Nature is what we see

POEM TEXT

"Nature" is what we see—
The Hill—the Afternoon—
Squirrel—Eclipse—the Bumble bee—
Nay—Nature is Heaven—
Nature is what we hear—
The Bobolink—the Sea—
Thunder—the Cricket—
Nay—Nature is Harmony—
Nature is what we know—
Yet have no art to say—
So impotent Our Wisdom is
To her Simplicity.

SUMMARY

The speaker defines "nature" as all the things people can perceive with their eyes: the physical landscape or the time of day, little animals like squirrels, phenomena like eclipses, and bugs like the bumble bee. Actually, the speaker says, that's not quite right: nature is Heaven itself (that is, divine, perfect, and holy). Nature exists in all the things people can hear: things like the call of the bobolink (a kind of bird), the ocean, thunderstorms, and chirping crickets. Actually, that's still not it: nature is harmony, the combination of parts into a perfectly balanced whole. Nature is something that human beings instinctively sense but lack the ability to put into words. Our greatest knowledge pales in comparison to nature's simple existence.

THEMES

NATURE VS. HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

Emily Dickinson's "Nature is what we see" presents nature as something at once immediate and utterly inexplicable. Human beings can see and hear and touch the natural world, whose beauty and splendor exists all around us. At the same time, the speaker declares, human "wisdom" is totally useless in the face of nature's "Simplicity." People may be able to instinctively *sense* nature, but, this poem argues, we will never be able to fully understand it or describe it in words.

The speaker repeatedly attempts to define nature in the poem. They say that nature is something "we see" and "hear": it consists of the landscape (things like the hill and sea), animals (like squirrels, bumblebees, and bobolink birds), times of day (like the afternoon), and spectacular events (like solar eclipses and thunderstorms). All these things convey nature's incredible vastness and diversity, and they also reflect the human instinct to explain and categorize our surroundings—to *know* everything by *naming* it.

Yet the speaker feels that none of this *really* accounts for the full majesty of the natural world, because nature can't be contained within the limits of human perception. Indeed, the speaker rejects the definition of nature as something we "see" and "hear," immediately saying "Nay" (as in, "No, that's not right."). Nature, the speaker counters, "is heaven itself" and "harmony," something infused with goodness and divinity, a mass of disparate parts coming together into a perfectly balanced whole.

Ultimately the speaker argues that nature can't be reduced to a simple definition at all; it lies beyond human efforts to describe it. Things like animals or thunder might be *part* of nature, and nature might be fine-tuned in perfect harmony, but none of the descriptions really capture *what it essentially is*.

Nature, the speaker concludes, "is what we know— / Yet have no art to say." In other words, human beings are instinctively familiar with nature but can't put its wonder into language; all our "Wisdom" is "impotent," or powerless, to comphrehend nature's "Simplicity."

This "Simplicity" seems to be a catch-all term for the way nature just *exists*. It defies human definition because it doesn't need human beings to make sense of it. The poem thus acknowledges the limits of human understanding, while also celebrating—but not explaining—all that is various, vibrant, and awe-inspiring about the natural world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

"Nature" is what we see—
The Hill—the Afternoon—
Squirrel—Eclipse—the Bumble bee—

The poem's speaker begins by trying to define "Nature." Nature, of course, is a word that people use all the time; it exists all around us. Yet, as the poem will make clear, nature as a *concept*

is actually pretty hard to pin down with language. This might be why the speaker wraps the word in quotation marks here, as though they're already aware that they're not going to be able to truly define nature in the poem; they're only circling around the idea of "Nature."

First, the speaker posits that the natural world "is what we see." That is, the natural world is right there, outside of the window; people can look at nature and, in doing so, bear witness to its existence.

The speaker then provides a list of some of the aspects of nature that people might "see": the landscape, the shifting light throughout the day, animals, and so on. Notice how there are no connecting conjunction words like "and" in lines 2 and 3. This list is thus an example of asyndeton, and it implies that there are many more things the speaker *could* mention; the list is not definitive.

The trademark Dickinson em-dash connects the items in this list, resulting in many halting caesurae. It's as though the speaker's gaze is being whipped this way and that as they try to take in all the various examples of nature that surround them.

It's quite a varied list as well:

- The speaker first mentions "The Hill." Note how this is capitalized *and* given the definite article ("the"). This makes the hill seem all the more tangible, almost as if the speaker points out of the window and says, well, there's some nature *right there*.
- "With the second item on the list, the poem's already getting complicated. Is "the Afternoon" really something that people "see," or is this just a useful concept that people turn to to make sense of the rhythms of the day? This ambiguity subtly anticipates the speaker's *rejection* of their own definition of nature.
- Line 3's items are then more tangible. A squirrel, an eclipse, a bumble-bee—these are easy to spot! Notice how the alliteration/consonance of "bumble bee" makes it all the more present on the page, also suggesting that nature can be easily *experienced* through the senses.

Together, the items on this list imply that nature is the non-human world, including insects, animals, places, and even times of day. The list also speaks to the human desire to categorize—and by categorizing, to understand—the world, as though by naming things they become a little less mysterious.

LINE 4

Nay—Nature is Heaven—

Suddenly the speaker rejects their own definition of "Nature." "Nay," they say, making it clear that nature *isn't* "what we see"—or, more accurately, it's not *just* "what we see." *Looking* at the world can't fully capture what nature actually *is* because nature is more than what human beings experience.

Notice how "nay" and "nature" alliterate, lending force to this sudden change of heart. The long /ay/ assonance adds to the effect, while the caesura after "Nay," another bold dash, further signals a strong shift in direction.

Nature, the speaker continues, is "Heaven." Heaven." Perhaps the speaker is referring to the awe-inspiring majesty of the natural world, which certainly *can* seem like heaven—in the sense that being in nature is a blissful, sublime, and even divine experience. Or, maybe, the speaker is saying that the natural world is a kind of heaven on earth, a way of experiencing God's splendor while living as a mortal being.

But the speaker might also be talking about heaven as *part* of the natural world. If heaven is a real place, and it's part of the non-human material universe, then surely it *counts* as part of nature, too.

LINES 5-8

Nature is what we hear—
The Bobolink—the Sea—
Thunder—the Cricket—
Nay—Nature is Harmony—

The speaker returns to their original approach to defining nature, filtering it through the senses. This time, however, the speaker focuses on *hearing* rather than *sight*.

Notice how line 5 is identical to the poem's first line, apart from its final word. Note, too, just how many lines here begin with the phrase "Nature is." This anaphora creates the sense that the speaker is reaching again and again for an adequate definition of nature yet coming up short.

The speaker also repeats the list-like structure from lines 2 and 3. Lines 6 and 7, like 2 and 3, again use asyndeton (the lack of conjunction words like "and") and plenty of caesurae, suggesting the sheer variety and beauty of nature. It's as though these are just four out of an almost limitless number of sounds the speaker could have picked from.

The specific sounds the speaker calls out are:

- That of the bobolink bird, which has a wonderfully bizarre call (check it out here);
- The "Sea" (presumably the splashing of waves);
- "Thunder";
- And the chirping of "the Cricket."

Note how each line juxtaposes a relatively small sound against something more epic: the bobolink's individual call feels much softer than the roar of the ocean, while booming thunder overwhelms the little chirp of an insect. "Nature," this juxtaposition implies, has a sweeping scale.

The capitalization of each noun further suggests a certain

authority on the speaker's part. Human beings seem to have come up with a name for each and every part of nature.

Of course, the speaker then rejects such categorization in the following line. Just as line 4 undercut the first three lines of the poem, insisting that nature is not "what we see," line 8 offers another sudden rejection of the speaker's own definition of nature as "what we hear."

> Nay—Nature is Harmony—

Just as in line 4, the combination of alliteration, assonance ("Nay—nature"), and em-dash caesura makes this an abrupt shift in direction. Defining nature as "what we hear" just isn't going to cut it for the speaker.

The word "Harmony" echoes "Heaven" in line 4 (notice that they both start with the letter "h," too!). The speaker is acknowledging the mind-boggling interconnectedness of the world: all the different animals in the food chain, the ecosystem, the rhythms of the moon and the ocean—everything comes together into a perfectly balanced whole.

Finally, note the rhyme sounds here. "Sea" and "Harmony" rhyme with "see" and "Bumble bee" from the poem's opening quatrain. The return to this same rhyme sound again and again adds musical intensity to the poem, and it also might subtly reflect the interconnectedness of nature itself.

LINES 9-12

> *Nature is what we know—*
> *Yet have no art to say—*
> *So impotent Our Wisdom is*
> *To her Simplicity.*

In the poem's final four lines, the speaker essentially admits defeat.

They once again begin a line with the phrase "Nature is," making line 9 the poem's fifth attempt at a definition. Now, however, the speaker states that nature is what people "know" but are unable to express in language. People can intuitively *feel* or *sense* nature's awe-inspiring wonder, but they can't fully *capture* that wonder in words. Nature's divinity, harmony, sublimity, and sheer magic, the poem argues, can't be summed up in human language. Nature resists definition; it's bigger and more complex than any human mind can comprehend. Human beings have no "art to say" exactly what nature is: that is, no way of *art*-iculating nature—not in regular language nor in poetry.

In the poem's last few lines, the speaker sums up the disconnect between human knowledge and nature. "Our wisdom" is "impotent"—that is, powerless—when compared with nature's "Simplicity." The speaker personifies nature here, perhaps nodding to the concept of Mother Earth. This personification ascribes intelligence and intentionality to the natural world, emphasizing the fact that nature's existence does not depend on human perception/experience.

The juxtaposition between human "Wisdom" and natural "Simplicity" suggests that no amount of human knowledge or learning can scratch the surface of nature. Nature just does its thing, unconcerned with human attempts to define it, categorize it, and reduce its mystery. And that seems to be the poem's main point here: nature is *irreducible*, beyond the limits of the human mind.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Nature is what we see" uses alliteration sparingly. Alongside the related sonic device assonance, alliteration makes the poem more musical and memorable.

Note, for example, the alliteration of "Bumble bee." (There's also consonance here: "Bumble bee.") Dickinson could have picked from any number of other insects whose names *don't* alliterate. Picking this one adds artistic flourish to the poem, subtly calling the reader's attention to the use of language as part of the human effort to categorize and understand the natural world. The alliteration here reminds the reader that language is a human creation—one that, ultimately, proves inadequate when it comes to defining nature.

Later, the alliteration and assonance of "Nay Nature" add forcefulness to the speaker's sudden shift in thought. There's clear linguistic drama here, as though the speaker suddenly senses the limitations of their own definition of nature.

Finally, listen to the mixture of sibilance and assonance in the poem's last two lines:

> So impotent Our Wisdom is
> To her Simplicity.

These lines are brimming with /s/, /z/, and short /ih/ sounds. All this sonic play makes the poem's final lines stand out, lingering in the reader's ear. The smoothness and musicality of these lines also evoke the harmonious "Simplicity" of the natural world.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Bumble bee"
- **Line 4:** "Nay—Nature"
- **Line 8:** "Nay—Nature"
- **Line 9:** "Nature," "know"
- **Line 10:** "no"

ASYNDETON

The speaker uses asyndeton when listing out the various aspects of nature that "we see" and "hear":

The Hill—the Afternoon—
Squirrel—Eclipse—the Bumble bee—
[...]
The Bobolink—the Sea—
Thunder—the Cricket—

Neither list contains any coordinating conjunctions. As a result, each list seems like it's just a small, and fairly arbitrary, selection of examples plucked from a potentially limitless array of choices. The speaker might just as well have said, "The Mountain—the Night—the Mouse," etc. Nature, the asyndeton helps suggest, is remarkably, perhaps even inconceivably, vast.

Asyndeton also mashes these different parts of nature together, highlighting nature's immense scope and diversity. The second list, in particular, juxtaposes small sounds alongside epic ones: the warble of a "bobolink" appears right next to the roar of "the Sea," while cracking "Thunder" appears right next to the humble chirp of "the Cricket." Stuffing all these vastly different sounds into a single list, without any conjunctions between them, makes nature seem very hard to define indeed.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "The Hill—the Afternoon— / Squirrel—Eclipse—the Bumble bee—"
- **Lines 6-7:** "The Bobolink—the Sea— / Thunder—the Cricket—"

CAESURA

"Nature is what we see" features one of Dickinson's signature tricks: lines filled with dashes. These dashes create pauses within lines, or caesurae. As a result, the poem often feels breathless and choppy, as though the speaker is excitedly bouncing from one element of the natural world to the next in sheer amazement.

This is especially true in lines 2-3 and 6-7, where the speaker lists out various parts of the natural world that people can see and hear:

The Hill—the Afternoon—
Squirrel—Eclipse—the Bumble bee—
[...]
The Bobolink—the Sea—
Thunder—the Cricket—

Asyndeton—that is, the lack of a conjunction word like "and"—smooshes all these parts of nature together, while the dashes create the sense of the speaker swiftly bouncing this way and that, trying desperately to capture all the disparate parts of their surroundings. The caesurae thus help create a sense of nature's immense variety and abundance.

The poem also uses caesura to mark major shifts in direction. After trying to define nature as "what we see" and "what we hear," the speaker firmly rejects these definitions and offers alternatives:

Nay—Nature is Heaven—
[...]
Nay—Nature is Harmony—

Here, the caesurae create drama, a sense of the speaker throwing out their own ideas in order to try and get closer to what nature *really is*. The dash constitutes an abrupt transition in thought, helping to convey a speaker eagerly searching—yet failing to find—a way to define the natural world.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Hill—the"
- **Line 3:** "Squirrel—Eclipse—the"
- **Line 4:** "Nay—Nature"
- **Line 6:** "Bobolink—the"
- **Line 7:** "Thunder—the"
- **Line 8:** "Nay—Nature"

REPETITION

"Nature is what we see" is a very repetitive poem. The speaker keeps trying to define what nature is, and, in doing so, repeats the same sentence structure over and over again:

"Nature is what we see—
[...]
Nay—Nature is Heaven—
Nature is what we hear—
[...]
Nay—Nature is Harmony—
Nature is what we know—

This creates insistent anaphora ("Nature is") as well as broader parallelism. In a way, all these bold attempts to define nature have the opposite effect of their supposed intent: they *undermine* any stable sense of what, exactly, nature is. Yes, nature might be a hill or an insect, but the fact that the speaker reaches again and again for new definitions suggests that *none* of these definitions are enough. Language keeps falling short over and over again.

Ultimately, this all supports the poem's conclusion that "Nature is what we know— / Yet have no art to say." That is, nature is something human beings relate to intuitively yet cannot fully articulate.

Even the structure of the poem is repetitive. Lines 6 and 7 work just like lines 2 and 3, providing a list to support the previous line's bold statement about what nature is. As a result, when lines 11 and 12 conclude that human knowledge pales in

comparison with nature's "Simplicity," it feels refreshing precisely because these lines *don't* repeat the grammar/syntax/vocabulary that characterize the rest of the poem.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ""Nature" is what we"
- **Line 4:** "Nay—Nature is"
- **Line 5:** "Nature is what we"
- **Line 8:** "Nay—Nature is"
- **Line 9:** "Nature is what we"

VOCABULARY

Eclipse (Line 3) - An event in which one celestial body is obscured by another (e.g., the moon temporarily blocking out the sun).

Nay (Line 4, Line 8) - Archaic form of "no."

Bobolink (Line 6) - A small blackbird with an unusual call.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Nature is what we see" consists of a single, 12-line stanza. Look a little closer though, and it also divides pretty neatly into three quatrains (a.ka. four-line stanzas; sometimes the poem is published with actual spaces to indicate these stanza breaks).

Each quatrain starts almost identically, with the phrase "Nature is what we + [verb]." This highly repetitive structure creates a kind of restlessness, as though the speaker keeps digging around to find the right definition for nature and keeps coming up short.

The poem's many caesurae add to the effect of a speaker desperately searching for some way to define nature, making it seem as though their gaze is being pulled this way and that.

METER

"Nature is what we see," by Dickinson's standards, doesn't have a very strict meter.

By and large, each line has three stressed syllables, and these often fall into an iambic (da-DUM) pattern. Many lines can thus be considered iambic trimeter, as is the case with lines 2 and 6:

> The Hill— | the Af- | ternoon—
> [...]
> The Bob- | olink— | the Sea—

There's quite a bit of variation on this pattern, however. Take line 1, which begins with a trochee (the opposite of an iamb: DUM-da):

> "Nature" | is what | we see—

The speaker begins lines with stressed beats quite a bit, as in line 3 (which has four feet, making it a line of tetrameter)...

> Squirrel— | Eclipse— | the Bum- | ble bee—

...And line 7, which begins with a dactyl (DUM-da-da) followed by a trochee. This line feels truncated because it has just five syllables (most of the poem's lines have six):

> Thunder—the | Cricket—

Lines 4 and 8, meanwhile, feature the same forceful opening stressed beats:

> Nay—Nature is Heaven—
> [...]
> Nay—Nature is Harmony—

All in all, this frequent variation makes the poem feel spontaneous and honest. A strict meter might feel too authoritative and self-assured. This, in turn, would be at odds the speaker's view that, ultimately, they *can't* really define what nature is. The metrical inconsistency reflects the speaker's struggle to capture nature in words.

Notice, however, that the final three lines fall into perfect iambic meter:

> Yet have | no art | to say—
> So im- | potent | Our Wis- | dom is
> To her | Simpli- | city.

Once the speaker acknowledges the limits of human "art," that art becomes smooth and steady. The poem's turn to regular meter here mirrors the harmony and "Simplicity" being described.

RHYME SCHEME

"Nature is what we see" features a strange rhyme pattern. Lines 1, 3, 6, 8, and 12 all end with the long /ee/ sound, creating full rhymes ("see"/"bee"/"Sea"/"Harmony"/"Simplicity"). Line 10 ends with "say," forming a slant rhyme with all those rhymes. Readers much hear a slant rhyme between lines 2 and 4 as well, albeit a very subtle one ("Afternoon" and Heaven"). Mapped out and including slant rhymes, the poem's overall rhyme scheme looks like this:

ABAB CADA FAHA

The poem hints at a pattern but repeatedly breaks it. In this way, the rhyme scheme mirrors the speaker's attempts to define "nature." The poem's sounds don't quite line up, which reflects the limits of "art" to capture the pure "Simplicity" of the

natural world.

SPEAKER

As is often true of Dickinson's poetry, the reader learns nothing about this poem's speaker—apart from the fact that they're a human being. The speaker's attempts at anonymous, detached authority create a bit of irony: the speaker repeatedly tries to define nature yet does so by *filtering* nature through the human experience. That is, they try to define nature by relating it to what human beings can sense. Yet nature, the speaker comes to argue, exists beyond the limits of human perception. Recognizing this, the speaker ultimately declares that defining nature through human "art" is impossible.

SETTING

"Nature is what we see" doesn't have a clear setting, though it does, of course, call to mind elements of the natural world.

In lines 2-3 and 6-7, the speaker points out various aspects of nature that human beings can see and hear: landscapes, water, buzzing insects, storms, birds, and so on. These references make nature seem tangible, yet these lines also encompass a wide range of disparate things—an "eclipse" is nothing like a "bumble bee." In this way, the speaker's descriptions of nature hint at nature's vastness and complexity.

Again, though, the poem isn't really set anywhere, which reflects the idea that the natural world can't be encompassed by human language.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson was an important part of the American Romantic movement, alongside writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. She was also a one-of-a-kind writer with a distinct sensibility that set her apart from her contemporaries. Some people even see her as the grandmother of modernism, the 20th-century literary movement of experimental, introspective writers like T.S. Eliot.

Though she is now famous for her use of slant rhymes, idiosyncratic punctuation, and unconventional capitalization, these techniques were quite innovative for her time. Her poems are also filled with strikingly unique imagery and figurative language, as well as deeply personal considerations of nature, faith, and death.

Dickinson wrote "Nature is what we see" around 1863 and, like most of her poetry, it wasn't published during her lifetime (only 10 of her nearly 1800 poems were). The poem belongs to a subgenre of Dickinson's work: the *definition* poem (closely related to the *riddle* poems). In poems like "Hope is the thing with feathers" or "Experience is the angled road," Dickinson seeks to define an abstract concept through concrete imagery and figurative language.

Most of Dickinson's poems were found after her death, when her sister discovered a trunk of poetic treasure 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

Emily Dickinson lived in Amherst, Massachusetts all her life. She grew up in a strict Protestant environment that placed great emphasis on religious rules and social codes. Dickinson was also swept up for a time by the religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening, and her religious upbringing shows itself in the hymn-like rhythms of her poetry. Many of her poems also express wonder about the afterlife, often speculating—sometimes exuberantly—on what it's like to meet God and Jesus, if that is in fact what happens when people die (something Dickinson wasn't sure about).

Dickinson ultimately rejected organized religion and often questions the existence of God in her work—an activity that would have been scandalously at odds with her community. By all accounts, Dickinson's life was extremely unusual for the 1800s. Most women were expected to marry and have children, but Dickinson never did. In fact, towards the end of her life, she barely spoke to anyone but a small circle of close friends and family and spent much of her later years shut up in her room.

Dickinson's poetry also syncs up with her era's idealistic movements aimed at preserving the natural world. This idea of protecting natural wonders was a novel one in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, a time when nature was often seen as a source of wealth rather than beautiful in its own right.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Dickinson's Legacy — Listen to three contemporary writers discussing Dickinson's influence on their work. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000198y)
- Emily Blaster — A video game based on Dickinson's poetry! (https://gabriellezevin.com/emilyblastergame/)
- Dickinson's Rhythms — Check out an informative discussion of Emily Dickinson's distinctive use of meter. (https://poemshape.wordpress.com/2009/01/18/emily-dickinson-iambic-meter-and-rhyme/)
- A Manuscript of the Poem — Read the original text in

Dickinson's own hand. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/12175588)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- A Bird, came down the Walk
- After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
- A narrow Fellow in the Grass
- An awful Tempest mashed the air—
- As imperceptibly as grief
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- 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 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 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
- 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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