# Tell all the truth but tell it slant —

## POEM TEXT

1 Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
2 Success in Circuit lies
3 Too bright for our infirm Delight
4 The Truth's superb surprise
5 As Lightning to the Children eased
6 With explanation kind
7 The Truth must dazzle gradually
8 Or every man be blind —

## SUMMARY

Tell the whole truth, but tell it from a particular angle or put a spin on it. You have to go about it in a roundabout way, because human beings are too weak to take in the truth's magnificent brilliance all at once. Much like you make lightning seem less frightening to children by gently explaining it to them, you have to tell the truth little by little so as not to overwhelm people; if the truth is shown too directly, people won't be able to grasp or accept it.

## THEMES

### TRUTH AND UNDERSTANDING

In this poem, the speaker muses on the best way to tell the truth. While the speaker believes that it's important to tell "all the" truth, it also seems that the truth is too vast, bright, and brilliant to be taken in all at once. Whether that truth in question is related to religious enlightenment, the laws of nature, or something else entirely, the speaker believes that the truth must be arrived at slowly and indirectly—lest it totally overwhelm its audience.

To "tell it slant" here essentially means to put a spin on the truth, to approach it from an angle of sorts rather than head on. Broadening this idea, the speaker insists that success when it comes to sharing the truth can be found in "Circuit," a word that indicates a kind of circular journey. Truth can't be grasped all at once, in other words; it takes repeatedly hovering around the edge of something to really understand it.

Why must the truth be approached this way? According to the speaker, it's because the truth is simply "too bright" on its own, too dazzling and surprising to stare at directly. Much like the sun, it's too radiant to behold all at once; doing so will make someone go "blind," metaphorically speaking. The speaker isn't advocating for lying, but saying that the truth must be felt and glimpsed—rather than gaped at—in order for it to be fully understood and believed.

The actual truth that the speaker is talking about here is left ambiguous. On the one hand, the speaker might be alluding to religious (and specifically Christian) truth. The Bible frequently connects "light" and "truth" with God, and lightning is also often taken as symbolic of God's power. Contrasted with the "infirm"—or weak, sickly—"Delight" of humanity, the bright truth in the poem might be taken as a reference to the strong, everlasting presence of God. The poem might be saying that it's simply too much for feeble human beings to look at God and spiritual truth directly. Of course, the poem may simply be referencing truth and truth-telling more generally.

In any case, the speaker compares telling the truth to gently explaining lightning to children in a way that makes it seem less scary. The laws of nature are harsh, and the nature of the world isn't always pretty; children need to know these things, but adults soften the truth to make it more palatable. The speaker seems to suggest that this is the role of the person who tells the truth—to deliver it in a way that doesn't frighten the recipient.

Regardless of what this truth is, exactly, the speaker insists that it must "dazzle gradually." In other words, a truth that is discovered in bits in pieces, or that is felt and intuited before it is understood, stands a better chance of being accepted than a truth that is delivered too bluntly. And the final line of the poem speaks to the danger of a truth arrived at too suddenly: the em dash ends the poem abruptly, mimicking the way a person might respond to a sudden, uneasy truth—by breaking off or turning away, no longer able or willing to engage.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-8

### THE NATURE OF POETRY

The poem can be interpreted as an ars poetica, a poem that meditates on the art of poetry itself. The speaker's instruction to "Tell all the truth but tell it slant" seems to capture something that poetry in particular is capable of doing: taking something old and familiar and making it new and fresh. That is, by giving an idea an unexpected "slant," poetry creates the "surprise" of seeing something beautiful or profound in the everyday.

The speaker's assertion that "success in Circuit lies" implies that even if one wanted to deliver the truth all in one fell swoop, one couldn't. Instead of just bluntly stating some profound fact,

the speaker intimates that one must try again and again to arrive at truth. This requires poets to find new ways of looking at the familiar world. The poet's job, then, isn't just to tell the truth, but to tell it in ways that *haven't been told before*—an idea that presents poetry as a process of constant innovation and discovery.

The idea that "success in Circuit lies" also subtly suggests that beauty exists in ordinary, routine occurrences. The word "circuit" invites readers to think about repetition, which is often seen as boring and mundane. And yet, the speaker upholds that a certain kind of "superb surprise" lurks within the truth. It is this sense of wonder and "surprise" that poetry is capable of unveiling through its unexpected and unique approach to language. The poet's responsibility, then, is to reveal meaningful feelings or thoughts that readers don't expect.

This process of arriving at surprising truths must happen "gradually." Through this slow and patient approach, poetry can invite readers to really sit with things they might ordinarily have ignored or overlooked. Thus, poetry may open a reader's eyes to the truth—whether that truth is something big and profound or just the ordinary beautiful world to which people quickly become accustomed. Poetry, the poem itself suggests, presents reality in a way that allows readers to see the extraordinary at the heart of the ordinary.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-8

## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINE 1

*Tell all the truth but tell it slant —*

The poem begins with the speaker instructing the reader to "Tell all the truth but tell it slant." The word "slant" indicates a specific angle or perspective, so it's as if the speaker is saying, "Tell the truth, but not directly."

The word "slant" often describes a slope, but here essentially means to approach the truth from an angle rather than head-on—to tell it indirectly. People must find their own unique ways of articulating meaningful ideas.

Of course, "slant" can also refer to a person's bias or predisposition toward a certain idea. In the context of the poem, this might suggest that people have their own viewpoints and their own experiences of the truth—and, maybe, that the truth itself is subjective

Finally, the word "slant" foreshadows the poem's central metaphor, which compares the experience of encountering profound truths to the experience of seeing "dazzl[ing]" light. In the same way that people are better off gazing at a "slant" of light than staring directly into the sun, it's necessary to approach the truth in a roundabout, indirect way.

The first line sets up some expectations for the poem's rhythm. The poem is written in common meter, which alternates between lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. A line of iambic tetrameter is made up of four iambs, which are metrical feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). A line of iambic trimeter, on the other hand, contains only three iambs (three da-DUMs).

This first line, then, is written in iambic tetrameter:

Tell all | the truth | but tell | it slant —

Many church hymns use common meter, so this rhythm lends the poem a sense of importance or reverence while also making it feel more musical.

The presence of heavy consonance and alliteration in the repetition of /t/ and /l/ sounds make the line all the more memorable:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —

Everything that follows the em dash at the end of line 1 explains or illustrates this point made at the outset of the poem. In this way, the first line functions like a thesis that the rest of the poem will support.

### LINE 2

*Success in Circuit lies*

In line 2, the speaker elaborates on the idea of telling the truth "slant." The speaker says that "Success in Circuit lies," apparently suggesting that the best way to approach the truth is through a circuitous (or indirect) route—it can't be approached head-on.

The word "circuit" refers to circularity, bringing to mind the outermost edge of something. The speaker is implying that one can only *circle* the truth. Instead of directly accessing it, people have to dance around it, finding indirect and inventive ways to get at it. Only by circling the truth again and again does it become possible to actually *understand* it.

The word "lies" also has a subtle double meaning, since it can refer to the act of deception. Since it's impossible to directly state the truth, the speaker implies that saying indirect things—things that might even seem untrue—is actually a better way of working one's way toward profound meaning. The speaker doesn't mean that outright lies *lead* to the truth, but that sometimes it's necessary to think in abstract ways in order to arrive at the truth of things.

Either way, the poem indicates that people can only handle a little truth at a time, or that telling and understanding the truth is something that happens in stages or layers, not all at once.

This requires people to open themselves up to interpretations of the truth that might not seem obvious or straightforward at first.

The sibilance in "Success" and "Circuit" indicates a strong relationship between these two concepts, again emphasizing the idea that circuitousness and indirectness are good ways of approaching the truth. The consonant hard /c/ sound also connects these words, adding a sharp and percussive effect: "Success in Circuit lies." This gives the line a rhythmic quality that goes well with the speaker's use of iambic trimeter, emphasizing the da-DUM da-DUM rhythm of the line's three iambs.

## LINES 3-4

*Too bright for our infirm Delight*
*The Truth's superb surprise*

The speaker goes on to say that the truth is "Too bright for our infirm Delight." The use of the word "our" here indicates that the speaker is making a broad claim about humanity's inability to handle the blatant truth. Human beings, the poem argues, are unable to fully enjoy the beauty that lurks within the truth—a beauty that feels too upfront and "bright" and therefore overwhelms the human capacity to appreciate it.

The internal rhyme between "bright" and "Delight" in line 3 creates a pleasing sound that hints at the inherently good, satisfying, or even divine nature of truth. The use of the word "infirm," however, implies that humanity's ability to take pleasure in this kind of truth is limited by its weakness of mind, character, or spirit. This is not a *literal* weakness but a metaphorical one: something about being human makes it difficult for people to look at the truth straight on. This builds on the poem's central metaphor comparing truth to a strong, dazzling light.

In line 4, the speaker further emphasizes the beautiful nature of truth, describing it not just as a "surprise," but as a "superb surprise." Truth, then, is wonderful and superior to anything else. It is also inherently surprising, because no matter what people think they know, they can never grasp the entirety of a given truth—there is always more to it than a person can comprehend.

The sibilant /s/ sound pairs with the consonant /p/ sound in the words "superb" and "surprise," linking the words and drawing attention to the idea that beautiful and startling things often lurk in the truth. The /s/ and /p/ sounds add intensity to the language that reflect how overwhelming it can be to face the truth head-on, even when the truth contains beauty and wonder.

## LINES 5-6

*As Lightning to the Children eased*
*With explanation kind*

In these lines, the speaker goes from *explaining* what it means to tell the truth "slant" to *illustrating* what this means. The speaker suggests that explaining lightning to children will "ease[]" their worries about it. This is actually the first half of a simile, as the speaker will go on in the poem's final two lines to compare the way one might gently explain lightning to a child to the act of telling the truth "slant."

Telling a child about lighting requires one to be "kind," gentle, and careful. After all, lightning is beautiful and amazing, but it can also be startling and dangerous. By methodically explaining to children what lightning actually *is*, though, it's possible to slowly help them leave their fears behind. This suggests that truth and knowledge can have a calming effect if they're "eased" upon people. If delivered too bluntly, though, the truth might feel frightening or upsetting.

Lightning is often associated with sudden realizations and ingenious ideas, but it's also linked to punishment and doom, since figures like Zeus in Greek mythology often use lightning to spite humans. By referencing lightning, then, the speaker subtly gestures toward more complex, religiously-inflected ideas. This reminds readers that the poem might actually be about some kind of religious or spiritual truth, not just the concept of knowledge. Either way, what's clear is that truth can be overwhelming, striking people like a bolt of lightning unless it's revealed slowly and indirectly.

## LINES 7-8

*The Truth must dazzle gradually*
*Or every man be blind —*

These lines complete the simile begun in lines 5 and 6. In the same way that one would explain lightning gently and thoughtfully to a child, the speaker argues that "The truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind." In other words, the truth should be delivered in a way that won't overwhelm people. This is because overwhelming people with the truth will keep them from seeing it at all—they will be metaphorically "blind" to it.

Like the first line of the poem, the last one ends with an em dash. This lends an unfinished quality to the speaker's thoughts—an effect that echoes the "gradual[]" revelation of truth. Instead of giving the poem a conclusive ending, the speaker cuts off the language with this final dash. This keeps readers from feeling like they have fully grasped what, exactly, the poem means. And *this*, in turn, is a perfect representation of the speaker's main point, since this essentially mirrors what it feels like to circle the truth without directly accessing it. The end of the poem therefore leaves readers with the feeling that the speaker has been trying to describe, illustrating that it's impossible to talk about profound truths in a straightforward, definitive way.

## SYMBOLS

### LIGHT

Light in the poem symbolizes truth itself. Throughout the poem, the speaker talks about how light can be overpowering, implying that too much truth can feel like a light that is too "bright" for humans to face.

Light also has certain philosophical and religious associations, since it's often used as a symbol of enlightenment or creation. Consider, for example, the phrase "Let there be light," which God says in the Old Testament of the Bible while creating the earth. In addition, light is frequently used in modern times to illustrate some kind of revelation, like when cartoon characters realize something important and a lightbulb appears above them.

In the poem, the speaker also mentions lightning, a form of light that feels inherently menacing. A light like this, the poem implies, is so "dazzl[ing]" that it can be deeply unsettling and disorienting. Similarly, truth should be approached "gradually," as if were a strong light. In the same way that staring at a bright light temporarily "blind[s]" people, confronting truth in a direct, head-on way actually keeps people from genuinely recognizing it in the first place. Considering that light has religious implications, this encourages readers to consider the fact that the poem might be about what it's like to encounter divine truth. Either way, though, comparing the truth to a bright light helps readers understand the speaker's point that it's impossibility to fully grasp or confronting certain forms of truth or knowledge directly.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Line 3:** "bright"
- **Line 5:** "Lightning"
- **Line 7:** "dazzle"

## POETIC DEVICES

### CONSONANCE

For such a short poem, "Tell all the truth but tell it slant —" contains a lot of consonance. Note how often the poem turns to the /l/ sound, for example, especially in the first line:

> Tell all the truth but tell it slant —

The first line also contains consonance (and alliteration) of the /t/ sound in "Tell," "truth," and "slant." Taken together, this consonance makes the first line feel memorable and assertive.

Later, in line 4, consonance appears with the /p/ sound and the sibilant /s/ sound:

> The Truth's superb surprise

These sounds connect the words "superb" and "surprise," emphasizing the idea that the truth often contains wonderful or beautiful surprises—even if human beings aren't always able to register or make sense of this beauty. The consonance and alliteration in this moment also just makes the line sound more musical and satisfying. The speaker's language reflects the beauty that often lurks within the truth.

The poem's last moment of consonance comes at the very end of the final line, when the speaker alliterates the bold /b/ sound, saying, "Or every man be blind." The immediate repetition of the /b/ sound gives this moment a heightened and rhythmic feeling, ensuring that the poem ends on a strong and decisive note. This assertive tone reveals the speaker's confidence in the belief that overwhelming people with knowledge simply makes it impossible for them to see the truth at all.

**Where Consonance appears in the poem:**

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8

### SIBILANCE

The first two lines of the poem feature sibilance, as the speaker repeats the /s/ sound several times:

> Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
> Success in Circuit lies

This sibilance connects the word "slant" with "Success" and "Circuit." This underscores the idea that truth is best told indirectly—by circling along the outer edge of it—rather than by a more direct means. The sibilance here also subtly creates an air of deception, with that the hissing /s/ sound evoking a snake. While the poem isn't telling readers to lie, it is suggesting a sort of bending of the truth to make it more palatable—so that subtle nod to a creature associated with trickery makes sense.

Sibilance reappears in lines 3 and 4, when the speaker argues that the truth is too astounding for human beings:

> The Truth's superb surprise

The sibilance in this moment draws a straight line through the

words "Truth's," "superb," and "surprise," making them feel almost inseparable. This encourages readers to see the truth as something that is inherently "superb" and "surprising." On a more basic level, this /s/ sound simply smooths out the line, making it sound soft and gentle—a pleasing effect that aligns with the speaker's suggestion that great beauty lurks inside truth.

There are also subtler forms of sibilance in the poem. Take, for example, lines 6 and 7:

> With explanation kind
> The Truth must dazzle gradually

The /th/, /z/, and /sh/ sounds support the sibilance here, and are often treated as sibilant themselves. This adds to the poem's general musicality, helping the words flow easily in a way that sweeps readers from one line to the next.

**Where Sibilance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "slant"
- **Line 2:** "Success," "Circuit"
- **Line 4:** "Truth's," "superb," "surprise"

## REPETITION

There are a couple different forms of repetition in this poem. The first is diacope, which appears in line 1 with the repetition of the word "tell":

> Tell all the truth but tell it slant —

The repetition of "tell" adds emphasis to the word and thus relates to the poem's argument that the means of *relating* the truth are as important as that truth itself. This diacope also works the poem's consonance and common meter (a meter that follows a pattern of alternating eight-syllable and six-syllable lines) to simply make the first line feel very musical and memorable. The speaker's use of repetition here is a large part of why it sounds so memorable, making the language more rhythmic and cohesive. This is most likely the reason that this opening line is easily one of the most quoted lines of poetry in the English language!

There is also the more general repetition of the word "truth," which appears three times throughout the poem. This calls repeated attention to the topic at hand, encouraging readers to meditate on the nature of truth and the idea that it's impossible to ever fully access or grasp it. Repetition thus helps the speaker spotlight the poem's primary concern.

**Where Repetition appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Tell," "truth," "tell"
- **Line 4:** "Truth's"
- **Line 7:** "Truth"

## METAPHOR

The central metaphor of this poem is that truth is "too bright" for human beings to look at it directly. Like the sun, the truth is necessary and wonderful, but because of its brilliance, it can only be glimpsed or felt—people shouldn't stare right at it, since it will "blind" them and prevent them from seeing anything at all.

Within this extended metaphor there are some other more discrete metaphorical ideas. In line 3, for example, the speaker describes humanity's "infirm Delight," suggesting that the reason human beings can't handle the truth all at once is because they are too feeble—too weak in character or in spirit. This presents humans as if they are ill or perhaps frail from old age, an idea that implies that everyone needs to be treated gently and carefully or else they'll be overwhelmed. This means that suddenly encountering the truth (which is "dazzl[ing]" and powerful) would be a deeply overpowering experience.

Lines 5 through 8 set forth a simile that essentially says the same thing. The speaker suggests that it's best to tell children about lightning in a "kind," gentle, and less direct way so that they won't be frightened. In the same way, the speaker implies, the truth needs to be "eased" onto people so that they don't feel daunted by it. Once again, then, the speaker presents the truth as a strong and astonishing force, using both metaphor and simile to vividly illustrate how intense it feels to directly encounter straightforward truths.

**Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**

- Line 3
- Line 4
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 7-8

## ENJAMBMENT

It is not immediately apparent by looking at the poem which lines are enjambed and which are end-stopped, since the speaker doesn't use conventional punctuation. This makes it difficult to decide if a line is self-contained or if it runs into the following line.

Lines 2 and 3, for example, seem enjambed:

> Succes in Circuit lies
> Too bright for our infirm Delight

It would make sense to connect these two lines, since the phrase "Success in Circuit lies" sounds incomplete. However, the line could be reworded like this: "Success lies in Circuit."

This demonstrates that it *is*, in fact, a complete and grammatically correct clause, meaning that it is actually end-stopped.

Lines 4 and 5, on the other hand, are most likely enjambed. Neither line contains a verb—a stylistic choice on the speaker's part. This makes it difficult to discern whether the lines are self-contained, but it *is* clear that they're connected to one another, meaning that it's reasonable to assume that they're enjambed:

> Too bright for our infirm Delight
> The Truth's superb surprise

These lines could be rephrased to read: "The Truth's superb surprise is / Too bright for our infirm Delight." This would be an obvious example of enjambment, since the word "is" highlights the fact that the two lines depend on each other to make sense. As it stands, though, the speaker has inverted this sentence and left out the verb, making the lines feel more self-contained than they otherwise would. This forces readers to work harder to decide if the two lines should be read together or separately. In a way, then, the speaker is doing just what the poem calls for: approaching meaning via "slant," messing with the arrangement of words and punctuation in the poem to present ideas in an interesting, "slanted" way.

Despite this ambiguity, there *is* an obvious moment of enjambment in the poem. In lines 5 and 6, the speaker continues over the line break without any kind of pause:

> As Lightning to the Children eased
> With explanation kind

This creates a seamless, fluid feel that makes the speaker's language sound swift and smooth in this moment. Enjambment also highlights the word "eased" in this moment, underscoring the idea that logical "explanation[s]" will help soothe any kind of worry children might have about lightning.

Of course, these instances of enjambment and end-stopped lines are open to interpretation. Because of the speaker's unique syntax and the poem's lack of punctuation, readers are forced to make their own decisions about which lines are connected and which ones stand on their own. This lack of clarity aligns with the speaker's belief that it's best to speak in roundabout, "slant[ed]" ways.

**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 3-4:** "Delight / The"
- **Lines 5-6:** "eased / With"

## VOCABULARY

**Slant** (Line 1) - A slope or angle. In this context, "slant" means to present something (the truth) from a particular angle, point of view, or perspective.

**Circuit** (Line 2) - A circular line that runs along the outer edge of a given area. Or, to put it more simply, an indirect route.

**Infirm** (Line 3) - Feeble or weak. The word is often used to describe sick or frail people.

**Superb** (Line 4) - Excellent or brilliant.

**Dazzle** (Line 7) - To amaze or overwhelm. "Dazzle" can also describe the way very bright lights often make it difficult for people to see.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Tell all the truth but tell it slant" is an eight-line poem that can be further broken up into two quatrains based on its rhyme scheme (and, in fact, the poem is sometimes published with a stanza break after the first four lines).

This structure is straightforward and easy to follow, offsetting the fact that the speaker's syntax (that is, the arrangement of words) is unconventional. The poem's rather circuitous language reflects the speaker's attempt to tell the truth but "tell it slant." If the language were as uncomplicated as the poem's structure, then the poem might feel too blunt, and this wouldn't align with the idea that it's impossible to state the truth in a straightforward way.

But if the poem's form were as quirky and elusive as its language, it would be hard to understand the speaker's meaning at all! This mixture of a simple form with more complex language therefore allows the speaker to demonstrate what it might look like to tell the truth "but tell it slant."

### METER

Much of Dickinson's poetry is written in common meter—the meter of Christian hymns. This poem is no exception.

The poem alternates between lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. A line of iambic tetrameter contains four iambs, feet that contain an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. A line of iambic trimeter, on the other hand, contains just three iambs. Consider, for example, lines 3 and 4:

> Too bright | for our | infirm | Delight
> The Truth's | superb | surprise

Line 3 is in iambic tetrameter, while line 4 is in iambic trimeter. This gives the poem a dynamic and fresh sound, as if the rhythm

is constantly evolving.

However, the poem doesn't follow this pattern *perfectly*. There are a couple of moments in the poem in which an iamb is replaced with another kind of foot, such as in line 5:

As Light- | ning to | the Chil- | dren eased

While it's possible to force that second foot into an iambic rhythm, doing so sounds pretty unnatural! We'd argue that the poem is more naturally read with that second iamb being replaced with a pyrrhic foot, two unstressed syllables in a row. While deviations like this are small, they make a difference, especially in such a short poem, keeping things from getting too rigid.

### RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows a rhyme scheme in which the even-numbered lines rhyme with each other but the odd-numbered lines don't. It can be mapped out like this:

ABCBDEFE

This means that greater emphasis falls on words like "lies" and "surprise" or "kind" and "blind." These rhymes give the poem a sense of structure and consistency.

Although the words at the end of odd-numbered lines don't form perfect rhymes, they are still sonically connected. For example, lines 1 and 3 end with the words "slant" and "Delight," respectively. These words are connected through consonance, since the /l/ and /t/ sounds are present in both words ("slant" and "Delight"). Similarly, lines 5 and 7 are connected by the assonant /ee/ sound ("eased" and "gradually"). They are, in other words, slant rhymes—an appropriate aspect of the poem, considering that the speaker argues for the value of telling the truth "slant." In this way, the poem subtly enacts its core theme through its use of slant rhymes.

The poem also contains an internal rhyme in line 3 between "bright" and "Delight." This rhyme draws attention to the relationship between truth and pleasure, reminding readers that there is beauty in the truth even though actually encountering this beauty might overwhelm people. This internal rhyme adds musicality to the line, making the speaker's language sound particularly cohesive and satisfying.

## SPEAKER

The poem contains no identifying information about the speaker. All readers know is that the speaker is somebody who thinks extensively about the best way to deliver the truth. According to the speaker, the truth is too overwhelming and powerful to approach head-on. Because of this, the speaker urges readers to seek out the truth in circuitous, indirect ways.

This suggests that the speaker is a cautious and philosophical person, the kind of person who ponders life's big questions but knows that there are limits to human understanding. The poem spotlights this kind of thinking, which is why it doesn't matter all that much that readers never learn who, exactly, the speaker is—in other words, the speaker's ideas are much more important than the speaker's actual identity.

## SETTING

Just as there is no specific speaker of the poem, there is also no specific setting. This poem deals with abstract ideas about truth rather than concrete concerns about the material world. This is part of what makes it feel so timeless: the poem can be applied to any time or place. The lack of specificity allows the speaker to meditate on philosophical ideas about the nature of truth without having to integrate these thoughts into a particular environment. The result is that the poem feels universal and applicable to all walks of life.

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson is widely considered to be one of the greatest and most original poets writing in the English language. She was directly influenced by the Romantics, who valued beauty, the imagination, and reconnection to nature in the face of the Industrial Revolution. She was also impacted by Transcendentalist poets like Ralph Waldo Emerson, picking up on Emerson's interest in individuality and the life of the mind.

Both Emily Dickinson and her contemporary Walt Whitman are often credited with taking these Romantic and Transcendentalist approaches and breathing new life into them. Many people even consider Dickinson's work to be a precursor to Modernism; her use of punctuation, enjambment, and slant rhymes was quite radical for her time, exhibiting the kind of experimentation and rejection of tradition that would come to be associated with Modernist writers. In fact, her work was so unusual for its time that the first editors of her poetry were thrown off by her style in the aftermath of her death—they actually went in and replaced her careful choices with more conventional punctuation, syntax, and full rhymes!

The poetry world in the 1800s was dominated by men. Very few women were published, and when they *were* published, it was usually done anonymously. This was the case for the few poems Dickinson published during her lifetime, which were likely circulated without her permission.

Philosophical and religious writing was also largely overtaken by men, but this didn't stop Dickinson from incorporating this kind of thinking into her poetry. She grew up religious but tended to practice her faith in private, wrestling with religious

ideas in her poetry instead of attending church on a regular basis. All the same, her poetry often uses common meter, which is typical of Christian hymns. By borrowing this form, Dickinson managed to repurpose certain religious practices so that they fit into the unique landscape of her own thinking.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Like almost all of Dickinson's poems, "Tell all the truth but tell it slant —" was not published until after her lifetime. It was written at some point between 1858 and 1865, a period of time in which the poet was intensely prolific. The poem's religious undertones are reflective of Dickinson's relationship with the Christian church (her family was Calvinist), which evolved over the course of her life as she became increasingly skeptical of organized faith. She wasn't alone in her grappling with religion—she lived during a divisive period in which traditional Christian beliefs came up against new scientific discoveries, such as Darwin's theory of evolution.

In particular, New England saw the revival of traditional Christianity in the 1860s, when Dickinson was a teenager. During this period many of Dickinson's contemporaries made public declarations of their faith, but Dickinson herself never did this. She even distanced herself from the church by the end of the decade, feeling that her commitment to the world was greater than her commitment to her faith.

Despite her lack of church attendance, Dickinson continued to wrestle with religious questions throughout her life. Her poetry is a window into this struggle; at times reverent, other times angry or even scoffing, her varying poetic tone indicates that her relationship with God was highly personal and far from straightforward. This may account for the ambivalence and ambiguity in much of her work. While her poems often set out to define or describe a seemingly simple concept—such as telling the truth—there is nothing simple about the way they unfold on the page. Nor, it seems, was her general outlook on life, existence, or religion.

# MORE RESOURCES

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Biography and Further Reading — Check out this brief biography of Emily Dickinson, along with a selection of her poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)
- Additional Resources on Dickinson — For more information about the poet's life and work, take a look at the Emily Dickinson Museum's website. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org)
- The Emily Dickinson Collection — Harvard Library's Emily Dickinson Collection includes preserved copies of over a thousand of her handwritten poems and letters. (https://library.harvard.edu/collections/emily-dickinson-collection)
- Hear the Poem — A performance of the poem by actress Alice Barclay for Live Canon Poetry. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YjBbSEMNj-0)
- A Further Examination of the Poem — This craft essay by Camille T. Dungy provides some additional insight into the poem and its influence on modern poetry. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70128/tell-it-slant)

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- 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
- There's a certain Slant of light
- This is my letter to the world
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

# HOW TO CITE

## MLA

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