There came a Wind like a Bugle

POEM TEXT

There came a Wind like a Bugle—
It quivered through the Grass
And a Green Chill upon the Heat
So ominous did pass
We barred the Windows and the Doors
As from an Emerald Ghost—
The Doom's Electric Moccasin
That very instant passed—
On a strange Mob of panting Trees
And Fences fled away
And Rivers where the Houses ran
Those looked that lived—that Day—
The Bell within the steeple wild
The flying tidings told—
How much can come
And much can go,
And yet abide the World!

SUMMARY

The wind began to blow like a trumpet. It made the grass shiver, and the summer heat went suddenly cold beneath an uneasy green light. We hurried to close the windows and doors, as if we were trying to keep a bright green ghost out of the house. The very second we got the house closed up, the rain began to rattle down, making a thrilling, dangerous sound like the end of the world itself. A surreal crowd of trees that seemed to gasp for breath, fences running away from their usual spots, and rivers where houses used to be: that's what people who were alive on the day of this storm saw. Up in the wind-battered church tower, the bell rang wildly as if to give news of the storm. Isn't it amazing how much change and uproar can come and go while leaving the world itself unaltered?

THEMES

CHANGE, DESTRUCTION, AND HUMAN INSIGNIFICANCE

"There came a Wind like a Bugle" is about a powerful storm tearing through a small town, but the poem does more than illustrate the awe-inspiring power of nature. It also suggests that *symbolic* stormy upheavals can rip people's lives to shreds while leaving the broader world itself ultimately unchanged. As the speaker watches a huge thunderstorm destroy their town, they reflect in astonishment that the world somehow "abide[s]," or remains the same, in spite of it all. Through this symbolic storm, the poem suggests that big, stormy changes can feel earth-shattering to the people who endure them, while still meaning little in the grand scheme of things.

Big change, the poem suggests, can sometimes seem as if it's about to tear the whole world to pieces. The symbolic storm that rolls across the poem's landscape is terrifyingly vast and powerful: even before it arrives, its eerie green light makes the speaker feel menaced by an "Emerald Ghost." And when the storm strikes for real, it does all kinds of damage, ripping up trees and fences and sending "Rivers" of floodwater pouring into people's houses. Read symbolically *or* literally, these images evoke the kind of disaster that destroys a former way of life.

But all this mayhem, the speaker says, doesn't actually do any harm to the "World": big, destructive change might feel like "Doom" itself to the people who endure it, but in the background, the world just rolls on. Even as human things like the "Bell" in the creaking church "steeple" are thrown around at the mercy of the storm, the speaker reflects in amazement that "much can come" and "much can go," but the "world" itself remains unchanged. This storm, in other words, is vast and life-altering for those who "lived—that Day," but it makes no permanent difference to the "World" itself.

The poem thus suggests that, in the face of unstoppable, overwhelming forces like time, change, and even literal storms, people's lives are pretty fragile and small. One town's destruction is just a blip in the ongoing history of the "World."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-17

NATURE VS. HUMANITY

"There came a Wind like a Bugle" tells a tale of nature's awe-inspiring might. As the poem's speaker watches a terrible storm develop from an eerie "Green Chill" to a full-blown disaster, they reflect that nature is overwhelmingly powerful—in ways that might well leave humanity feeling a little unsettled. Nature, the poem suggests, is stronger by far than human beings, no matter what people might try to tell themselves.

From the poem's very beginnings, the speaker knows that they're helpless in the face of a gathering storm. As a "Green

Chill" pervades the air and an ominous "Wind" begins to blow like a hunting "Bugle," all the speaker and their family can do to protect themselves is rush indoors and "bar[] the Windows." They feel as if they're being stalked by an "Emerald Ghost," a menacing figure against whom locks and bars can only do so much—or even pursued by "Doom" itself, facing death or the end of the world.

And indeed, the poem continues, the few efforts people can make to save themselves are nothing in the face of this terrifying display of nature's power. The speaker remembers seeing "Rivers where the Houses ran" and "Fences fled away" in rushing stormwaters: in other words, the whole town is swiftly destroyed. Next to these images, the idea that the speaker and their family might save themselves by simply "barr[ing] the Windows and the Doors" looks pitifully naïve. Humanity, the poem suggests, can never keep itself completely safe from nature's merciless might.

Nature, the poem thus concludes, is overwhelmingly powerful—and all of humanity's best efforts to protect themselves against it are no guarantee of safety. In fact, humanity and civilization might just be fleeting, fragile, "pass[ing]" blips in nature's ongoing churn.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-17

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

There came a Wind like a Bugle—
It quivered through the Grass
And a Green Chill upon the Heat
So ominous did pass

The poem begins with a long, eerie note as a "Wind like a Bugle" heralds a coming storm. That simile suggests not just the brassy sound of a first ominous gust of stormwind, but a real threat: a "bugle" is the kind of horn used as a signal in hunting and warfare. Something dangerous is on the way.

In fact, something dangerous already seems to be here. Take a look at the imagery in lines 2-4:

It quivered through the Grass
And a Green Chill upon the Heat
So ominous did pass

In these images, the approaching storm already feels like a tangible presence:

- The wind doesn't just make the *grass* quiver, the speaker says: the wind *itself* quivers. It's as if the wind were a snake, a physical being parting the grass as it passes by.
- And the "Green Chill" that falls over the summery "Heat" unites two senses, sight and touch. This moment of synesthesia makes the coming storm seem to fill up the whole atmosphere.

Any reader who has ever experienced a summer storm will be able to *feel* these images on their skin: that sudden chill, that unearthly green light, that shivery breeze. In the speaker's words, it's all awfully "ominous." When these signs come along, there's no escaping a thunderstorm. All that people can do is try to find cover before that storm breaks.

And the poem's form suggests there might be very little time indeed to get out of the storm's way. Written as one long stanza, the poem evokes the unrelenting speed of a storm: that "Green Chill" and sinister wind slow down for no one.

LINES 5-6

We barred the Windows and the Doors
As from an Emerald Ghost—

As the signs of a deadly storm creep over the landscape, the speaker and their friends and family try to make the best of a bad situation, blocking up their doors and shutters against the wind and rain. But their efforts can only do so much; it's as if, the speaker says, they're trying to keep an "Emerald Ghost" out of the house (an image that makes the "Green Chill" of line 3 feel even stranger). And what ghost was ever defeated by a locked door?

Once again, the simile here suggests that this storm feels not just dangerous, but actively *menacing*. Both the image of the warlike "bugle" and the haunting "Emerald Ghost" suggest that this storm doesn't merely feel like an awe-inspiring natural phenomenon. To this speaker, at least, it seems to have some sinister purpose in mind—some mysterious and unpleasant intention.

And the specific imagery of the "Emerald Ghost," besides picking up on the "Green Chill," might paint a picture of a weird and ancient spirit, green-skinned or kitted out in jeweled armor, striding toward the speaker's fragile little house.

The poem's meter reflects that sense of an unstoppable threat making its way nearer. This poem uses Dickinson's favorite common measure: that is, lines of alternating iambic tetrameter (four da-DUMs in a row) and iambic trimeter (*three* da-DUMs). Here's how that sounds:

We barred | the Win- | dows and | the Doors
As from | an Em- | erald Ghost—

Here, that steady, swinging rhythm sounds like a *tick-tock* countdown to when the *real* storm begins. The "Emerald Ghost" is about to strike.

LINES 7-8

The Doom's Electric Moccasin
That very instant passed—

The very second the speaker's family finishes getting the doors and windows shut, the storm breaks in earnest. The speaker evokes this moment with a strange, complex metaphor:

> The Doom's Electric Moccasin
> That very instant passed—

Try taking this image word by word: the "Doom" here suggests the storm's inevitability. It was always "doom[ed]," or fated, to strike, and no one can do anything about that.

- Even more powerfully, it might allude to a more general "Doom": this is a word associated, not just with fate, but with Doomsday itself, the end of the world.
- The earlier image of the "Bugle" supports this idea: in the biblical Book of Revelation, an angel is said to blow a final trumpet that signals the end of time.

That doom's "Electric[ity]" suggests both the crackle of lightning and the crackle of nerves:

- As the first thunderbolt strikes, the speaker might feel an answering electric thrill of terror and excitement.

But what about that strange "moccasin"?

- A moccasin, of course, is a kind of soft-soled shoe—an image that suggests the storm has crept up nearly silently, until now.
- But it's also a type of snake, an image that evokes the shocking, viper-like sting of an electrical storm.
- Last but not least, the word's very sounds—that sharp /k/, that sibilant /s/—evoke the crack and hiss of sudden lightning and rain.

In a mere three words, then, the poem conjures up the sounds, sensations, and emotions of the storm's first moments—both around and inside the speaker.

LINES 9-12

On a strange Mob of panting Trees
And Fences fled away
And Rivers where the Houses ran
Those looked that lived—that Day—

Up until this point, the poem has felt shocking and immediate, conjuring the storm's approach second by second. Now, the speaker gets a little more distance from the storm in both time and space, taking a wide look at all the destruction it caused.

Those who "lived" on that fateful "Day," the speaker says, saw the landscape itself panicking:

- A "strange Mob" of trees seemed to "pant," an image that suggests both branches heaving in the wind and gasps of terror.
- Fences "fled" before the storm—in other words, they were uprooted by wind or floodwater.
- And "Houses" were replaced by "Rivers" that "ran" where they used to stand—and perhaps even "ran" away themselves, washed off their foundations.

All this personification suggests that the speaker sees their own fear and panic reflected in this destruction. Trees, fences, and houses here all seem like helpless people doing their best to escape the inescapable. But these images of attempted escape are also images of destruction: a fence that "fle[es] away" on stormwaters is no longer a fence, but a bundle of flotsam.

In other words, this storm wasn't just a few hours of wind and rain. It was a destroyer, ripping apart the familiar world the speaker once knew.

These images begin to suggest that this poem is about more than a literal storm. This picture of the human world shredded by "Ghost[ly]" forces of "Doom" suggests that the speaker is also thinking of the storm symbolically: going through a major storm, to the speaker, might feel a lot like going through any kind of sudden, shocking, and destructive *change*.

Here, readers might take a second glance at a subtle repetition earlier in the poem. Up in line 4, a "Green Chill" is said to "pass" over the landscape; then, in line 8, the "Doom's Electric Moccasin" is said to have "passed" in an instant. That quiet touch of polyptoton looks more significant in the light of all this destruction. Both the storm itself and the landscape it shreds, the poem suggests, are *passing*, temporary. This idea is about to become important.

LINES 13-14

The Bell within the steeple wild
The flying tidings told—

It might seem as if the speaker finished describing the way the storm shook the world in line 12. But here, the poem returns to another picture of what the storm did to the landscape. Singled out, this last detail seems to demand the reader's special attention.

Besides "panting Trees," fleeing "Fences," and running "Houses," the speaker remembers seeing "The Bell within the steeple"—that, is the church bell—ringing crazily in the wind. Take a look at the language here:

> The Bell within the steeple wild
> The flying tidings told—

There's more than one ambiguity in this passage:

- Perhaps the steeple itself is "wild," rocking in the winds—and perhaps the bell is telling its "flying tidings" *wildly*. Perhaps both!
- And perhaps the bell "told" those "flying tidings" of the storm—but perhaps, punnily, it also "tolled" them, or rang them out, as bells do!

This disorienting language has more than one effect. It summons up all the confusion and "wild[ness]" of the storm, in which everything seemed to rock and sway. But it also, once again, draws a parallel between the speaker and the world around them. The personified bell that "told" (and tolled) of the storm sounds an awful lot like the speaker, who *tells* of the storm even now, in this very poem. Perhaps the speaker feels as driven to speak of what they saw as a bell ringing spontaneously in the wind.

LINES 15-17

How much can come
And much can go,
And yet abide the World!

In the poem's last lines, the form changes suddenly. Up until now, the poem's lines could be grouped into a series of ballad stanzas. That is, lines 1-4, 5-8, and 9-12 can each be a distinct four-line stanza (a quatrain) that uses common measure.

Now, however, the speaker splits what would ordinarily have been *one* line of iambic tetrameter (four da-DUMs) into *two* lines of iambic dimeter (two da-DUMs), like this:

How much | can come
And much | can go,

Coming right on the heels of the church bell, these parallel lines seem to mimic that bell's swing: back and forth, coming and going. The words here, then, might be a message the speaker heard in the bell's ringing.

And if the speaker and the bell have something in common, feeling helplessly driven to "t[ell]" the storm's "flying tidings," then the poem's final lines might record those tidings themselves.

The storm, the speaker thus concludes, teaches this lesson:

How much can come
And much can go,
And yet abide the World!

In other words: it's astonishing how much chaos, destruction, and uproar can pass through people's lives while the "World" itself rolls on undisturbed. Stormy change, this poem has suggested, can feel like the Apocalypse itself. But even when towns and lives are destroyed, the world "abide[s]," fundamentally unchanged. It's hard to say whether such "tidings" are consoling or terrifying.

SYMBOLS

THE STORM

The poem's storm can be read as a symbol of change.

When a huge storm rattles through the speaker's town, it throws the landscape into chaos, knocking over fences, flooding houses, and threatening to uproot trees. But it can't have any real effect on the "World" itself. In this, it sounds a lot like the forces of change: any number of things can "come" and "go," the speaker reflects, but the world itself just goes on.

Stormy change, then, is a mighty force, but not an all-powerful one.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

The poem's imagery puts readers right in the middle of the eerie moments just before a huge storm breaks.

Especially striking here is Dickinson's use of synesthesia to evoke the ominous light and sudden clammy cold of an approaching storm. The "Green Chill upon the Heat" makes the cold air and the weird light seem like one inseparable, inescapable thing. By combining the senses of touch and sight, the poem suggests just how oppressive the storm feels as it creeps up on the countryside.

A similar blurring of boundaries turns up when the speaker describes how the wind "quivered through the grass." Here, of course, readers will imagine the *grass* quivering (or trembling) in an uneasy breeze. But by attributing that "quiver" to the wind itself, the poem again suggests that the storm feels like a *presence* before it even breaks.

The uncanny, chilly light of line 3 turns up again in the metaphorical form of an "Emerald Ghost." Now, the cold greenness seems not just huge, but sinister: a bejeweled specter haunting the people in the house. (Readers might note, too, that it doesn't do much good to "bar[] the Windows and the Doors" if you want to keep a ghost out: this moment also suggests how powerless the people really are against the storm!)

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "It quivered through the Grass / And a Green Chill upon the Heat"
- **Line 6:** "an Emerald Ghost"

SIMILE

Similes evoke the storm's sinister power.

The first of the poem's similes turns up in the very first line, where the ominous "Wind" that warns of the coming storm is "like a Bugle"—in other words, like the blast of a horn. Besides evoking a long, eerie, brassy note, this image has dangerous connotations:

- Hunters use bugles to signal to each other over long distances. Hearing this sound, the speaker might well feel like a fox or a deer about to run for its life.
- A trumpet blast might also evoke nothing less than Judgment Day: the end of the world itself. In the biblical Book of Revelation, a proverbial "last trumpet" blows to herald the death of this world and the beginning of the next. (The poem's mention of "Doom" a few lines later—as in "Doomsday"!—strengthens this subtle allusion.)

The wind that heralds the storm thus suggests that danger, destruction, and—most of all—world-shaking change are on the way.

That sense of danger only gets stronger in lines 5-6, when the speaker's family shuts up all their doors and windows to keep out the "Green Chill" of the oppressive pre-storm air, as if it were an "Emerald Ghost." Here, the storm seems actively menacing. Glinting like an emerald, creepy as a specter, it isn't just something going on outside: it wants *in*.

The poem's similes thus help readers to feel the speaker's unease. To the speaker, this storm isn't just spectacular, but threatening.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "There came a Wind like a Bugle—"
- **Lines 5-6:** "We barred the Windows and the Doors / As from an Emerald Ghost—"

METAPHOR

Most of this poem's metaphors are also examples of personification: the speaker expresses their own fear through images of a terrified, conscious landscape:

- The trees, for instance, become a "strange Mob" that "pant[s]"—an image that at once evokes branches heaving in the wind and gasps of terror.
- The "Fences," uprooted by wind or flood, seem to have "fled away," as if they were running for their lives.
- And as "Rivers" of floodwater pour through the "Houses," a tricksy bit of phrasing makes it sound as if the houses themselves might have tried to escape: the line "Rivers where the Houses ran" could suggest both that rivers "run" where the houses used to be and that the houses themselves, washed off their foundations, seem to have run away.

All of these moments invest the landscape with human feelings—and suggest that the speaker sees their own helpless terror reflected in the world around them.

That sense of connection with a personified landscape feels even stronger when the speaker reports how the "Bell" in the churchtower "told" of the storm (with a little pun on "tolled," or rang). The speaker, of course, is doing precisely the same job as the bell, *telling* of this storm in a poem.

The one metaphor in this poem that isn't *purely* personification is an especially tricky and vivid one. In line 7, the speaker describes the onset of rain and lightning as the movement of the "Doom's Electric Moccasin." This image does several things at once:

- It casts the beginnings of the storm as the movement of a soft slipper, as if the thunderclouds were creeping up on the people below.
- But that "Moccasin" is also "Electric," charged and crackling.
- And the very sounds of the word "moccasin," with its sharp /k/ and sibilant /s/, evoke the crack of lightning and the hiss of rain.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "The Doom's Electric Moccasin"
- **Lines 9-11:** "On a strange Mob of panting Trees / And Fences fled away / And Rivers where the Houses ran"
- **Lines 13-14:** "The Bell within the steeple wild / The flying tidings told—"

REPETITION

Moments of repetition conjure up the storm's sweeping power and underline the speaker's reflections on time and change.

When the storm finally breaks (after a long, ominous build-up), it devastates the countryside:

> On a strange Mob of panting Trees
> And Fences fled away
> And Rivers where the Houses ran

The anaphora on "And" here evokes overwhelming chaos: the visions of disaster just keep coming!

All that destruction leads the speaker to muse:

> How much can come
> And much can go,
> And yet abide the World!

The parallelism (and, more specifically, antithesis) here suggests that, in a sense, comings and goings are all the same: growth and death, building and destruction, are all the same to the "World" underneath.

The poem subtly underlines that sense of change rushing over the world in a blink-and-you'll-miss-it bit of polyptoton. Take another glance at lines 3-4 and 7-8:

> And a Green Chill upon the Heat
> So ominous did pass
> [...]
> The Doom's Electric Moccasin
> That very instant passed—

These related words both end a four-line passage, and both describe a different phase of the storm: first it's the warning "chill" that cools the summer countryside, then the "Electric" rattle of rain and lightning that hits the boarded-up house. In both of these images, the storm almost seems to be over at the same time as it begins: it doesn't stay, but *passes* the second it arrives. Even huge, powerful storms, this repetition quietly hints, are just "passing" fluctuations, moving over the "abid[ing]" stillness of the "World."

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "pass"
- **Line 8:** "passed"
- **Line 10:** "And Fences"
- **Line 11:** "And Rivers"
- **Lines 15-16:** "How much can come / And much can go,"

JUXTAPOSITION

By juxtaposing the wild storm with the comparatively helpless human world, the speaker suggests that people are a lot more fragile than they'd like to think.

The storm that blows across the poem's landscape sounds almost apocalyptic. With its ominous "bugle" and its "Ghost[ly]" greenness, it feels as if it might have stepped right out of the Book of Revelation, an eerie angel of "Doom" blowing its awful trumpet.

Next to all that power, the little town seems frail and terrified. Blown around by winds, ripped from their places, and deluged by floodwaters, the poem's trees, fences, and houses feel fragile and temporary. The remorseless storm strides right over them.

And the poem's pointed personification of all these parts of the everyday world reminds readers that human beings aren't any more lasting or invulnerable than the things they build and grow. The speaker and their friends, boarded up in their house, must be as tempted to "fle[e]" as any of the battered bits of flotsam that bob past on the floodwaters—but, of course, there's nowhere safer to go!

By juxtaposing the coolly unstoppable storm with the frantic, scrambling world below, the poem thus suggests that people are at the mercy of huge and uncontrollable forces.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 9-14

ASSONANCE

Assonance helps readers to *hear* the poem's storm.

For instance, listen to the echoing vowel sounds in the first three lines:

> There came a Wind like a Bugle—
> It quivered through the Grass
> And a Green Chill upon the Heat

The interplay of /ih/, /ee/, and /oo/ sounds here suggests exactly what the speaker describes in the first line: an uneasy wind that ruffles the grass and cools the air. And it's not just the specific sounds here, but the way they interweave, that mimics the wind: that movement between different vowels evokes an eerie howl that rises, falls, and changes.

Later on, a moment of assonance draws attention to a subtle bit of wordplay. When the speaker describes how the "Fences fled away," that /eh/ sound both connects the fences to their terrified escape and asks readers to pay attention to the sounds of the word "fled." If the fences "fled," perhaps it's because they were caught up in a *flood*—the same one that overflows the "Houses" in the next line.

And listen to what happens as the storm-blown bell in the church steeple rings:

> The Bell within the steeple wild
> The flying tidings told—

Those repeated long /i/ sounds feel like the high, repeated tolling of the bell as it swings crazily in the wind.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Wind"
- **Line 2:** "quivered"
- **Line 3:** "Green," "Chill," "Heat"
- **Line 10:** "Fences fled"
- **Line 13:** "wild"
- **Line 14:** "flying tidings"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration gives the speaker's description of the storm-torn landscape its drama.

Take a look at the long run of alliterative sounds here:

> On a strange Mob of panting Trees
> And Fences fled away
> And Rivers where the Houses ran
> Those looked that lived—that Day—
> The Bell within the steeple wild
> The flying tidings told—

This flurry of alliteration—especially after a first half of the poem that barely uses the device—makes this passage sound urgent and driven, just as the fences, houses, trees, and rivers are driven by the stormy wind.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Grass"
- **Line 3:** "Green"
- **Line 10:** "Fences fled"
- **Line 11:** "Rivers," "ran"
- **Line 12:** "looked," "lived"
- **Line 13:** "within," "wild"
- **Line 14:** "tidings told"

PUN

A sly pun strengthens the poem's personification of the landscape.

After giving a portrait of "Houses" and "Fences" scrambling around helplessly in the face of the storm, the speaker looks up to the church bell as it swings in the wind:

> The Bell within the steeple wild
> The flying tidings told—

Here, the bell is said to have "told" of the storm, as if it were a town crier belting out the news. But, punnily, it also *tolled*—in other words, it rang, just as bells ordinarily do!

This nifty little joke suggests that the speaker is personifying the landscape consciously, making a point. By associating the church bell's tolling with a human voice, the speaker hints that humanity is just as helpless before the storm as the inanimate world. Both human beings and the things they create are easily blown around! This pun stresses the poem's idea that a big show of nature's power—or, symbolically speaking, a stormy time of change—can remind people that they're completely at the mercy of a world that was never really under their control.

Perhaps the speaker even feels a special fellow-feeling with this bell: just as the bell "told" of the storm, the speaker *tells* of the storm in this very poem.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "told"

VOCABULARY

Bugle (Line 1) - A trumpet, especially the kind used as a signal in hunting or warfare.

Quivered (Line 2) - Trembled, shivered.

Ominous (Line 4) - Suggesting that something bad is about to happen.

Barred (Line 5) - Locked up, closed tight.

Doom's Electric Moccasin (Line 7) - This line suggests a few things at once:

- As the rain falls, it sounds "electric," or thrilling and charged (which makes sense in a lightning storm!)
- The "moccasin" here might suggest a snake's rattle: a "moccasin" is a kind of viper, and the word evokes the sound of a rattlesnake through onomatopoeia.
- The "Doom" here might equally mean the inevitability of the storm (it was "doomed," or fated, to start) and the sense that it's such a huge storm it feels like the end of the world (the final "Doom" of judgment day!)

Taken altogether, these words thus hint that the storm is full of crackling, dangerous, threatening energy.

Steeple (Line 13) - A pointed tower, especially on a church building.

Tidings (Line 14) - News, warnings.

Abide (Line 17) - Endure, go on unchanged.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"There came a Wind like a Bugle" is written in one continuous stanza of 17 lines, like a gust of stormwinds. But readers will note that the ballad-like rhyme scheme and meter of this one big stanza also seems to divide the poem up into Dickinson's most common form, four-line quatrains—at least, until an odd five-line passage at the end.

On a closer look, though, that five-line passage preserves the rhythm and rhyme of the four-line passages: it just divides what would usually be one line into two. That choice gives these last few times a musing, wondering tone; it's as if the speaker is slowing down to roll their experience of the storm around in their head. It also visually separates the speaker's philosophizing about the storm from their description of the storm's eerie wildness.

The poem thus evokes the storm itself by running what could have been several stanzas together into one wild blast—but also suggests that the speaker is safely distant from the storm now, calling it up in memory.

METER

"There came a Wind like a Bugle" uses one of Dickinson's favorite meters: common meter, also known as ballad meter. This steady, swinging rhythm is built from alternating lines of iambic tetrameter—that is, lines of four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm—and iambic trimeter, lines of *three* iambs. Here's an example from lines 5 and 6:

> We barred | the Win- | dows and | the Doors
> As from | an Em- | erald Ghost—

The musical, chanting quality of this meter helps to evoke the speaker's fascination with the storm battering the world outside. But little variations in the pattern also suggest the jumpy anxiety before the storm hits. Listen to the difference in the very first line:

> There came | a Wind | like a Bugle—

There are only *three* feet here, not four—and the last one isn't an iamb, but an anapest, with a da-da-DUM rhythm. What's more, it has a feminine ending, an extra unstressed syllable at the end of the line. This short, odd line helps to create tension right from the get-go: the poem will only get into the swing of its common meter in line 5.

And check out what happens in the poem's last three lines:

> How much | can come
> And much | can go,
> And yet | abide | the World!

Here, Dickinson divides the four iambic feet of a tetrameter line into *two* lines of *two* feet apiece (also known as dimeter). That means when the poem is read aloud, its rhythm sounds steady—but on the page, these last lines stand out, drawing extra attention to the speaker's reflections on the nature of the world.

RHYME SCHEME

"There came a Wind like a Bugle" uses this classic ballad rhyme scheme:

> ABCB

This traditional pattern gives the poem the deceptively simple flavor of a folk song or a hymn. Putting complex ideas into a down-to-earth form like this was one of Dickinson's favorite poetic tricks.

Note, though, that a number of the rhymes here are slant, like "Ghost" and "passed" in lines 6 and 8 or "told" and "World" in lines 14 and 17. That slight off-kilter quality helps to make the poem's rhymes feel as uneasy as the eerie green light before the storm.

Readers might also notice that the end of the poem appears to break from the scheme: the first 12 lines break into neat four-line groups, but the five lines left over, obviously, do not! But read aloud, the poem's rhyme scheme remains unchanged: lines 15 and 16 are actually one longer line divided in two, so the ABCB pattern remains consistent. (See Meter for more on that.)

SPEAKER

The reader doesn't learn much about the speaker of this poem, who reveals nothing of their own identity. All the reader can gather about this person comes from their description of a storm. As the speaker looks out on the coming tempest, they see it as everything from a creepy "Emerald Ghost" (in the early stages before the clouds break) to the "Electric" rattle of "Doom" itself (as the rain finally starts to fall). This speaker is clearly alert, inquisitive, thoughtful, and imaginative, able to spin a cloudburst into philosophical reflections on the nature of the whole "World."

Many of Dickinson's poems use a similar voice, unidentifiable but intense; the reader might well speculate that some of these speaker's qualities are Dickinson's own.

SETTING

The landscape the poem describes sounds a lot like Dickinson's own home in Amherst, Massachusetts. The uprooted "Fences," "panting Trees," and the church "steeple" with its windblown bell evoke a classic American rural scene—and the feeling of an ominous chill breaking a humid heat will be familiar to anyone who's visited the eastern United States in summertime.

But really, this poem could take place just about anywhere a storm hits. This mighty storm, with its power to reshape the landscape, is a big, impersonal natural force: it doesn't matter to the *storm* what particular bit of land it upheaves.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) became one of the greatest and most influential of writers without publishing more than a handful of poems during her lifetime. After 1865, she rarely even left her family home in Amherst, Massachusetts. But her intense, philosophical poetry ranged far beyond the borders of that small world.

Dickinson's distinctive poetic voice combines down-to-earth forms (like her famous ballad stanzas) with startling, evocative word choices and profound insights into time, nature, and love. One of her favorite techniques, the use of an expectant em-dash to end lines, is on vivid display in "There came a Wind like a Bugle."

This poem, like almost all of Dickinson's work, didn't see the light of day until after her death; Dickinson mostly eschewed publication, mistrusting its conformity and commercialism. But she was actively involved in the literary world around her: she admired Charlotte Brontë and William Wordsworth, met Ralph Waldo Emerson, and shared a general American Transcendentalist interest in the workings of the imagination and the power of nature.

Dickinson only became widely known posthumously, when her sister Lavinia discovered a cache of nearly 1,800 secret poems and brought them to publication with the help of a (sometimes combative) group of Dickinson's family and friends. It was a fortunate rescue: Dickinson's poetry would become some of the most influential and beloved in the world.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dickinson wrote most of her poetry during the American Civil war, which ran from 1861 to 1865. She was firmly on the Union side of that bloody conflict; in one of her letters, she writes with delight about the ignominious defeat of Confederate president Jefferson Davis, who was reportedly trying to make his escape disguised in a woman's skirt when he was finally captured.

However, Dickinson rarely addressed the political world around her directly in her poetry, preferring either to write about her immediate surroundings or to take a much wider philosophical perspective.

"There came a Wind like a Bugle," however, is one of many of Dickinson's poems that might indirectly reflect her thoughts and feelings about the chaos around her, even if it doesn't explicitly deal with the war. The poem's portrait of a landscape torn to shreds by a violent storm might evoke the bewildering terror of civil war threatening to turn a familiar home into a devastated waste. Even the "bugle" in the first line sounds rather military.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem as a Song — Listen to a musical version of the poem composed by Aaron Copland and performed by Leontyne Price. (https://youtu.be/tC0Jn4uERwA)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/bUA2T32mSn4)
- The Emily Dickinson Museum — Visit the website of the Emily Dickinson Museum to learn more about Dickinson's life and work. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/)
- Dickinson's Influence — Read contemporary author Helen Oyeyemi's celebration of Dickinson. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/04/emily-dickinson-hero-helen-oyeyemi)
- The Poem in Dickinson's Hand — See one of Dickinson's original drafts of the poem at the Emily Dickinson Archive. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/12172906)

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
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I dwell in Possibility –
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- 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
- Safe in their Alabaster Chambers
- Success is counted sweetest
- Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
- The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
- There is no Frigate like a Book
- There's a certain Slant of light
- The Sky is low — the Clouds are mean
- The Soul has bandaged moments
- The Soul selects her own Society

- 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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