

The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants



POEM TEXT

- 1 The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants—
- 2 At Evening, it is not
- 3 At Morning, in a Truffled Hut
- 4 It stop opon a Spot

- 5 As if it tarried always
- 6 And yet it's whole Career
- 7 Is shorter than a Snake's Delay—
- 8 And fleeter than a Tare—

- 9 'Tis Vegetation's Juggler—
- 10 The Germ of Alibi—
- 11 Doth like a Bubble antedate
- 12 And like a Bubble, hie—

- 13 I feel as if the Grass was pleased
- 14 To have it intermit—
- 15 This surreptitious Scion
- 16 Of Summer's circumspect.

- 17 Had Nature any supple Face
- 18 Or could she one contemn—
- 19 Had Nature an Apostate—
- 20 That Mushroom—it is Him!



SUMMARY

Mushrooms are the elves of the plant world. Come nighttime they're nowhere to be found, but in the morning their round little houses pop up as if they'd been there for ages.

Even so, the mushroom's whole life is shorter than the time it takes for a snake to strike its prey. They grow even more quickly than a weed.

Mushrooms are the jugglers of the plant world. You can't pin down where they'll be at any given time. They bubble up from someplace else and quickly hurry away.

I feel like the grass appreciates having mushrooms pop up from time to time (alternatively, this line might mean the opposite: that the grass is happy when mushrooms finally *stop* popping up), stealthily growing right under Summer's cautious eye.

If Nature had a nimble face or the ability to treat someone with contempt—and if any part of Nature was going to break its

rules—it would definitely be the mushroom!



THEMES



THE WONDER OF NATURE

In “The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants,” the speaker marvels at one of nature’s most enchanting and perplexing creations: the mushroom. The speaker is taken by both its “fleet[ing]” nature and its impish unpredictability, both of which make it stand out from other “Plants.” (In fact, the mushroom technically isn’t a *plant* at all, though it’s only very recently that “fungi” have been classified in their own separate kingdom.) The poem serves as a fittingly playful meditation on nature’s furtive and short-lived “Juggler”: the mischievous sprite that briefly interrupts summer’s caution.

The speaker is mesmerized by the way mushrooms seem to appear out of nowhere and disappear just as swiftly. In calling the mushroom “the Elf of Plants,” the speaker implies that mushrooms are somehow magical and a bit capricious in nature. One minute they’re nowhere to be seen, and the next their little “Truffled Hut” appears “opon a Spot.”

The speaker also calls mushrooms “Vegetation’s Juggler,” suggesting that they’re like magicians performing for a rapt audience, and the “Germ” (the spark or seed that starts something) “of Alibi.” This nods to the way mushrooms don’t stay in one place for very long: as soon as you think you have their location pinned down, they pop up somewhere else entirely.

The speaker next compares mushrooms to “Bubble[s]” that seemingly float up out of nowhere and then disappear without a trace. Indeed, the speaker says the mushroom’s “whole Career / Is shorter than a Snake’s Delay.” In other words, the time it takes for a mushroom to appear and then disappear again is less than the time it takes for a snake to strike its prey. And this elusiveness is part of what makes them so captivating!

The speaker’s focus on the mushroom’s unpredictability suggests an appreciation for the way that mushrooms disrupt the ordinary progression of summer. When the speaker says that “the Grass” must be “pleased” whenever the mushrooms “intermit,” they might mean that the grass is happy when the mushrooms randomly (“intermit[tently]”) appear, perhaps because they spice things up. Alternatively, the speaker might be saying that the grass is happy when the mushrooms finally *stop* randomly showing up (“intermit” can mean also mean to cease).

Either way, it’s clear that the mushrooms get in the way of

“Summer’s” normally steady—and, in the speaker’s estimation, exceedingly cautious—growth. This is a delightful interruption, the speaker implies, that makes nature a little stranger and more marvelous.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16



A CELEBRATION OF TRICKSTERS, REBELS, AND NONCONFORMISTS

“The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants” can be read as a [symbolic](#) celebration of tricksters, rebels, and nonconformists—those people who defy normal rules and conventions. By praising the unpredictable, disruptive nature of mushrooms, the poem suggests that there is something admirable about free-thinking and defiant *people*.

The mushroom’s ability to shapeshift, pop up where it’s not expected, and defy nature’s caution makes it the perfect symbol for the world’s rule-breakers. The speaker compares mushrooms to elves, creatures from mythology known for playing tricks and causing mischief. This suggests that the mushroom represents people who aren’t afraid to stir things up!

The speaker also calls the mushroom a “surreptitious” (or stealthy) “Scion / Of Summer’s circumspect.” In other words, mushrooms grow quickly and furtively right under “Summer’s” vigilant eye, suggesting that they’re not really supposed to be there. Summer seems to represent normal rules and conventions, which mushroom-like people disobey and/or disrupt.

The poem’s focus on the “Apostate”—or dissenter—of “Nature” can then be read as a celebration of those people who don’t conform to what’s popular or expected. Unlike “Nature,” the poem doesn’t “contemn” (or feel contempt towards) the mushroom for being an “Apostate”—that is, someone who disavows a religious or political doctrine. The poem instead seems to *applaud* the mushroom’s ability to spring up right beneath “Summer’s” stern and orderly eye, suggesting that such disobedience is *admirable*.

What’s more, the poem itself is mushroom-like: short, whimsical, and irreverent. The poem flits between various [metaphors](#) much like mushrooms pop up in various locales, perhaps hinting at poetry’s mushroom-like ingenuity. Because readers never know what to expect with a poem, it has a way of slipping past people’s defenses—thus opening them up to new ideas! The poem’s humorous, whimsical language is also *sly* like mushrooms—it feels playful and innocuous on the surface, but it’s actually arguing for the importance of thinking freely and not just mindlessly following established rules and norms. In this way, the speaker perhaps suggests *poetry’s* penchant for

sneakily undermining mainstream beliefs about the world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 15-20



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants—
At Evening, it is not
At Morning, in a Truffled Hut
It stop opon a Spot*

The poem begins with a [metaphor](#): the speaker says, “The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants.” In other words, the mushroom is a unique and enchanting part of the plant world (though, technically, it’s not a plant at all!).

An “Elf” is a mischievous little creature from folklore known for playing tricks and being elusive. The metaphor suggests that, like elves, mushrooms are small and capricious; they don’t follow any predictable patterns, but rather pop up when and where they please.

Indeed, the speaker says that the mushroom is nowhere to be seen in the “Evening,” but by “Morning,” it appears “in a Truffled Hut.” This is another metaphor playing on the way a mushroom looks: its cap forms a little “hut.” The word “truffled” comes from a specific kind of mushroom, and this image also might make readers think of the mushroom as a kind of delightful little house in which an elf or fairy might live.

[Anaphora](#) in lines 2 and 3 (“At Evening”/“At Morning”) highlights just how quickly the mushroom grows. Unlike many plants which take days or even weeks to rise from the ground, the mushroom seems to just appear overnight.

And notice the playful, bouncy sounds in line 4:

It stop opon a Spot

There’s /s/ [alliteration](#) (“stop”/“Spot”), /aw/ [assonance](#) (“stop,” “opon,” “Spot”), and crisp /t/ and /p/ [consonance](#). The line reads like a lighthearted tongue-twister, the poem’s sounds helping to convey the mushroom’s impish nature. The humorous sounds also create a fun, light-hearted [tone](#)—the speaker is *enjoying* musing on what makes the mushroom stand out from other plants!

This stanza also establishes the poem’s form. Each stanza has four lines, making them [quatrains](#). These quatrains also use something called [common meter](#), a favorite of Dickinson’s and also the meter often used for church hymns and [ballads](#).

Common meter alternates between lines of [iambic](#) tetrameter and trimeter. An iamb is a poetic foot with two beats arranged

in an unstressed-stressed pattern: da-DUM. Iambic tetrameter means there are four iambs per line, while trimeter means there are three. Here are lines 1-2:

The Mush- | room is | the Elf | of Plants—
At Eve- | ning, it | is not

Common measure also uses an ABCB [rhyme scheme](#): every second and fourth line rhyme with each other ("not"/"Spot"). Using common measure lends the poem some familiar music.

LINES 5-8

*As if it tarried always
And yet it's whole Career
Is shorter than a Snake's Delay—
And fleeter than a Tare—*

Even though mushrooms seem to appear at random, when they do appear somewhere it seems like they'd "tarried always." To tarry means to hang around for a while; the speaker is saying that it seems like the little mushroom has been leisurely hanging out. The mushroom looks content and at home, as though it's always been a part of the environment despite seeming to appear out of nowhere.

"And yet," the speaker continues, "its whole Career"—its life/existence—"Is shorter than a Snake's Delay," or the time it takes for a snake to strike its prey. Indeed, it grows faster than even the fastest growing weeds (a tare is a kind of vetch, a fast-growing plant in the pea family).

The [parallelism](#) in lines 7-8 emphasizes the mushroom's fleeting nature. The speaker reaches for two very different images and insists that the mushroom's existence is shorter than both:

Is shorter than a Snake's Delay—
And fleeter than a Tare—

Note, too, that the word "Career" creates a subtle [pun](#). When used as a verb, "career" means to rush or hurtle towards something. The mushroom's entire life, this pun suggests, is defined by slippery quickness.

LINES 9-12

*'Tis Vegetation's Juggler—
The Germ of Alibi—
Doth like a Bubble antedate
And like a Bubble, hie—*

The speaker says that the mushroom is "Vegetation's Juggler." This [metaphor](#) again conveys that there's something captivating about the mushroom; it's like a magician keeping its spellbound audience enthralled with tricks and illusions.

Since a "Juggler" is someone who keeps multiple objects in the air at once, the metaphor also reflects the mushroom's ability

to pop up all over the place, constantly slipping out of reach. This, in turn, is why the speaker also calls it "The Germ of Alibi." A "Germ" is the seed, kernel, or genesis of something, and an "Alibi" is evidence that someone was somewhere other than the scene of a crime when a crime was committed. So this metaphor implies that the mushroom can't be tied to a certain time or place; just when you think you have its pattern figured out, it has another trick up its sleeve.

The [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) of "Vegetation's Juggler," and "Germ" add yet more playfulness to the poem's language. Along with the continued [personification](#) of the mushroom, these metaphors begin to suggest that the speaker isn't just fascinated by *literal* mushrooms. The defiant little mushroom, readers might begin to suspect, also [symbolizes](#) defiant *people*: the tricksters, rebels, and nonconformists of the world.

The speaker then uses a [simile](#) in lines 11-2, saying that the mushroom

Doth like a Bubble antedate
And like a Bubble, hie—

The mushroom "bubbles" up from somewhere else, but no sooner does it appear than it's already hurrying away.

LINES 13-16

*I feel as if the Grass was pleased
To have it intermit—
This surreptitious Scion
Of Summer's circumspect.*

The speaker [personifies](#) another element of nature in the fourth stanza:

I feel as if the Grass was pleased
To have [the Mushroom] intermit—

These lines might be read in two different ways:

- To "intermit" means to stop or cease, so the speaker might be saying that the personified "Grass" is happy to see the rebellious little mushrooms go on their way—to finally stop their shenanigans.
- Alternatively, the poet might be using a shortened form of the word "intermittently," which means from time to time. In this reading, the "Grass" might actually be as charmed by the mushrooms as the speaker is. Perhaps it's delighted when mushrooms break up the monotony of its growth.

Either way, the mushroom is clearly set apart from the rest of the natural world. It's a "surreptitious" (or stealthy) "Scion" (a twig or offshoot of a bigger plant, or the descendent or offspring of a powerful family).

In contrast, the speaker personifies "Summer" as wary and cautious ("circumspect").

This implies that the mushroom is defying nature's slow and boring rules by shooting up quickly, sneakily, and unpredictably. The mushroom is like a rambunctious, mischievous prince, frustrating its straight-laced parents.

The sounds of the poem convey the mushroom's sneaky defiance. Listen to the smooth [sibilance](#) in lines 15-16:

This surreptitious Scion
Of Summer's circumspect.

All these quiet, hissing sounds also might evoke the disdain of cautious "Summer," who views the mushrooms as annoying interlopers.

LINES 17-20

*Had Nature any supple Face
Or could she one contemn—
Had Nature an Apostate—
That Mushroom—it is Him!*

Readers might interpret the final stanza in a few different ways:

- In one reading, the speaker muses that if "Nature [had] any supple" (or flexible) "Face," it would be the mushroom. That is, compared to most of nature, which follows rigid—and to the speaker, maybe rather *boring*—rules, the mushroom is able to bend and move without breaking. The mushroom is a freer, more flexible representative of the natural world.
- Alternatively, the speaker might be saying that if personified "Nature" had a face that could express contempt, she would *direct* that contempt at the mushroom.

In both readings, the poem once again conveys a tension between the mushroom and the rest of the natural world.

In the last two lines of the poem, the speaker says that if "Nature [had] an Apostate" (someone who leaves or rejects their religion, political party, etc.), it would be the mushroom. This final [metaphor](#) again suggests that the mushroom is a rebel and a free-thinker, a being *choosing* to reject the laws of nature. (It's worth keeping in mind here that Dickinson herself rejected the religion she'd grown up with, searching for a more personal and nuanced relationship to God through poetry and nature.)

[Symbolically](#), the dynamic between "Nature" and "That Mushroom" reflects the way that a rigid society looks down on free-thinkers and those who don't conform to its rules.

Notice the use of [anaphora](#) and [parallelism](#) in lines 17 and 19 ("Had Nature any supple Face" / "Had Nature an Apostate").

This [repetition](#) adds rhythm and momentum to the final stanza, creating an intensity that makes the poem's final moments ring out more powerfully.



SYMBOLS



THE MUSHROOM

While on one level a simple celebration of literal mushrooms, it's also possible to read the poem as celebrating the kind of *people* who break away from society's rules and expectations. In this interpretation, the mushroom [symbolizes](#) the world's rebels and free-thinkers.

Like the sneaky, slippery mushroom, these people refuse to be pinned down to one predictable "Spot." They're nature's "Apostate"—free-thinkers who march to the beat of their own drums and refuse to bow to strict, predictable rules. Philosophically speaking, the poem might imply that such people aren't afraid to outgrow beliefs that no longer serve them, or that they simply refuse to do and be what others expect. And while cautious, straightlaced society might not be too "pleased" at these stealthily disruptive people, the speaker of the poem clearly approves of those who dare to deviate.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12
- Lines 15-16
- Lines 19-20



SUMMER / GRASS

If the "Mushroom" [symbolizes](#) the world's tricksters, rebels, and nonconformists, then cautious "Summer" and "Grass" symbolize the orderly rules and expectations that the mushroom so sneakily defies.

The speaker says they "feel as if the Grass was pleased / To have [the Mushroom] intermit." In other words, the Mushroom disrupts the Grass's slow, cautious growth, springing up seemingly overnight, and the Grass is happy when these little rule-breakers disappear.

It's also possible to read "intermit" as being short for "intermittently," thereby implying the opposite: that the Grass considers the mushrooms' sudden appearance a welcome distraction from the slow tedium of growth. In either reading, however, the Grass is part of a predictable, steady system.

The speaker also describes "Summer[]" as "circumspect," or wary and careful, implying that ordinary society sees those who defy convention as rash and irresponsible. Indeed, the speaker says that "Nature" would "contemn" (or look contemptuously upon) the Mushroom for its "Aposta[sy]," implying that "Summer" and its "Grass" symbolize the religious doctrine or

other dogma from which mushroom-like people break free.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-16:** "I feel as if the Grass was pleased / To have it intermit— / This surreptitious Scion / Of Summer's circumspect."



POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The poem uses multiple [metaphors](#) to describe what makes mushrooms so special. In the poem's opening line, the speaker says that "The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants." An "Elf" is a magical creature from folklore known for trickery and mischief, and the speaker is thus commenting on the enchanting, roguish nature of mushrooms. The speaker also says that the mushroom appears overnight "in a Truffled Hut." This is a rather whimsical metaphor for the mushroom's appearance, which is often compared to a little house for fairies.

The speaker later calls the mushroom "Vegetation's Juggler." This suggests that the mushroom is an entertaining performer while also conveying the way mushrooms are constantly popping up in new places, seemingly out of nowhere. This is why the mushroom is also "The Germ" (the originating seed or kernel) "of Alibi." An "Alibi" is a piece of evidence saying someone was somewhere else when a crime was committed, so this metaphor implies that the mushrooms are slippery enough that they can't be tied to a certain time or place!

In the final stanza, the speaker says:

Had Nature an Apostate—
That Mushroom—it is Him!

Here, the speaker compares the mushroom to an "Apostate": a person who abandons their religion or other belief or cause. This metaphor suggests that the speaker's admiration of mushrooms isn't merely literal; the mushroom's rebellious nature represents *people* who think for themselves.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants—"
- **Lines 3-4:** "At Morning, in a Truffled Hut / It stop opon a Spot"
- **Lines 9-10:** "'Tis Vegetation's Juggler— / The Germ of Alibi—"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Had Nature an Apostate— / That Mushroom—it is Him!"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem [personifies](#) various aspects of nature and in doing so makes the entire world seem vibrantly alive. Most obviously, the speaker personifies the mushroom throughout. Calling it "the Elf of Plants," the speaker depicts the mushroom as a tricky, sneaky little creature that pops up where and when it pleases. This personification helps to playfully evoke the delight the speaker takes in the mushroom's mischievous behavior. It also makes it easy to see how the mushroom might represent those *people* who march to the beat of their own drums.

The speaker also personifies "the Grass" and "Summer[]" in the fourth stanza:

I feel as if the Grass was pleased
To have it intermit—
This surreptitious Scion
Of Summer's circumspect.

These lines can be read in two ways:

- "Intermit" might be short for "intermittently," meaning every now and then. In other words, the "Grass" (capitalized to make it seem like a proper noun) is happy when the mushrooms decide to pop up and interrupt "Summer's" otherwise steady, predictable growth.
- "Intermit" also means *stop*, however, in which case the lines signify the opposite: the grass is happy when the mushrooms finally *disappear* because it's sick of them disrupting summer's slow and cautious growth.

Either way, the poem highlights the tension between the mushroom and the rest of nature, which sees the mushroom as an outlier. This tension, in turn, again suggests that the mushroom is a [symbol](#) of nonconformity.

In the final stanza, the speaker personifies "Nature" itself. If "Nature" had a "supple" (or flexible) face, it would look at the mushroom with contempt (alternatively, the speaker is saying that the mushroom would *be* that face). And if "Nature [had] an Apostate" (or dissenter), it would be the mushroom. The personification in these lines makes it all the more clear that the mushroom isn't just a mushroom—it's a stand-in for anyone who turns their back on other people's expectations.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 13-16
- Lines 17-20

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) (as well as the related devices [assonance](#), [consonance](#), and [sibilance](#)) adds playful music to the poem.

Take line 4, for example, which features the hissing alliteration of "stop"/"Spot" as well as /aw/ assonance and crisp /p/ and /t/ consonance:

It stop upon a Spot

The line reads almost like a tongue-twister, these bouncy, lighthearted sounds suggesting the whimsical and mischievous nature of the mushroom. They also contribute to the poem's humorous [tone](#).

Later, the alliteration of "Juggler" and "Germ" calls extra attention to the speaker's metaphors (the same sound appears in the word "Vegetation," making it ring out even more clearly to the reader's ear). And in the following stanza, hissing sibilance helps to convey the mushroom's stealth. This sibilance is both alliterative:

This surreptitious Scion
Of Summer's circumspect.

And consonantal, appearing within words:

This surreptitious Scion
Of Summer's circumspect.

That smooth sound pops up again at the start of the final stanza, calling attention to the flexibility of Nature's "supple Face." Finally, the sharp, biting /c/ alliteration "could" and "contemn" helps to evoke the natural world's imagined hostility toward the mischievous mushroom.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "stop," "Spot"
- **Line 9:** "Juggler"
- **Line 10:** "Germ"
- **Line 15:** "surreptitious," "Scion"
- **Line 16:** "Summer's," "circumspect"
- **Line 17:** "supple"
- **Line 18:** "could," "contemn"

REPETITION

[Repetition](#) creates rhythm, momentum, and emphasis throughout the poem. In the first stanza, for example, flitting [anaphora](#) (and [antithesis](#)) highlights the quickness with which mushrooms pop up overnight:

At Evening, it is not
At Morning, in a Truffled Hut

There's more anaphora in the final stanza, where the speaker repeats the phrase "Had Nature." This anaphora highlights the tension between "Nature" and the rebellious "Mushroom." It also makes the ending feel more emphatic by adding momentum and rhetorical emphasis to the concluding lines.

There are other kinds of repetition in the poem as well. In lines 7-8, [parallelism](#) helps to emphasize just how little time the mushroom spends in any particular spot:

Is shorter than a Snake's Delay—
And fleeter than a Tare—

The repetition of lines 11-12, meanwhile, highlights the way the mushroom leaves as mysteriously as it appears:

Doth like a Bubble antedate
And like a Bubble, hie—

The mushroom bubbles up out of nowhere and then seems to disappear without a trace.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "At"
- **Line 3:** "At"
- **Line 7:** "than," "a"
- **Line 8:** "than a"
- **Line 11:** "like a Bubble"
- **Line 12:** "like a Bubble"
- **Line 17:** "Had Nature"
- **Line 19:** "Had Nature"



VOCABULARY

Truffled hut (Line 3) - The speaker is saying that the mushroom looks like a little hut (or small house).

Opon (Line 4) - An archaic spelling of "upon."

Tarried (Line 5) - Lingered or stayed longer than anticipated.

A Snake's Delay (Line 7) - The time it takes a snake to strike its prey.

Fleeter than a Tare (Line 8) - Faster than a weed ("tare") grows.

'Tis (Line 9) - A contraction of "It is."

Juggler (Line 9) - A performer who tosses and catches multiple objects in a continuous stream of motion. Also: someone who handles multiple tasks at once.

Germ (Line 10) - The seed or genesis of something.

Alibi (Line 10) - A piece of evidence that someone was somewhere other than the scene of the crime when the crime was committed.

Doth (Line 11) - An archaic form of "do/does."

Antedate (Line 11) - To exist or happen before something else.

Hie (Line 12) - Hurry away.

Intermit (Line 14) - Discontinue or stop. The speaker also might be using a shortened form of "intermittently," which means every now and then.

Surreptitious (Line 15) - Secretive or stealthy.

Scion (Line 15) - A young shoot or twig of a plant, or the descendent or offspring of a powerful family.

Circumspect (Line 16) - Cautious; vigilant; unwilling to take any chances.

Supple (Line 17) - Flexible.

Contemn (Line 18) - An archaic word meaning to treat something with contempt (loathing, disgust, etc.).

Apostate (Line 19) - Someone who leaves or turns against their religion, political party, etc.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants" follows an ABCB [rhyme scheme](#): the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme.

The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants—
At Evening, it is not
At Morning, in a Truffled Hut
It stop upon a Spot

As with most Dickinson poems, however, most of the rhymes are [slant](#): "Career"/"Tare," "intermit"/"circumspect," "contemn"/"Him." Some of the A and C words also subtly echo each other, as with "Face" and "Apostate" in the final stanza. This complicates the poem's otherwise familiar, predictable rhyme pattern, in a way evoking the rebelliousness of "Nature[']s Apostate."



SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem, like so many of Dickinson's poems, is completely anonymous: the reader doesn't learn any specific details about this person. Instead, the poem focuses entirely on the bewitching "Mushroom." Perhaps the speaker admires the mushroom so because they, too, feel like an outcast. Or, maybe, the speaker admires the mushroom because they *wish* they could be more like it: more rebellious, free-spirited, etc.

Note that the speaker's interest in and admiration for "Nature[']s Apostate"—someone who abandons their religion or political party or other cause—reflects Dickinson's own disdain for the societal rules and expectations of her time. While Dickinson was in many ways deeply spiritual, she had serious misgivings about the strict religious doctrine she grew up with. She was, of course, also a woman writing in the 1800s, a time when women's intellectual and creative pursuits weren't exactly encouraged, to say the least. While the poem doesn't have to be read with Dickinson's own apostasy in mind, it certainly leads to a deeper understanding of the speaker's fascination with these rebellious little organisms.



SETTING

The poem is set outside during the "Summer[]," a season during which many varieties of "Mushroom[s]" grow. The speaker describes the absence of mushrooms in the "Evening" and the sudden appearance of their "Truffled Hut[s]" in the "Morning," suggesting how quickly they come and go. The speaker compares the mushroom's stealthy arrival and departure to the speed with which "a Snake[]" strikes its prey, or the frenzied way "Tare" or weed spreads.

The poem's setting can also be read [symbolically](#), with "Summer's Circumspect" (or cautious) standing in for society's



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem consists of 20 lines broken into five [quatrains](#) (or four-line stanzas). These are more specifically [ballad](#) stanzas written in [common measure](#): they alternate between lines of [iambic](#) tetrameter (four da-DUMs) and trimeter (three da-DUMs) and follow an ABCB [rhyme scheme](#) (meaning the second and fourth lines in each stanza rhyme).

This is the form Dickinson turns to most often in her poetry. It's used in many folk songs and church hymns, and here it lends the poem some simple, familiar music.

METER

Like so many of Dickinson's poems, "The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants" is written in [common meter](#). This means the poem's rhythm is [iambic](#) (da-DUM), with lines alternating between tetrameter (four iambs per line) and trimeter (three iambs per line). Take a look at the first two lines:

The Mush- | room is | the Elf | of Plants—
At Eve- | ning, it | is not

This simple, bouncy rhythm adds to the poem's playful, lighthearted tone.

Common meter is used in many church hymns, which makes it an interesting choice for a poem celebrating an "Apostate": someone who turns their back on their religion. The poem slips its celebration of nonconformity into a familiar pattern, subtly evoking the mushroom's own sneakiness.

rules, norms, and expectations, and the mushrooms representing those people who choose to defy them.



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 "The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants" around 1874 on the back of an envelope. Like most of her poetry, it was only discovered after her death when her sister discovered a trunk of nearly 1,800 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

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. As such, it comes as no surprise that the speaker of "The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants" admires nature's rebellious, unconventional "Apostate." 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

- [The Elf of Plants: Mushrooms in Poetry](#) — A Goodreads review exploring the significance of fungi in "The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants" and "Mushrooms" by American poet Sylvia Plath. (https://www.goodreads.com/author_blog_posts/21000891-the-elf-of-plants-the-mycorrhizal-movement-in-dickinson-and-plath)
- [Learn More About Emily Dickinson](#) — A Poetry Foundation biography of the poet. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson>)
- [Listen to the Poem Out Loud](#) — A reading of (a slightly different version of) the poem. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jJINIBND1c>)
- [Handwritten Drafts of the Poem](#) — Peruse the Emily Dickinson Archives where you can see drafts of "The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants" in Dickinson's own handwriting. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/12177613)
- [Studies in Scale: Emily Dickinson's Envelope Poems](#) — A fascinating Poetry Foundation article discussing Dickinson's use of the backs of old letters for writing poems—including this one! (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70065/studies-in-scale>)
- [Introduction to Mycology \(The Study of Fungi\)](#) — A brief look at what scientists know about mushrooms today. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqKNm_evkYA)

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](#)
- [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!](#)



HOW TO CITE

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