together for one night, these two corpses will be lying next to each other for all eternity. The bond they've forged in the afterlife, however, has already ended. According to the speaker, they kept "talk[ing]" until the creeping "Moss" of the graveyard smothered their "lips" and covered the "names" on their headstones. Symbolically, the moss represents death and decay, obliterating the voices and identities—if not all living memory—of these two dead people.

The fact that moss has overgrown their headstones suggests that no one is tending their gravesites. Seemingly, these martyrs to "Beauty" and "Truth" have been forgotten. Even if their sacrifice is still having an impact somewhere in the world, no one honors (or perhaps even remembers) the fact that it was *their* sacrifice.

This cold reality throws an ironic light on their idealism. The poem seems to be saying that no matter how virtuous we are in life, death gets the final word—and outlasts anything we make or do. Perhaps, in that sense, all idealism and sacrifice are destined to fail eventually (as in the question from line 5: "Why I failed?"). The two martyrs do seem to enjoy an afterlife of sorts for a while, but it's not paradise, and it's doomed to end.

This depiction of the afterlife would have been considered highly unorthodox, if not blasphemous, in Dickinson's strictly Christian society. The poem's use of common meter—often found in Christian hymns—adds another subversive element. Here and throughout her career, Dickinson uses a form she first encountered in church to explore her own unconventional ideas about death and eternity.

❁ SYMBOLS

❁ MOSS

The "Moss" of the graveyard symbolizes the slow creep of death, or the oblivion that follows death. As it covers up the characters' "lips" and "names," it reflects the way death itself silences their voices and effaces their

identities. Since it's a naturally growing plant, it also evokes the way nature, or the life cycle, easily moves on after the end of any individual human life.

Finally, the growth of moss over these graves is a sign of decay; it indicates that no one is tending the gravesite, at least not very well. In other words, it suggests that the world of the living has forgotten, or at least moved on from, these two martyrs and their legacies.

> **Where this symbol appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Lines 11-12:** "Until the Moss had reached our lips— / And covered up—Our names—"

⚒ POETIC DEVICES

CAESURA

Emily Dickinson is famous for her unusual punctuation, especially her signature dashes. She often used dashes as substitutes for commas and periods, and sometimes inserted them in places where there wouldn't normally be a grammatical pause. Occasionally, she inserted "unnecessary" commas as well. As a result, her poems tend to contain tense or dramatic caesuras, and this one is no exception.

Look at the first three lines, for example:

> I died for **Beauty—but** was scarce
> Adjusted in the Tomb
> When One who died for **Truth, was** lain

In line 1, a dash takes the place of a more conventional comma, emphasizing the word "Beauty" and setting up a kind of dramatic twist (*But suddenly...*). In line 3, the comma doesn't technically need to be there, but the pause helps stress the thematically important word "Truth."

Line 7 again emphasizes "Truth," this time with the help of two dashes:

> "And **I—for Truth—Themself** are One—"

Grammatically, only the second caesura is necessary; the dash after "I" just adds drama! Another seemingly gratuitous caesura, also marked by a dash, appears in the final line:

> And covered **up—Our** names—

Notice how the extra punctuation slows the pace of the language. This slowness feels appropriate in a poem about death and eternity, featuring "Moss" creeping over corpses.

The eccentricity of Dickinson's punctuation is also a bit disorienting, making it a good match for the jarring psychological and philosophical territory it explores. When her poetry was first published after her death, editors tried to eliminate these effects, standardizing her capitalization and punctuation (for example, removing weird caesuras like the one in line 12 here). Later editors acknowledged that these effects were important to her art, and printed her language just the way she wrote it.

> **Where Caesura appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 1:** "Beauty—but"
> - **Line 3:** "Truth, was"
> - **Line 7:** "I—for Truth—Themself"
> - **Line 8:** "Brethren, are"
> - **Line 9:** "so, as Kinsmen, met"
> - **Line 12:** "up—Our"

ALLUSION

The poem features two characters, one who "died for Beauty" and one who "died for Truth." The second character claims that these two ideals "are One": in other words, that beauty and truth are the same thing. This claim is an unmistakable allusion to one of the most famous poems in English, John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819).

Keats's poem meditates on an ancient Greek vase, or urn, painted with vivid scenes of pastoral life. It portrays the vase as a timeless work of art carrying a message for all humanity. The ending sums up this message:

> When old age shall this generation waste,
> Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
> Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
> **"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all**
> **Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."**

In Dickinson's poem, the man who "died for Truth" clearly agrees with this idea. He says that he and the speaker are "Brethren" (brothers/family) because their ideals are one and the same. The speaker seems to agree, too, or at least doesn't openly disagree.

But the poem as a whole casts Keats's idea in a jaded, ironic light. Rather than focusing on an age-old work of art, Dickinson's poem focuses on two *human* representatives of beauty and truth—both of whom are now decaying corpses. The work they produced during their lives may endure (or not; the poem doesn't say!), but *they* certainly won't. As their lives, and even their afterlives, fade into oblivion, the ideals they died for seem almost irrelevant. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" may be all you need to know "on earth," but in the world of death (*under* the earth), neither beauty nor truth counts for much.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

REPETITION

The poem repeats a number of key words and phrases: "died for," "Beauty," "Truth," and "Room[s]."

The first three of these underline the poem's core themes: death, martydrom, and idealism (including the Keatsian ideals of beauty and truth—see the Allusion entry for more context). It's also notable that the first two stanzas mention beauty and truth, but the third *doesn't*. As oblivion consumes the two characters, the ideals they died for seem to lose their relevance.

Meanwhile, the repetition of "Room"/"Rooms" (lines 4 and 10) makes for a slightly extended metaphor. In the first stanza, the speaker compares the two graves to "adjoining Room[s]," as if the cemetery were a house or hotel. In the last stanza, the speaker compares the two occupants of those graves to "Kinsmen, met a Night," lodged in neighboring rooms and talking through the wall. Again, the reader might picture a house or inn where relatives ("Kinsmen") are staying together.

Interestingly, both "Room" and "Rooms" fall at the ends of their respective lines; the first makes a full rhyme (with "Tomb"), while the second makes a slant rhyme (with "names"). The second rhyme sounds fainter and less resonant, as fits the ghostly atmosphere of the final stanza.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "died for Beauty"
- **Line 3:** "died for Truth"
- **Line 4:** "Room"
- **Line 6:** "For Beauty"
- **Line 7:** "for Truth"
- **Line 10:** "Rooms"

METAPHOR

The poem uses metaphor and simile to evoke the speaker's experience in the grave. First, lines 3-4 introduce a simple metaphor:

> When One who died for Truth, was lain
> In an adjoining Room—

The speaker compares the two neighboring graves—their own and the other character's—to "adjoining Room[s]," as if they were in a house or hotel rather than a cemetery. This metaphor captures the way the characters, for the moment at least, seem to be in a transitional state between life and death. (Picture temporary lodging for travelers.) They're still able to communicate in some supernatural fashion, and they still feel

as if their graves are just a version of something earthly and familiar: rooms.

Later, the speaker expands on this image with a combination of simile and metaphor:

> And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night—
> We talked between the Rooms—

The two corpses feel like "Kinsmen," or family, who have bumped into each other on a certain "Night" and are now lodging together (again, perhaps at an inn or one of their homes). Again, it's as if death feels rather comfortable at first, even cozy. But this comfort and familiarity soon dissipate, as "Moss" grows over the pair and reminds them where they *really* are.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "When One who died for Truth, was lain / In an adjoining Room—"
- **Lines 9-10:** "And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night— / We talked between the Rooms—"

☰ VOCABULARY

Scarce (Line 1) - Scarcely; barely.

Adjusted (Line 2) - Settled (in the grave, or "Tomb").

Lain (Line 3) - Lain to rest; buried.

Adjoining Room (Line 4) - A metaphor for the grave adjacent to the speaker's.

Failed (Line 5) - Here meaning "died" (as in a phrase like "His heart failed"), but possibly connoting other kinds of failure as well.

Themself (Line 7) - Here meaning "those two things" (i.e., beauty and truth).

Brethren (Line 8) - Brothers, relatives, or other close associates.

Kinsmen (Line 9) - Relatives; members of the same "kin" or family.

Moss (Line 11) - Common, green, flowerless plants that grow in clumps. Often found at gravesites (such as the speaker's) and other sites of decay.

⏱ FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Like most of Emily Dickinson's poems, this one takes the form of a ballad. This means that it consists of rhyming quatrains

(four-line stanzas) set in ballad meter, a.k.a. common meter: alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. The basic rhythm goes like this: da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, / da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM.

This particular poem has three quatrains, and as in a typical ballad, the second and fourth lines of each quatrain rhyme. Two of the rhyme pairs are slant rhymes, a device Dickinson used often.

As its name suggests, the ballad is a very song-like form (and has been used in many actual song lyrics). Ballad meter is also used in many traditional hymns, such as those Dickinson grew up hearing in church.

Dickinson's spirituality was unconventional and often overtly skeptical of Christian doctrine, so her use of hymn-like stanzas can have a subversive quality. This poem, for example, presents an eerie and not very Christian vision of the afterlife. The characters don't encounter salvation or damnation so much as oblivion; they have a brief, supernatural or dream-like exchange, then fall silent forever as "the Moss" covers their "lips" (line 11).

Dickinson's signature formal techniques—tense dashes, unpredictable capitalization, imperfect rhymes—roughen the surface of the language, making the tale that much more unsettling.

METER

Like most of Dickinson's poems, "I died for Beauty" is a ballad, one that follows traditional ballad meter (a.k.a. common meter). This means that it alternates lines of iambic tetrameter (da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM) with lines of iambic trimeter (da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM). This rhythm is only a baseline: it may change occasionally for the sake of variety or emphasis. Here's how the meter plays out in the first stanza, for example:

> I died | for Beau- | ty—but | was scarce
> Adjus- | ted in | the Tomb
> When One | who died | for Truth, | was lain
> In an | adjoin- | ing Room—

These lines follow the pattern exactly, with the exception of line 4, which begins with a trochaic foot (stressed-unstressed) rather than an iambic one (unstressed-stressed). This is a common metrical substitution, and it's really the *only* rhythmic variation in the poem. In other words, the poem's rhythm is strict and consistent, reinforcing its portrayal of death as an unstoppable force.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows a simple ABCB rhyme scheme. That is, it's written in quatrains whose second and fourth lines rhyme. This pattern is typical of the ballad form, which Dickinson uses here

and in most of her poems.

The first stanza uses a perfect rhyme, while the others use slant rhymes ("replied"/"said" and "Rooms"/"names"). In general, Dickinson's poetry is known for its innovative use of slant and imperfect rhymes. They reflect her belief (expressed in a famous poem) that poets should "tell it slant," or tell the truth through indirect, surprising language.

They also make her poems a bit more unsettling and unpredictable. Here, for example, off-rhymes reinforce the sense that something is "off" about this scenario—that this conversation between corpses is impossible, supernatural, and eerie. Notice how the word "Room" makes a full rhyme in the first stanza, while "Rooms" makes a slant rhyme in the last stanza, so that the poem ends on a more dissonant note than it began on. It's as though the rhymes have deteriorated somewhat along with the corpses!

👥 SPEAKER

The speaker is an enigmatic voice from beyond the grave. Their name, age, gender, etc. are unknown. They were apparently a martyr to their ideals, as they claim to have "died for Beauty." Most likely, this means they were an artist or romantic—someone whose death was connected to the stresses of art, love, or both. Now underground, they hit it off immediately with the corpse in the neighboring grave: a man "who died for Truth." The two have much in common, not only because they're martyrs but because the man believes beauty and truth are the same thing. They keep "talk[ing]" as long as they can, but oblivion silences them eventually, as if their afterlife were a temporary dream.

The reader never learns exactly how these characters died, or what they did in life. The mystery surrounding them reinforces the idea that death is a kind of erasure. Just as the "Moss" of the grave has "covered up" their "names," so death itself has erased their identities and life stories.

🏔 SETTING

The poem is set in a graveyard, where two recently dead people (the speaker and a man who "died for Truth") lie in adjacent "Tomb[s]." Their graves aren't especially well tended; moss has overrun not only their buried bodies but the "names" on their headstones. Evidently, these two martyrs—one for "Beauty," one for "Truth"—have been forgotten by the living.

The setting is also notable for what it's *not*. Though it initially resembles a kind of afterlife—a place where corpses can "talk[]" like "Kinsmen"—it's not heaven, hell, purgatory, or any other traditional world beyond the grave. In fact, it's not even *beyond* the grave; it's just the grave itself! Accordingly, these characters don't seem immortal in any conventional, religious

sense. Their conversation fades like a brief dream as "Moss" silences their "lips." The speaker is somehow able to narrate the poem, but they no longer have any other agency or identity.

ⓘ CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson published only a handful of poems during her lifetime and grew famously reclusive as she aged. However, it would be a mistake to view her *only* as a literary recluse or to think that she didn't intend for her poetry to be read in the future. She ordered many of her poems into sequences that she sewed into fascicles (or booklets); "I died for Beauty—but was scarce" appears in one of these fascicles and dates to approximately 1862.

Though she lived in the 19th century, some critics classify Dickinson as a forerunner of modernism (a 20th-century literary movement) for her psychological subtlety and experimentation with form. She was, certainly, one of the greatest voices of American Romanticism, a school of thought that believed in the importance of the self, nature, and one's individual relationship with God.

Dickinson's thought and work were also influenced by contemporary American transcendentalist writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson; by the novels of the Victorian English writer Charlotte Brontë; by Shakespeare's plays and poems; and by the English Romantics of the early 1800s, including William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. This poem, with its comparison between "Beauty" and "Truth," alludes to a masterpiece by the Romantic poet John Keats: the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," which contains the famous line "Beauty is truth, truth beauty."

Growing up in a religious community meant Dickinson was also familiar with the Book of Common Prayer. Her poems engage both with the form and content of these prayers. For example, this poem showcases her characteristic common meter and touches on themes of mortality and immortality, which Dickinson revisited again and again in her work. In fact, several of her best-known poems attempt to envision the experience of dying or being dead; other examples include "Because I could not stop for Death" and "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dickinson's most active writing years coincided with one of the most tumultuous times in American history: the Civil War (1861 to 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 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 rejected 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).

Dickinson also questions the existence of God and heaven in her work. Her poems can be irreverent, even blasphemous, as she tests out what exactly she believes. "I died for Beauty," for example, casts doubt on the notion of a Christian heaven (or hell, purgatory, etc.). It imagines the afterlife simply as a dreamlike vision in a grave, where the physical reality of death (the creeping "Moss") slowly erases all trace of human identity.

Note that, by the 1860s, Dickinson had already experienced the deaths of relatives and friends. Her cousin Sophia Holland and friend Benjamin Franklin Newton had both died young, and their losses affected her deeply.

📖 MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Dickinson at the Morgan Library — Watch a PBS segment on Emily Dickinson and a Dickinson exhibit at the Morgan Library in New York City. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLeMZ5WIdrI)

- A Dickinson Documentary — Watch a short film about Emily Dickinson from the PBS Voices & Visions series. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N65cHinI0ko)

- The Original Manuscript — View the original manuscript of the poem, and other Dickinson poems, via Harvard University's Emily Dickinson Archive. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/12170088)

- The Dickinson Museum — Explore further resources at the website of the Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst, Massachusetts. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/)

- The Poet's Life and Work — Read a brief biography of Dickinson at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of "I died for Beauty—but was scarce." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRfH3i7kK7E)

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

💬 HOW TO CITE

MLA

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