I dwell in Possibility –

POEM TEXT

I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –

Of Chambers as the Cedars –
Impregnable of eye –
And for an everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky –

Of Visitors – the fairest –
For Occupation – This –
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise –

SUMMARY

I live in a house called Possibility (a metaphor for poetry). This is a more beautiful and truthful house than the one called Prose. It has far more windows and better doors than Prose does.

The House of Possibility has rooms as strong as cedar wood, into which the outside world can't see. For its eternal roof, the house has the sky itself.

Visitors to this house are the most beautiful and virtuous kinds of people. My job here is the one I'm doing right now: opening up my own little hands, I collect poetry, the divine substance of the heavens themselves.

THEMES

THE POWER OF POETRY

"I dwell in Possibility" is a poem that celebrates poetry itself. Poetry, argues the poem, offers its writers and readers an imaginative world of near-limitless "Possibility." This contrasts with prose (things like novels, short stories, and essays), which the speaker believes to be more limited and restrictive (even if poetry uses stricter forms than prose in a technical sense). "I dwell in Possibility" is thus a great example of meta-poetry—poetry *about* the art of poetry.

The speaker presents poetry as a metaphorical house that's "fairer" than prose's house. In other words, poetry is more beautiful, just, and truthful than prose. This is because, according to the speaker, poetry offers greater room for freedom and creativity. Its metaphorical house has more windows and doors than that of prose. This suggests that poetry makes it easier to try out multiple perspectives or viewpoints (windows), perhaps letting in more of the light of truth, and has more "doors" that open on the realm of the imagination.

If a poetry is a house, then poetry's stanzas (like the quatrains on display here) are like rooms in that house, made of fragrant cedar wood. Stanzas, like rooms in a house, give a poem its structure, but the poem doesn't see this as a limitation. On the contrary, when it comes to poetry's ability to unlock the imagination, the sky is the limit! To that end, the speaker's poetry-house doesn't have an actual roof; instead, if someone looks up in one of its cedar rooms, they'll see the "everlasting" sky. In this way, the poem also links poetry with both the natural world and the divine, making it a kind of portal to both nature and the heavens above. Poetry expands the poet's world.

Poetry also has the best readers, according to the poem. That's probably because reading poetry has something in common with writing poetry: both require an effort of the imagination, and a willingness to bring sensitivity and patience to the text. Poems aren't puzzles to figure out: they're more like little rooms to explore, beautiful forests to get lost in, journeys to undertake—in which it is the journey, rather than the destination, that really matters. This world of imaginative possibility represents what the speaker calls "Paradise"; the poet's work is to "gather" small parts of this paradise together into readable form. But the poem only means something when the reader comes along. The reader, through the act of reading, helps *create* the poem, too. Poetry thus not only expands the poet's world, but creates a special bond between poet and reader.

Poetry's potential for freedom, creativity, and connection becomes all the more powerful when considered in the context of Dickinson's life. For one thing, this emphasis on the "Possibility" of poetry transforms the home (the speaker's metaphorical house) from a domestic world in which the women of Dickinson's day were expected to cook, clean, and care for children into something more exciting. Dickinson herself was famously reclusive. But this poem suggests that, though she was often *physically* in the same place, her creative work allowed her to travel far beyond the confines of her room—and her era.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –

As is often the case with Dickinson's poems, "I dwell in Possibility" features a first-person speaker. This "I," often taken to be Dickinson herself, "dwells" (or lives) in a place of potential—of "Possibility."

"Possibility" itself, in other words, is a kind of *home* for the speaker—an idea that line 2 makes even clear by metaphorically calling "Possibility" a "House." What's more, this house is "fairer" than that of "Prose"—it's more beautiful, just, and truthful.

The mention of prose helps readers grasp what the speaker means by "possibility" in the first place. Prose refers to regular written or spoken language that *isn't* poetry. Considering that this *is* a poem, and that poetry and prose are often (somewhat unfairly!) positioned as polar opposites, it becomes clear here that this is a poem about the art of *poetry itself*. When the speaker talks about "Possibility," then, she's talking about poetry. To her, poetry is possibility, and this is the world in which she lives.

The alliteration of "Possibility" and "Prose" draws attention to the contrast the speaker is making between these two forms of writing. These lines also have a fairly steady iambic (da-DUM) meter:

I dwell | in Pos- | sibil- | ity –
A fair- | er House | than Prose –

The first line contains four iambs (four da-DUMs), making it a line of iambic tetrameter. The second line has three iambs, making it iambic trimeter. This pattern, known as common measure or common meter, turns up in most of Dickinson's work. The speaker will continue to use this pattern throughout the poem, whose rhythm, sounds, and structure all remind the reader that this piece of writing is exactly what it praises: *poetry*.

LINES 3-4

More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –

In lines 3 and 4, the poem builds on an extended metaphor that presents "Possibility" (i.e., the art of poetry) as a house. Prose, again, is also a metaphorical house here—but it's just not as good! The poetry house has more and better windows and doors, for example.

Doors and windows let light and air into a home, and also allow for movement in and out. Windows in a house can also provide *perspective* on the outside world, a way to look outside from within (and vice versa). Poetry's "numerous" windows, then, suggests that poetry offers perspective and insight into the surrounding world—and perhaps also into poets themselves (in that poetry has "windows" through which both poet and reader may peek).

The idea that poetry's house has more/better windows and doors also suggests that poetry as an art form offers more space and freedom than prose does. It allows for more movement and more breathing room—more imaginative space for readers to walk around in. It allows for more *light*, too, which is symbolically connected to insight, knowledge, and understanding. This is the kind of "Possibility" that the poem seeks to celebrate.

The poem thus also implies that prose is inherently more limiting than poetry. Of course, readers might not necessarily agree! And in truth, the poem is more about celebrating the beauties and joys of poetry than defining the shortcomings of prose.

These two lines are again full of assonance and consonance that remind readers that this work celebrating poetry is itself a poem:

More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –

All the sound patterning here is part of how the speaker differentiates poetry from prose. In poetry, words are weighed differently, with readers paying more attention to the way the sonic qualities of a given word work with or against that word's meaning. By using lots of pattered sound, the poem showcases one of the things that makes poetry so special.

Finally, it's worth noting how the caesura in line 4 creates a little pause, as though the reader is witnessing the act of poetic creation in motion—as though the speaker takes a beat to think of the next part of the poem.

LINES 5-8

Of Chambers as the Cedars –
Impregnable of eye –
And for an everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky –

The second stanza continues with the construction of the speaker's poem-house—the place of "Possibility" in which the speaker lives. Having put in the "Windows" and "Doors," the speaker now describes the rooms and roof.

In line 5, the poem uses simile to compare the "Chambers" (rooms) of the poem-house to cedar trees. Cedar is one of the

most durable woods in North America, and it often turns up in the Bible as an image of strength and beauty. It can survive a long time, and it's tempting to read the specific mention of "cedar" as a gesture towards Dickinson's firm belief that her poems would be read and loved long after her death (even though she published only a handful in her lifetime).

Dickinson uses quatrains in many of her poems, and the four-line stanzas here might evoke the four walls of a room/chamber. Poetry isn't all about having freedom and space, then: it also has a certain structure that supports it. This might relate to the way the restrictions of poetic form (things like rhyme, meter, and so forth) can open up the imagination in ways that perhaps more free-form prose doesn't.

There's a closeness in sound between "Chambers" and "Cedars," achieved by the highlighted consonance and assonance as well as by the fact that both words have two syllables. The line, then, is packed with words that sound quite similar—something that subtly evokes the density of strong cedar wood, and the way every word in poetry is specially selected for its meaning *and* sound.

Line 6 then metaphorically compares the strength of cedar wood to the speaker's house of poetry, saying that the latter is "impregnable of eye." The word "impregnable" means impenetrable, while "eye" here is probably a metonym for human vision.

This is a difficult line to interpret. Poetry, if read rather than heard, needs the "eye," so perhaps this is more to do with the fact that *composing* poetry gives the speaker a cherished kind of privacy away from the prying eyes of society. This would be in keeping with the fact that Dickinson herself spent much of her life inside her house working on her poems. The poetry-house might also be "impregnable" (fortress-like) to the eye because it requires *more* than the eye to experience it. That is, poems demand more than just being scanned for basic meaning; they require an effort of the imagination on the reader's behalf.

Lines 7 and 8 put a roof on this house of poetic possibility. Or, rather, they *don't:* poetry's roof is actually the sky itself. With poetry, in other words, the sky is the metaphorical limit! Casting this roof as "everlasting" also portrays poetry as divine and immortal, linking poetry with the heavens. The enjambment between line 7 and 8, in turn, suggests uninterrupted space, relating to the limitlessness of the poetic imagination.

LINES 9-12

Of Visitors – the fairest –
For Occupation – This –
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise –

Line 9 briefly turns the poem's attention to you, dear reader! The "Visitors" to the house of poetry are not just any old Joe. Those who come to this house—in other words, those that read poetry—are the "fairest" of people.

The speaker admires people who are willing, through poetry, to engage in life's deeper questions—to contemplate existence, or death, or, perhaps, the superiority of poetry itself! By implication, poetry readers' sensitivity and patience brings poems to imaginative life. In this way readers, too, are creators of the poem.

The word choice here echoes line 2, in which the speaker called poetry a "fairer House than Prose." Here, the speaker speakers that the *readers* of poetry also possess this quality of fairness (a combination of beauty, truthfulness, and grace).

In this last stanza, caesurae allow the speaker to pack meaning into a small space. The caesura after "Visitors" works like a comma or colon, making it clear that the word "fairest" applies to those that "dwell"—as readers or writers—in the house of poetic possibility.

Line 10 then switches focus away from readers and onto the speaker. The speaker's "Occupation" is "this"—the composition of the poem itself! In other words, the reader is witnessing the speaker's creative work firsthand. The speaker's definition of herself as a poet makes it all the more plausible to read this poem as autobiographical—though, as with any good poem, there's no need to *reduce* it to one such reading.

The way the speaker situates herself in this extended metaphor is pretty radical. In this house of the poetic imagination, the speaker rejects the expected gender roles of the day. The speaker doesn't live a life of domesticity, raising children and performing endless chores: to her, there's a different kind of work to be done, in a different (and perhaps lovelier) kind of house. The poem, then, not only praises poetry, but argues that it is vital to life itself. The last two lines make this point emphatically:

> The spreading wide my narrow Hands
> To gather Paradise –

To write poetry—when done well at least—is to "gather Paradise." This casts poetry as a kind of divine art, and the poet as someone with an important role: putting people in touch with the divine.

Line 11 is the longest line on the page, which fits with the image of the speaker's hands "spreading wide." This vivid image makes the speaker's commitment to her work physical: she is determined to "gather" as much as her small hands will allow. While this perhaps suggests Dickinson's humility, it also hints at her steadfast determination to prove herself as a poet—whether in her lifetime or after her death. As with lines 7 and 8, the enjambment between the last two lines suggests purity, limitlessness, and, in a way, simplicity. The speaker has a creative calling, and, quite simply, she's going to answer it.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

There's only one example of alliteration in "I Dwell in Possibility," and it comes in the first two lines:

> I dwell in Possibility –
> A fairer House than Prose –

The alliteration here helps to set up the juxtaposition between "Possibility" (poetry) on the one hand and "Prose" on the other. The sound itself is plosive, meaning it has more of a stand-out *pop* than softer consonants. That striking quality underlines the energy and surprise of this match-up between poetry and prose—and draws the reader's attention to the speaker's use of the word "Possibility" to *mean* poetry.

Alliteration is also a distinctly poetic technique! It's rarely found in prose, so its appearance here highlights one of the main differences between the two competing forms. While prose writing tends to avoid obvious sound patterning (though it doesn't always!), poetry is, on one level, the *art* of language-based sound patterning. Just look at this poem: every word is carefully (but also instinctively) selected as much for its sound as for its literal meaning. While the poem uses consonance and assonance more than alliteration, this early use of alliteration announces that, in this house of "Possibility," there is a poet at work.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Possibility"
- **Line 2:** "Prose"

ASSONANCE

Like alliteration and consonance, assonance highlights just how *poetic* this poem is.

The poem celebrates the art of poetry, marking it as "Superior" to prose. Both forms use the same raw material—language—but poetry practices the magic art of sound patterning, whereas prose tends to aim for clarity of expression. (Of course, this is a huge generalization, and counter-examples can be found easily in both directions!) This poem shows Dickinson following the advice of one of her favorite poets, John Keats, who once told the poet Shelley to "load every rift with ore" (pack as much meaning into the poem as possible, and avoid wasting words). The first stanza, which is the most assonant of all, makes it clear that there is a skilled poet at work in this metaphorical house of poetry and possibility:

> I dwell in Possibility –
> A fairer House than Prose –
> More numerous of Windows –
> Superior – for Doors –

The first /i/ assonance is gentle but hints at the "Possibility" of poetry, a quiet example of sound patterning at work. The /o/ sounds that follow are more obviously assonant, and their specific sound has more of an impact on the stanza than the /i/. /O/ vowels are, quite literally, round—read these lines out loud and notice how your mouth forms an "O" shape. As the speaker here praises poetry for having more metaphorical windows than prose—more ways of looking out on the world—the repeated /o/ helps highlight the openness of those windows.

In the last stanza, meanwhile, "wide" in line 11" chimes with the last vowel sound of the poem, "Paradise." This /i/ sound is itself wide. This assonance emphasizes just how much "paradise"—which could mean beauty, divine insight, truth—is there for the taking in the house of poetry. The speaker just needs to reach out and grab as much of it as possible.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "in Possibility"
- **Line 2:** "Prose"
- **Line 3:** "More," "Windows"
- **Line 4:** "Superior – for Doors –"
- **Line 5:** "Chambers," "Cedars"
- **Line 11:** "wide"
- **Line 12:** "Paradise"

CAESURA

The caesurae in "I dwell in Possibility" often stand in for more typical punctuation marks, like commas or colons—a characteristic Dickinson move. But they also reflect the speaker's mastery of the very poetry she praises.

For example, line 4 could just as easily read "Superior for doors": but it doesn't. Bearing in mind that this is a poem about poetry as a kind of sacred work, the dash here seems to remind the reader that they are witnessing an act of poetic creation. It's as if the speaker pauses for a moment to consider which direction to go. But she's not lost in the woods: the dash also suggests that the speaker is in complete control, masterfully calibrating the poem's speed and shape.

There are two other caesurae in the poem, both of which occur in the final stanza. These are punctuation replacements, serving the role of either commas or colons:

> Of Visitors – || the fairest –
> For Occupation – || This –

The speaker here is praising the readers of poetry as "the fairest" readers of all, and states clearly that her "Occupation" or role in the house of Possibility is to write poetry. It's hard to

think whether these complex ideas could be communicated in fewer words; probably not! The caesurae compress this part of the poem, making it seem as if the poet is distilling language itself to its purest, most concentrated form.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Superior – for"
- **Line 9:** "Visitors – the"
- **Line 10:** "Occupation – This"

CONSONANCE

Consonance, like assonance and alliteration, emphasizes that this is a *poem*, as opposed to prose. "I dwell in Possibility" draws a distinction between these two art forms, and finds much more to celebrate in poetry. Poetry tends to organize language through sound much more than prose (though this is definitely a simplification)! The presence of consonance—and other elements like rhyme and meter—announces that this is a poem, and it's proud to be one.

Other than this general function, consonance sometimes has more specific effects here. The two /l/ sounds in the first line—"dwe**ll**" and "possibi**l**ity"—chime together gently, perhaps hinting at the speaker's unhurried commitment to the craft of poetry. In line 5, the similarly between "chambe**rs**" and "ceda**rs**" suggests the linguistic strength of poetry, as though its lines are like well-made walls built from fine, dense wood.

In line 9, the two /t/ sounds in "Visi**t**ors" and "faires**t**" link the two words together conceptually. This makes the speaker's case that, simply put, poetry readers are the best kind of readers. Meanwhile, the delicate, gentle /s/ sound in "faire**s**t" and "thi**s**" (line 10), suggests that poetry, for all its cedar-like strength, is also delicate, and requires careful construction.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dwell," "Possibility"
- **Line 2:** "House"
- **Line 3:** "More numerous"
- **Line 4:** "Superior," "for Doors"
- **Line 5:** "Chambers as," "Cedars"
- **Line 9:** "Visitors," "fairest"
- **Line 10:** "This"
- **Line 11:** "spreading wide," "Hands"
- **Line 12:** "gather," "Paradise"

ENJAMBMENT

Most lines in "I dwell in Possibility" end in dashes, which take the place of more typical punctuation and give the poem its characteristic Dickinsonian flavor. (Check out the Resources section to see the poem in Dickinson's own hand, with dashes aplenty.) But the poem's two moments of definite enjambment suggest freedom and limitlessness. Here's the first example, which comes between lines 7 and 8:

> And for an everlasting Roof
> The Gambrels of the Sky –

As part of the poem's extended metaphor, these lines describe the "roof" in the house of poetic "Possibility." In fact, poetry doesn't have a roof—the sky is the metaphorical limit! Enjambment here imitates this limitlessness, breezing past the barrier of the line break.

Something similar happens between lines 11 and 12:

> The spreading wide my narrow Hands
> To gather Paradise –

The speaker "gather[s] Paradise" through writing poetry, and offers herself to the art with commitment, faith, and joy. The enjambment here moves like the speaker herself as she opens up her arms to embrace poetry: it stretches the sentence, spreading it "wide" over two lines.

These enjambments suggest the boundless "Possibility" of this metaphorical house—and the boundless delight the speaker takes in her art.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "Roof / The"
- **Lines 11-12:** "Hands / To"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The whole poem is an extended metaphor!

The speaker lives in a house called "Possibility," which she contrasts with a house called "Prose." Right away, it's clear that "Possibility" also means *poetry*, which is often pitched as the opposite of prose writing (however unfair this might be). The speaker constructs this dreamy poetry-house before the reader's eyes. Lines 3 to 8 discuss the house's architecture, while line 9 refers to its "visitors" (readers), and lines 10 to 12 describe what the speaker does as an "Occupation" within this house.

Each component of this rich metaphor reveals something different about how the speaker perceives the art of poetry. First of all, poetry is "fairer" than "Prose"—meaning it's more beautiful, but also perhaps more virtuous and truthful. (Elsewhere in her work, Dickinson suggests that poetry is a kind of search for truth about existence—the kind of truth that scientific study can't access.) Poetry also demands more of its readers, asking them to bring sensitivity, creativity, and patience as gifts when they come to visit the house. That's why poetry readers are the "fairest," too.

The more specific elements of the metaphor are up for interpretation. "Windows" in line 3 could mean perspectives, while "Doors" might represent portals into the imagination itself. Poetry is also strong, with rooms as durable and fragrant as cedarwood. Though it's made out of tough material, the house of poetry has the sky itself for a roof—linking poetry with the heavens (and divinity), while also suggesting that poetry offers limitless room for creativity. In this poetry house, the speaker merely has to spread "wide" her hands in order "gather Paradise."

It's also worth considering how the architectural metaphor relates to poetic form. Most of Dickinson's poems were written using quatrains like these: four square lines, a box- or room-like shape. These small, humble spaces help channel the imagination into "Paradise."

Dickinson's choice to use a house as the poem's central metaphor for poetry is a pretty radical one. For women in Dickinson's 19th-century America—particularly in small towns like Amherst, where she spent all of her life—the house was a workplace. Women were expected to perform endless unseen (and unpaid) labor, managing chores and rearing children while men went out to their jobs. The poem subverts this idea, saying that in the House of Poetry there are more important things to do than the dishes! This work, of course, is art-making—a "Paradise" the poet can gather in her own "Hands."

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

JUXTAPOSITION

The opening lines juxtapose the speaker's metaphorical house "Possibility" with another metaphorical house: "Prose." As prose and poetry are often presented as opposites—and because the speaker refers directly to the act of creating the poem in line 10—it's clear that "Possibility" refers to poetry. The House of Poetry is "fairer" than Prose, meaning it's more beautiful, but also, perhaps, more just, truthful, and gracious. In truth, the poem is less about criticizing prose than it is praising poetry, so the juxtaposition fades away after the first stanza. But in that the first stanza, the comparison is direct and sharp: the poem-house has "More" windows and "Superior" doors.

We explore the speaker's use of a house as the poem's main metaphor in the extended metaphor entry. Here, though, it's worth adding that "Prose" doesn't have to just mean prose writing. Prose can also relate to mundane everyday reality: for example, readers might have heard someone saying that something a little boring is "prosaic." In Dickinson's lifetime, the "prosaic" world might have meant the pressure to keep up societal appearances, to follow rigid 19th-century moral codes—and, as a woman, to uncomplainingly submit to endless chores and child-rearing. Poetry, then, is quite simply more *exciting* than prose, offering access to a world of limitless imaginative possibility. In another poem, "They shut me up in Prose," Dickinson explicitly links prose with the restrictions and expectations placed on her as a young girl. An influential pamphlet of the time, written by the Reverend Mr. Bennett, expressly outlawed poetry as "dangerous to a woman." It's easy to see, then, why Dickinson equates poetry with freedom and possibility!

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "I dwell in Possibility – / A fairer House than Prose – / More numerous of Windows – / Superior – for Doors –"

METONYMY

Metonymy appears in line 5 as part of an overall extended metaphor that represents poetry as a house. The line describes poetry's "Chambers" (rooms), which are made out of strong "Cedars" and are therefore "Impregnable of eye." It's a difficult line to interpret, but "eye" probably means human vision and, in particular, the "eyes" of the outside world trying to look in.

In other words, according to this speaker, poetry affords its writers and readers a kind of privacy. Poetry becomes an "impregnable" fortress which can only be visited by "the fairest" people, the loveliest and best writers and readers. The metonymy of the word "eye" reduces unworthy visitors who might want to get into the House of Poetry (perhaps to destroy it or undermine its power) to mere staring eyeballs. They can't get into the House of Poetry without the sensitivity, patience, and openness for which poetry calls.

The metonym might also suggest that poetry needs the reader's imagination in order to come to life. It's not enough to just run one's eyes over a poem and establish its literal meaning. The more work the reader is willing to put in—the more they offer their own imaginations to the poet's words—the more they are going to get out of the poem.

Where Metonymy appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Impregnable of eye"

VOCABULARY

Dwell (Line 1) - Live and exist, with the secondary meaning of "contemplate."

Fairer/Fairest (Line 2, Line 9) - More (or most) beautiful, just, and true.

Prose (Line 2) - Written language without poetic meter, e.g. a novel or a newspaper article.

Superior (Line 4) - Better; of a higher standard.

Chambers (Line 5) - Rooms.

Cedars (Line 5) - A type of tree, known for its strength, durability, and resinous fragrance.

Impregnable (Line 6) - So strong that nothing can get in.

Gambrels (Line 8) - A type of roof with a sloping triangular shape.

Paradise (Line 12) - An ideal and idyllic place, like the garden of Eden.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"I dwell in Possibility" is a twelve-line poem consisting of three quatrains (four-line stanzas)—a characteristic form for Dickinson. The poem's use of common meter and an ABCB rhyme scheme makes these quatrains specifically *ballad stanzas*. This distinctly musical-sounding type of stanza was often used in church hymns, which were a major influence on Dickinson's style. It's a common, recognizable poetic form—a useful effect here, since the poem is talking *about* poetry!

The quatrain shape is also important because those four-line stanzas have a box-like appearance on the page. This creates a visual parallel between the poem and the speaker's mention of "chambers," or rooms. The poem itself is made out of square, well-built, compact shapes—just like the speaker's imagined House of Possibility. (The word "stanza" itself comes from the Italian for "room.") This use of form—the chiseling of language into a particular shape—is one of the defining characteristics of poetry, and therefore one of the things that makes poetry a "fairer House than Prose."

METER

"I dwell in Possibility" uses four-line stanzas which alternate between lines of iambic tetrameter and trimeter—that is, lines of either four or three metrical feet called iambs, each of which follows a da-DUM rhythm. This is by far the most common meter in Dickinson's poetry; appropriately enough, it's known as common meter. The first two lines are a good example of this meter at work:

> I dwell | in Pos- | si-bil- | i-ty –
> A fair- | er House | than Prose –

The first line has four iambs (four da-DUMs), while the second has three. Common meter has a distinctly poetic sound to it (contrast it with a free verse poem to see the difference), which is important in a poem *about* poetry! The poem views poetry as a superior form to prose precisely *because* of the way that things like meter and rhyme bring music to the words, and pack meaning into the small room-like shapes of the stanzas.

The metrical sound here is also confident and controlled. The speaker's "occupation" is writing poetry (which she calls "gather[ing] Paradise"), and the speaker's use of meter suggests the kind of skill and craft that come through dedication and practice.

Church hymns, which often use common meter, were probably a big influence on Dickinson's choice of this rhythm. But in using the sounds of hymns, Dickinson also makes the meter her own. Here, common meter helps the poem create its own idiosyncratic and individual vision of "Paradise."

RHYME SCHEME

"I dwell in Possibility" uses a regular rhyme scheme throughout its three stanzas. It runs:

> ABCB

This is a common pattern in Dickinson's work. So is this poem's use of slant rhyme, which toys with the reader's expectations of a full rhyming sound.

In the first stanza, line 2's end-word ("Prose") is meant to rhyme with line 4's "Doors." And they *do* rhyme—almost! But "Prose" sounds closer to "Windows" at the end of line 3, though it's clear from the rest of the pattern that this is not part of the overall scheme. Perhaps this triple almost-rhyme suggests the "numerous" possibilities of poetry: in these complicated, interweaving sounds, the speaker showcases her control of the raw materials of language.

The only true rhyme in the poem appears in the second stanza, matching "eye" and "sky". The simplicity of the rhyme suggests clarity and precision. Metaphorically speaking, the House of Poetic Possibility doesn't have a roof—the sky's the limit! This clear rhyme evokes that bold freedom.

The last rhyming pair in the poem is the most delicate of all, matching "This" at the end of line 10 with "Paradise." This slant rhyme is gentle, almost imperceptible, suggesting the speaker's skill and sensitivity as a poet. It also explicitly pairs poetry—"This"—with beauty, truth, and joy ("Paradise").

SPEAKER

The poem's first-person speaker claims to live in a metaphorical house called "Possibility." As she contrasts this house with an inferior one called "Prose," it's clear that the house of "Possibility" is poetry itself. The speaker, like Dickinson herself, seems to be a poet—so it's reasonable to detect at least a hint of autobiography in this poem. Dickinson, too, constructed entire worlds through her poetry, even though she spent most of her time alone in her room.

As the speaker develops her metaphor—poetic possibility as a kind of house—she explains what makes poetry "superior" to prose in vivid, concrete terms. Poetry has more windows,

better doors, rooms made of beautiful, durable wood, and the heavens themselves for a roof. The speaker also praises those who read poetry, calling the "visitors" to this house the "fairest" kind of people out there.

The speaker also believes that poetry is a divine art which puts people in touch with "Paradise." Indeed, it is the poet's job "to gather Paradise" through the act of poetic composition. This speaker's vision is both grounded and sublime, humorous and serious.

SETTING

The poem takes place in the speaker's imagination, in a "House" called "Possibility." This "Possibility" is poetry itself, as opposed to the more limited house of "Prose." As if to prove poetry's capacity for imaginative freedom, the speaker takes the reader on a tour of this metaphorical house, describing its architecture in detail. She gives the dreamy poem-house windows, doors, rooms—and the sky for a roof. It's a house where visitors—readers—are welcome and valued.

This specific choice of extended metaphor is both well-established *and* radical. On the one hand, poets have often compared poetry to architecture. The word "stanza" even comes from the Italian for "room." But on the other hand, it's daring for the speaker to depict herself having poetry as an "Occupation." In Dickinson's 19th-century middle-class America, women *were* generally expected to be in the house—but not to write poetry. To be a woman was often to work as an undervalued laborer, performing an endless list of chores and rearing children. The speaker's house, then, represents a quietly revolutionary way of life. Her body may be indoors, but her spirit lives in limitless "Possibility."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) stands out as a unique figure in her era—and in poetry ever since. Most of Emily Dickinson's poetry was not published during her lifetime, and "I dwell in Possibility" is no exception. One of her few contemporary readers, the minister and author Thomas Wentworth Higginson, warned her against publishing her poems despite what he called her "wholly new and original poetic genius." While Dickinson indeed lived quietly and published only a few anonymous poems during in her own lifetime, the confidence of her verse shows that she was firmly (and rightly) persuaded of her own poetic immortality. This poem discusses how, for Dickinson, the act of poetic composition itself represents the freedom of the imagination—in a word, "Possibility."

While Dickinson was one of a kind, it would be wrong to cast her as a completely isolated figure. She admired writers like William Wordsworth and Ralph Waldo Emerson for their love of nature, and their belief that poetry could help an individual transcend the mundane "Prose" of everyday existence. (Read "They Shut me up in Prose" for another example of Dickinson linking prose with mental imprisonment.) Among the other books in her library were works by the Brontë sisters and William Shakespeare.

While all these figures were big influences on Dickinson's thought, in sound and style her work borrows as much from church hymns as from any other writer. For example, this poem showcases her characteristic common meter, which gave her verse its distinctly musical and memorable sound.

"I dwell in Possibility" is part of a long-running tradition of poems about poetry. Poets as far back as the ancient Roman Ovid wrote in praise of their own art (and their own skill with that art). But while literary history is full of poets making bold claims about the merits of their "everlasting" poetry (Shakespeare's "Sonnet 55," for example), this poem suggests that the act of composition itself is the true way to "Paradise."

Even though she rarely left her room, Dickinson travelled far and wide in her imagination. It's incredible to think that, without the commitment of friends, family, and publishers after her death, English-language poetry wouldn't know Dickinson at all: she's become one of the most beloved and influential writers of all time.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson lived in small-town Amherst, Massachusetts all her life. She grew up in a strict Puritan environment which placed great emphasis on religious rules and social codes; in fact, her family line can be traced back to the 16th-century Puritan settler John Winthrop. Dickinson's religious upbringing shows itself in the hymn-like tones and rhythms of her poetry.

In 19th-century Amherst, men ruled the house and the world. Dickinson's father was an influential politician who, in her own words, had a "pure and terrible heart." It's even thought that she had to ask him for permission to write poetry. Women writers were still a novelty in the 19th century, and many (like George Eliot) first published under male pseudonyms. Dickinson got around this problem by barely publishing at all! The few poems she printed during her lifetime, she printed anonymously.

By all accounts, Dickinson's life was extremely unusual for the time. Most women were expected to marry and have children, but she never did; in fact, towards the end of her life she barely spoke to anyone but a small circle of close friends and family. She spent most of her time shut up in her room, "gather[ing] Paradise" through her poetry, relatively immune to what was taking place outside in the wider world. This was no mean feat, given that the American Civil War took place between 1861 and 1865. While Dickinson certainly had strong opinions about

this war (she was firmly on the Union side of the conflict), the drama of her own life was interior, not political. Confined by a sexist society, she found scope for her towering brilliance within the four walls of her room.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem In Dickinson's Hand — See the poem in Dickinson's own handwriting. Note those characteristic dashes! (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/235739)
- The Emily Dickinson Museum — Learn more about Dickinson's life and work at the website of the Emily Dickinson museum (which is housed in her beloved family home in Amherst, Massachusetts). (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/education/resources-for-students-and-teachers/)
- More Dickinson Poems — Read a treasure trove of Dickinson poems. (https://poets.org/poems/emily-dickinson)
- Dickinson's Meter — Read a discussion of Emily Dickinson's use of meter in her poetry. (https://poemshape.wordpress.com/2009/01/18/emily-dickinson-iambic-meter-and-rhyme/)
- Dickinson's Life and Work — Listen to experts discussing Emily Dickinson's life and work on the BBC radio show In Our Time. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDBADIHwchQ)

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
- As imperceptibly as grief
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- I started Early — Took my Dog —
- I taste a liquor never brewed
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- Success is counted sweetest
- Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
- There's a certain Slant of light
- The Soul selects her own Society
- This is my letter to the world
- We grow accustomed to the Dark
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

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