I have a Bird in spring

POEM TEXT

I have a Bird in spring
Which for myself doth sing—
The spring decoys.
And as the summer nears—
And as the Rose appears,
Robin is gone.

Yet do I not repine
Knowing that Bird of mine
Though flown—
Learneth beyond the sea
Melody new for me
And will return.

Fast in a safer hand
Held in a truer Land
Are mine—
And though they now depart
Tell I my doubting heart
They're thine.

In a serener Bright,
In a more golden light
I see
Each little doubt and fear,
Each little discord here
Removed.

Then will I not repine,
Knowing that Bird of mine
Though flown
Shall in a distant tree
Bright melody for me
Return.

SUMMARY

In the springtime, I have a bird that sings to me. But the spring is deceptive. When summer comes and the roses bloom, my robin disappears.

Still, I don't mourn. I know that my bird, though it's flown away, is learning new songs for me far away beyond the sea, and will come back.

Safe in a secure hand, resting in a more authentic place, are my birds. Though they leave me now, I tell my uncertain heart that they're still mine.

In a calmer, more golden light, I see all of my little fears, anxieties, and troubles vanish.

So I won't mourn, since I know that my bird—though it's flown away—will sing in a faraway tree and bring back a bright song for me.

THEMES

SEPARATION AND FAITH

The speaker of "I have a Bird in spring" rejoices in the company of a little songbird in the springtime. But when summer comes, the bird flies away, and the speaker is left lonely. The only way the speaker can go on is to teach their "doubting heart" to believe that their bird "will return" in spite of their fears. For this speaker, enduring a separation means leaning on faith, trying to trust that what you love will someday come back to you.

Listening to their beloved bird singing in the springtime, the speaker seems once to have felt that this happy relationship would go on just like this forever. But, alas, "the spring decoys" (or misleads): what seems permanent in springtime changes "as the summer nears," when the bird takes off for parts unknown. This separation strikes the speaker to the heart.

To cope with losing their bird, the speaker must rely on faith. First, they must trust that that the bird is still "mine," still deeply connected to them even when it's far away. Second, they must hang onto the belief that the bird "will return," that this separation won't be final.

Keeping the faith like this is difficult. In order not to "repine" (that is, mourn) and despair, the speaker needs to rely on the thought of a "more golden light," a heavenly kind of illumination and understanding, that can wash away "each little doubt and fear" they feel about their bird. In other words, they have to reach out imaginatively to a kind of divine wisdom in order to maintain their hope that what they've lost will return.

Suffering a separation from something (or someone) you love, this poem thus suggests, is a great trial—and keeping the faith in your connection to a faraway beloved takes proportionately great fortitude, imagination, and trust.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-30

INSPIRATION AND CREATIVITY

This poem's tale of a little bird who sings to the poem's speaker in spring and disappears in the summer might be read as an image of the rhythms of an artist's life. When this bird is with the speaker, it sings beautifully; when it disappears, the speaker can only wait patiently, trying not to be too anxious, knowing that the bird will bring "melody new" with it when it returns. Poetic inspiration might work in just this way: the poet sometimes just has to sit and wait through a quiet spell until the music comes back again, trusting that their gift won't abandon them.

Though they do their best to bear it, the poem's speaker is clearly heartbroken when the little bird they love flies away. They feel shaken with "doubt and fear," worried that their bird will never return to them. The image of being suddenly deprived of a musical companion might suggest a poet's feelings when they run into a dry patch and find they can't "hear" the melody of their poetry any more.

But this speaker is able to stay brave by having faith that their little bird is just storing up "melody new," making up fresh songs to sing when it returns. Since the bird disappears as the seasons change from spring to summer, perhaps its departure is just part of the natural cycle of creativity: maybe the bird *has* to fly away in order to come back with fresh songs.

Though the speaker feels all the anxiety of an artist who isn't making art, then, they find comfort in the belief that inspiration will return and they'll overflow with "bright melody" again someday. Perhaps they aren't altogether at ease with the situation, but they can do their best to trust that their voice, like a migratory bird, will always come back eventually.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-30

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

I have a Bird in spring
Which for myself doth sing—
The spring decoys.
And as the summer nears—
And as the Rose appears,
Robin is gone.

The first stanza of "I have a Bird in spring" tells the story of a joy cut short. In spring, the speaker says, they had a little bird that sung to them. But "the spring decoys": that is, that happy season only deceives the speaker. As spring turns to summer, their bird up and flies away.

The poem's very shape suggests that the speaker's time with their bird was painfully brief. The speaker and bird only share the poem's two first lines before the summer comes and "Robin is gone."

Worse, the speaker is left all alone in the summer, when the "Rose appears," a symbolic time of blossoming joy. The deceptive, decoying spring feels all the more wrong-footing because it should lead into a happy summer—and doesn't.

Even the poem's rhythms jar. Listen to the meter in the first lines:

I have | a Bird | in spring
Which for | myself | doth sing—
The spring | decoys.

That short third line cuts off a pattern of neat iambic trimeter (that is, lines of three iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm) at the knees. Though the poem won't stick to those iambic feet all the way through, it will keep moving back and forth between longer lines of three beats and shorter lines of only one or two beats, a halting rhythm that evokes a struggling, faltering voice.

Everything about this first stanza, then, suggests that the bird's departure broke the speaker's heart when they were least expecting it. This will be a poem about how on earth one can cope with the shock of separation from a beloved. For now, all the stunned speaker can say is that "Robin is gone"—a line whose soft /au/ assonance sounds like a quiet moan.

LINES 7-12

Yet do I not repine
Knowing that Bird of mine
Though flown—
Learneth beyond the sea
Melody new for me
And will return.

The shape, sounds, and language of the first stanza all suggested that this poem's speaker was suffering over an unexpected loss: the singing bird they loved flew away without warning. In the second stanza, though, the speaker declares that they don't "repine." That is, they insist that they're not mourning. They know that their little bird is only taking a journey "beyond the sea" to learn "melody new for me," to store up new songs for the speaker's delight.

The tone of this stanza feels very different. The first stanza's bitter assertion that "the spring decoys" suggests that the speaker feels not just deceived, but cheated by their bird's departure. Here, though, the speaker is all faith, all "knowing,"

certain that their bird "will return." There's still sadness in the image of the bird far away "beyond the sea," across a mysterious and immeasurable distance. But the speaker also seems to find consolation in the thought that their bird's relationship to their bird hasn't been severed just because they're separated.

Even the sounds of these lines are sweeter:

- In the first stanza, there's a jarring split in the rhyme scheme. The speaker seems to be setting up an AABCCB pattern at first. But that expectation breaks when they use, not a second B rhyme, but a new D rhyme. Two painful words, "decoys" and "gone," bash into each other without harmony.
- Here, there's still not a perfect B rhyme. But there is a slant rhyme between "flown" and "return" that softens the blow, making this stanza gentler on the ear.

In these two opening stanzas, then, readers meet a speaker divided between feelings: betrayal and loyalty, grief and comfort, pain and love. Declaring their trust that their bird will return, they may be trying to reassure themselves as much as anything.

Notice how important the thought of "melody new" is to the speaker here. It's not just their bird they miss, but the song the bird sung: musical communion seems to be at the heart of this lost relationship.

LINES 13-18

Fast in a safer hand
Held in a truer Land
Are mine—
And though they now depart
Tell I my doubting heart
They're thine.

The speaker now finds consolation, not only in the idea that the bird will return, but that it's perfectly safe where it is:

Fast in a safer hand
Held in a truer Land
Are mine—

These parallel lines might lead readers to wonder if the bird has flown away to Heaven itself, the "truer Land" where the "safer hand" of God might protect it. At the same time as this hint of real loss enters, something new happens:

- So far, the speaker has spoken of a single beloved bird that has flown away.
- Now, the bird doubles: *two* birds who "are mine" have departed for a "truer Land."

Here, a little context on Dickinson's life might not go amiss:

- Dickinson wrote this poem in a pained letter to her beloved friend Sue Gilbert on a difficult occasion. Sue had just announced that she would marry Dickinson's brother Austin.
- That would have been all well and good, except that Dickinson herself was, almost certainly, deeply in love with Sue (and Sue probably returned those feelings to at least some degree).
- The whole situation felt desperate to Dickinson. In the letter this poem comes from, she tries hard to reconcile herself to a situation that will hurt her even as it brings happiness to two people she loves (at least for a while. As it happened, Sue and Austin would have a terribly troubled relationship).

Readers don't need to know this biographical detail to soak up this poem's mood of mingled faith and pain. But it does add tragic richness to the image of the birds "held in a truer land"—a land that might be truer because it's a place where love can be expressed publicly and formalized in marriage, as Dickinson's for Sue certainly couldn't be in the 19th century. The bird splits into a pair of lovebirds, and their summer flight becomes a journey toward the new adventure of married life.

The speaker can't follow. Left behind, they can only tell their "doubting heart" that the birds are still theirs, still connected to them. But even the mention of that doubting heart suggests that their faith in that connection isn't unshakeable. They have to tell themselves that it's still there.

LINES 19-24

In a serener Bright,
In a more golden light
I see
Each little doubt and fear,
Each little discord here
Removed.

The speaker wants to have faith that their lost bird (or birds, as the case may be) will return one day. But their "doubting heart" makes it hard. In this stanza, they describe those moments when they feel their faith more profoundly.

So far, the poem's language has been pretty plain: the speaker has simply laid out their predicament. Now, a moment of imagery gleams:

In a serener Bright,
In a more golden light
I see
Each little doubt and fear,
Each little discord here
Removed.

Dickinson uses the word "bright" as a noun here, not an adjective, giving this "golden light" a presence of its own. The speaker's anaphora here first invites readers to linger in that calm, golden bright for a moment, then stresses just how "little" every "doubt and fear" feels when that light is present.

This image of serene illumination suggests that the speaker is reaching out to a heavenly wisdom beyond the anxieties and pains of the world. The speaker here stretches their imagination toward a time when all their suffering will *look different*, or be "removed" altogether.

In other words, the speaker has to go to a pretty deep well to find comfort in their current distress. They might protest that they don't "repine" over their missing bird—but clearly, they do. To endure, they need to have faith not just that their bird will return one day, but that all their pain will be redeemed or healed, somehow.

LINES 25-30

Then will I not repine,
Knowing that Bird of mine
Though flown
Shall in a distant tree
Bright melody for me
Return.

Having reached out to a "serener Bright," a divine illumination that reminds them that their suffering won't be forever, the speaker can return to their struggle against despair with renewed faith. The language of this closing stanza repeats much of the language of the second stanza, with a few meaningful differences.

In the second stanza, the speaker claimed:

> Yet do I not repine
> Knowing that Bird of mine
> Though flown—

Now, they say:

> Then will I not repine,
> Knowing that Bird of mine
> Though flown

In one breath, then, the speaker confesses that they've been repining all along and declares that they'll redouble their efforts not to repine any longer. The "golden light" gives them strength to face their trials with renewed faith.

And where before the speaker pictured their bird "beyond the sea," now the bird is "in a distant tree"—still far, far away, but somewhere the speaker can imagine, perched on a branch and learning a new "bright melody." The return of the word "bright," which readers last saw in a moment of divine illumination, suggests that the speaker sees the bird's song as something itself close to holy.

The poem ends on a slow, solemn enjambment:

> Shall in a distant tree
> Bright melody for me
> Return.

Leaving the single word "return" all alone on the final line, the speaker gives special weight to their deepest desire: that their bird will come back to them.

Besides expressing the deep grief of separation from a beloved and the strength it takes to trust in a changing relationship, perhaps this poem explores artistic faith, too. The image of the little songbird who comes and goes might also be read as a symbol of the poet's voice—a creature with its own habits and whims. When it flies away, the speaker mourns its song, but perhaps can also accept that the bird *needs* to go away sometimes if it's ever to return with a new "bright melody."

SYMBOLS

THE BIRD

The lost bird here might symbolize both a faraway beloved and departed poetic inspiration.

Dickinson wrote this poem while grappling with her feelings about Sue Gilbert, a woman she loved—and who married Dickinson's brother. The bird here can be read as standing in for Sue herself, flying off to the new adventure of marriage. The speaker, a voice for Dickinson in this reading, stays behind, trying her best to believe that her beloved will go on caring for her even with this change in circumstances. One doesn't need that biographical detail to read the bird here as a symbol of any lost beloved, though—anyone a mournful lover might hope to stay connected to even when they're far away, living another life.

With its lovely song, the bird might also represent artistic inspiration and creativity (a role songbirds have often played in poetry). When it departs, the anxious artist can only wait patiently for it to return, hopeful it might bring "melody new" with it.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-6:** "I have a Bird in spring / Which for myself doth sing— / The spring decoys. / And as the summer nears— / And as the Rose appears, / Robin is gone."
- **Lines 8-12:** "Knowing that Bird of mine / Though flown— / Learneth beyond the sea / Melody new for me / And will return."

- **Lines 25-30:** "Then will I not repine, / Knowing that Bird of mine / Though flown / Shall in a distant tree / Bright melody for me / Return."

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

Repetitions—especially strong parallelism—give this poem its shape and its tone. Steady, echoing sentence structures evoke the speaker's struggle to stay firm and faithful in the face of doubt and loss.

Much of the parallelism in the poem travels in couplets, as in these moments of anaphora from the fourth stanza:

> In a serener Bright,
> In a more golden light
> I see
> Each little doubt and fear,
> Each little discord here
> Removed.

The mirrored lines feel intense and poignant. The first couplet, which describes the calm, golden light of an unearthly wisdom, invites readers to linger on the speaker's imagery for a moment, basking in that glow. In the second couplet, the repeated phrasing stresses just how "little" the speaker's fears and doubts feel in that light.

Perhaps the strongest and most meaningful repetitions here are the echoes between the second and fifth stanzas. The fifth stanza repeats the phrasing of the second word for word—almost. That makes those few differences there are between the stanzas especially significant:

- The speaker starts the second stanza by declaring, "Yet I do not repine." When that line rolls around again in the fifth stanza, it's turned into "Then will I not repine"—a statement that's softer in some ways and firmer in others. Before, the speaker claimed they weren't mourning; now, they admit they are, but that they'll try hard not to.
- Where in the second stanza the flyaway bird is learning "melody new" somewhere "beyond the sea," in the fifth the bird sings "bright melody" in "a distant tree." The movement from the mysterious oversea journey to the solid thought of a tree—faraway but imaginable—suggests that the speaker is getting a firmer imaginative grasp on their bird even as they accept how far away it is.
- Finally, the closing line of the second stanza—"and will return"—concentrates down to the lone word "return" in the closing line of the fifth stanza; the poem concludes with the simplest possible statement of the speaker's deepest longing.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "And as the"
- **Line 5:** "And as the"
- **Line 7:** "I not repine"
- **Lines 8-9:** "Knowing that Bird of mine / Though flown—"
- **Line 11:** "Melody," "for me"
- **Line 12:** "return"
- **Line 13:** "in a"
- **Line 14:** "in a"
- **Line 19:** "In a"
- **Line 20:** "In a"
- **Line 22:** "Each little"
- **Line 23:** "Each little"
- **Line 25:** "I not repine"
- **Lines 26-27:** "Knowing that Bird of mine / Though flown"
- **Line 29:** "melody," "for me"
- **Line 30:** "Return"

IMAGERY

Delicate touches of imagery give readers a glimpse of the well from which the speaker draws their faith.

Most of this poem just gently lays out the speaker's dilemma in plain, simple language: they had a bird, now it's gone, and though they miss it, they're trying not to "repine" too painfully. In the poem's fourth stanza, though, the speaker introduces a mysterious image:

> In a serener Bright,
> In a more golden light
> I see
> Each little doubt and fear,
> Each little discord here
> Removed.

The image of a "serener," "more golden" light here suggests a kind of heavenly wisdom that allows the speaker to see past earthly trials to a time when all "doubt and fear" will be "removed." That the speaker paints this mystical perspective on suffering as a different kind of light makes this wisdom feel all-encompassing: everything looks different under this calm golden glow.

Notice, too, that the speaker uses the word "bright" as a noun here, not an adjective: "a serener Bright." Such a "bright" feels like a solid presence of its own. The word appears again, this time in its usual adjective form, when the speaker describes the "bright melody" they hope their flyaway bird might bring home to them one day—a moment of synesthesia that unites sight and sound, suggesting that the bird's song is one of the ways

the speaker glimpses the "more golden" world they draw their strength from now.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-20:** "In a serener Bright, / In a more golden light"
- **Lines 29-30:** "Bright melody for me / Return."

ASSONANCE

Assonance gives the poem some quiet, poignant music.

For instance, when the speaker's bird first flies away, the speaker says: "Robin is gone." That gentle repeated /aw/ sound softens the line's finality; the speaker sounds sad and lost at the bird's departure, not shocked.

Clinging to their faith that the bird will return, the speaker tries to stay hopeful:

> Yet do I not repine
> Knowing that Bird of mine
> Though flown—
> Learneth beyond the sea
> Melody new for me
> And will return.

The round /oh/, long /i/, and sweet /ee/ sounds here make this passage sound as melodious as the birdsong the speaker hopes to hear again one day.

Later, in the stanza where the speaker describes the light of faith, one sound dominates:

> In a serener Bright,
> In a more golden light
> I see
> Each little doubt and fear,
> Each little discord here
> Removed.

That consistent long /ee/ sound suffuses this stanza just as that "golden light" suffuses the speaker's mind. The delicate /ih/ of "little discord," meanwhile, makes those discords sound fragile and tissuey, hardly worth worrying about in this new light. (Notice the alliterative /d/ that links "doubt" and "discord," too—a tiny hard thump that makes these troubles hit like thrown pebbles.)

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Robin," "gone"
- **Line 7:** "I," "repine"
- **Line 9:** "Though flown"
- **Line 10:** "beyond," "sea"
- **Line 11:** "Melody," "me"
- **Line 13:** "Fast," "hand"
- **Line 16:** "now"
- **Line 17:** "doubting"
- **Line 19:** "serener"
- **Line 21:** "see"
- **Line 22:** "Each," "fear"
- **Line 23:** "Each," "here"
- **Line 24:** "Removed"
- **Line 25:** "I," "repine"
- **Line 27:** "Though flown"
- **Line 29:** "melody," "me"
- **Line 30:** "Return"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambments give the poem a slow, halting rhythm that evokes the speaker's struggles.

Some of these enjambments are just gentle little pauses in the speaker's voice, as in the third stanza:

> Fast in a safer hand
> Held in a truer Land
> Are mine—

Here, the speaker sounds as if they're working through this idea, trying (with some difficulty) to believe that their beloved is better off away from them. A similar slow, thoughtful effect appears several times across the poem, from "Learneth beyond the sea / Melody new for me" in lines 10-11 to "Shall in a distant tree / Bright melody for me" in lines 28-29.

But some enjambments have a more complex effect on the poem's meaning. Listen to what happens when the speaker describes the "golden light" of wisdom and comfort they reach out for:

> In a serener Bright,
> In a more golden light
> I see
> Each little doubt and fear,
> Each little discord here
> Removed.

The enjambments here allow several different meanings to slowly unfold:

- Leaving "I see" on a line of its own means that, for a second, it seems to be a stand-alone statement, rather like the famous line from the hymn "Amazing Grace": "was blind, and now I see."
- But the phrase isn't over. In another enjambed line, the speaker goes on to describe *what* they see in

that golden light: their "doubt and fear," all their troubles.
- And the phrase *still* isn't over! This stanza's final enjambment reveals that, in this divine light, the speaker sees all those doubts, fears, and discords "removed."

This slow parceling-out of the phrase makes the speaker's build toward understanding feel like a gradual process. They have to make an imaginative stretch here, working their way into that "more golden light" that assures them their fears and suffering won't last forever.

In the final stanza, an enjambment closes the poem:

> Bright melody for me
> Return.

This enjambment leaves the word "return" on a line of its own, giving it a special weight—and making it sound like a special struggle for the speaker to get to it. Trusting in that "return" takes effort! (Note that some readers might argue that there are more enjambed lines in the poem than we've marked here; Dickinson's idiosyncratic use of punctuation leaves a few lines open to interpretation.)

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "sea / Melody"
- **Lines 14-15:** "Land / Are"
- **Lines 21-22:** "see / Each"
- **Lines 23-24:** "here / Removed"
- **Lines 28-29:** "tree / Bright"
- **Lines 29-30:** "me / Return"

VOCABULARY

Decoys (Line 3) - Here, Dickinson uses this word to mean "offers a false promise" or "misleads."

Repine (Line 7, Line 25) - Feel sorrow, mourn.

Learneth (Line 10) - Learns.

Fast (Line 13) - Safe and secure.

Thine (Line 18) - Yours.

Discord (Line 23) - Conflict, difficulty, trouble.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Rather than turning to the ballad stanzas she so often used, Dickinson invents a form of her own here. Five six-line stanzas (or sestets) with a changeable meter track this speaker's efforts to see a loss in a "more golden light" of understanding.

The poem's changing line lengths and halting rhythms suggest that, though the speaker is resolved not to "repine" and grieve over being separated from a beloved songbird, they're still struggling with deep sorrow and anxiety. Some lines here are only one word long, truncated as if the speaker were choking back tears.

The poem's overall shape, though, is steady as the speaker's sense of purpose.

METER

The poem's halting meter evokes the speaker's battle with doubt and grief. While often iambic—that is, built from iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "I have | a Bird | in spring"—the lines unpredictably change shape and length, as if they're struggling.

Though the rhythm of the lines varies from stanza to stanza, there's still a pretty steady pattern here. Each stanza dances back and forth between couplets with three strong stresses and single lines with either one or two stresses. Listen to the fourth stanza, for instance:

> In a serener Bright,
> In a more golden light
> I see
> Each little doubt and fear,
> Each little discord here
> Removed.

Though the two couplets don't exactly match each other, they consistently use those three strong beats; the shorter lines just have the one.

The poem's varied rhythms make the speaker's voice sound thoughtful and natural, not too rigorously structured. It's as if they're thinking through their dilemma in the moment.

RHYME SCHEME

"I have a Bird in spring" features a subtle rhyme scheme that changes slightly across the poem. Stanzas 2, 3, and 5 run like this:

AABCCB

The B rhymes that frame the couplets are often only the loosest possible slant rhymes (for instance, "flown" and "return" have only that /n/ consonance in common). The only perfect B rhyme appears in stanza 3, which pairs "mine" and "thine."

In stanzas 1 and 4, the pattern breaks completely: there's no firm link between "decoys" and "gone" or "see" and "removed." These stanzas rhyme:

AABCCD

This trip in the rhyme scheme might suggest the speaker's wobbling faith.

Overall, though, the poem's short B lines seem to hold hands, cutting across the firm and perfect couplets that make up the rest of each stanza. The mixture of chiming couplets and faint, loose B rhymes helps to set the poem's tone, mirroring the speaker's mingled faith and doubt.

SPEAKER

There's cause to read the speaker in this poem as a version of Dickinson herself. Dickinson enclosed this poem in a letter to her beloved Sue Gilbert, a dear friend she had intense and passionate feelings for. Sue cared deeply for Emily, too—but married Emily's brother Austin. Dickinson wrote this letter not long after her brother and her beloved had decided to get engaged; in it, she tries desperately to reconcile herself to the situation.

Whether or not readers know about this context, though, they can get a sense of this speaker as a suffering but courageous soul. The speaker's insistence that they "do [...] not repine" at losing their bird gets undercut a little by their later resolution: "Then **will** I not repine." Clearly, they *do* grieve when their bird flies away. But they're also resolved to meet this loss with faith and hope, trusting in a "more golden light" of heavenly understanding that can and will relieve their sorrow—and trying hard to believe that their bird is still somehow theirs, even when it's flown far away.

SETTING

"I have a Bird in spring" could take place anywhere that spring rolls into summer. The poem plays with the usual symbolism of the seasons: summer, the warm and fertile time when "the Rose appears," is here an untraditional time of loss and grief. While it's a summer of change and excitement for the bird who flies away, the blooming season is practically a winter of discontent for the lonely speaker.

The other important element of the setting here is a sense of *distance*. The poem's speaker doesn't quite know where their beloved bird has flown away to—only that it's "beyond the sea," in some "distant tree" they can only faintly imagine. Trying to trust that they'll be reunited with their bird one day, they picture seeing their situation in a "more golden light," a heavenly image that hints the pain of separation and loss might only get smoothed out in the "serener Bright" of the afterlife.

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 for the smallest of audiences: it was meant only for the eyes of her beloved friend Sue Gilbert. It didn't appear in print until 1894, when a selection of Dickinson's letters was posthumously published.

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

Dickinson herself was inspired by English writers like William Wordsworth and Charlotte Brontë, whose works similarly found paths through the everyday world into the sublime, terrifying, and astonishing.

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

This poem responds to a difficult episode in Dickinson's life: the marriage between her brother Austin and her beloved friend Sue Gilbert. Emily, Austin, and Sue met in their twenties, when the orphaned Sue moved to the Dickinsons' native Amherst to live with her elder sister. Emily and Sue took to each other right away. Sue, like Emily, had a brilliant intellect and a wide-ranging curiosity, and the pair felt like kindred spirits in a world that didn't make much room for thinking women.

When Sue spent time away working as a teacher, Emily missed her badly and wrote her increasingly passionate letters. Sue would become one of the lucky few with whom Emily shared her private poetry.

Emily's feelings would hit a wall when Sue returned to Amherst and accepted Austin's marriage proposal. If the love between Emily and Sue was romantic—as many of Emily's letters suggest it emphatically was—it couldn't stand the light of the 19th-

century day. Perhaps, too, Emily's feelings for Sue were more intense than Sue's feelings for Emily.

Whatever the case, Emily had to resign herself to Sue being her sister-in-law, not her lover—a fate especially painful because it also separated her from Austin, with whom she'd been fast friends as a child (as a wonderful excerpt from a childhood letter reveals).

Sue and Emily lived next door to each other and remained close until Emily's death. But that closeness was hard-won, marked by long silences and more often played out in the letters they still sent each other (even as neighbors) than in person.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Dickinson Museum — Find a trove of information about Dickinson's life and work at the Dickinson Museum. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/)
- Dickinson's Legacy — Learn how Dickinson's secret poetry was discovered and preserved. (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/12/05/emily-dickinsons-singular-scrap-poetry)
- The Poem in Dickinson's Hand — See the original manuscript of the poem, taken from a letter Dickinson wrote to her beloved friend Susan Gilbert when she married Dickinson's brother. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/12169042)
- Dickinson and Gilbert — Learn more about the intense relationship between Dickinson and Susan Gilbert, the woman for whom this poem was written. (https://www.themarginalian.org/2018/12/10/emily-dickinson-love-letters-susan-gilbert/)
- The Poem Set to Music — Listen to a pleasantly eerie choral arrangement of the poem. (https://youtu.be/dE9kJNmYbNQ)

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
- 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 heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I like a look of Agony
- I like to see it lap the Miles
- I measure every Grief I meet
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- I started Early — Took my Dog —
- I taste a liquor never brewed
- It was not Death, for I stood up
- I—Years—had been—from Home—
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- Nature is what we see
- One need not be a Chamber — to be Haunted
- Publication — is the Auction
- Safe in their Alabaster Chambers
- Success is counted sweetest
- Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
- The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
- The Bustle in a House
- The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants
- There came a Wind like a Bugle
- There is no Frigate like a Book
- There's a certain Slant of light
- There's been a Death, in the Opposite House
- The saddest noise, the sweetest noise
- The Sky is low — the Clouds are mean
- The Soul has bandaged moments
- The Soul selects her own Society
- The Wind – tapped like a tired Man –
- They shut me up in Prose –
- This is my letter to the world
- We grow accustomed to the Dark
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

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