There is no Frigate like a Book

POEM TEXT

There is no Frigate like a Book
To take us Lands away
Nor any Coursers like a Page
Of prancing Poetry —
This Traverse may the poorest take
Without oppress of Toll —
How frugal is the Chariot
That bears the Human Soul —

SUMMARY

There's no ship quite like a book to carry us far away—or any horses as swift as a page of lively poetry. Even the poorest people can travel this way, without having to worry about money: considering that it transports the soul itself, the splendid racing-cart of literature sure is cheap!

THEMES

THE POWER OF LITERATURE

"There is no frigate like a book" describes how reading literature transports people to glorious new places in their minds and hearts. The speaker argues that books have the power to bring anyone to faraway "Lands" simply by engaging their imaginations. And this kind of mental travel, the speaker implies, can enrich people's very souls.

The speaker doesn't just celebrate literature's power to transport people, but declares that the kind of traveling people do when they read books is even more wonderful than literal travel. The poem opens by declaring that even a "Frigate," or a large ship, cannot bring people to new places quite as well as a book can, and that no "Coursers" (or swift horses) can match a page of "prancing Poetry." All these comparisons suggest that literature isn't just a great way to "travel," but a vehicle that takes people to places they could never reach with a real-life boat or horse.

And books aren't just more powerful than ordinary travel: they're also cheaper—and this more democratic! While travel is expensive and time-consuming, reading is an experience available to even the "poorest" of people. Literature, the speaker implies, is inherently democratic: anyone can experience it "without oppress of Toll" (that is, without the burden of paying a cent). Books are thus not only a more fulfilling means of discovery than travel, but also a more just and equitable one.

This matters because, in this speaker's eyes, reading isn't just fun, but spiritually important. In its final lines, the poem imagines literature as a "Chariot that bears the human soul," carrying the reader's very spirit to new realms of experience and feeling. Reading, the speaker thus suggests, is an essential way of engaging and flexing the human imagination—of bringing readers into contact with people, places, and ideas that may deeply enrich their lives.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

There is no Frigate like a Book
To take us Lands away

"There is no Frigate like a Book" starts out by making a pretty big claim for literature. Books, in this speaker's eyes, don't just have the power to metaphorically carry people away to far-off lands: they do a considerably better job of it than even the grandest "frigate" (or sailing ship).

These lines introduce the extended metaphor that will shape this whole poem: the idea of reading as travel. That's a metaphor that goes so deep down into the English language that English speakers might not even know they're using it! For instance, people who say they felt "transported" by a wonderful book might not be thinking about how that word suggests a journey. But in this short poem, the speaker is going to think hard about this common idea—and suggest that the journeys people go on when they read are deeper, richer, and better than any journey they might take in the "real world."

Even the image the speaker uses in this first line makes reading sound like a grand adventure. A "frigate" has all sorts of romantic connotations: it's the kind of boat you'd expect to run into in an adventure story, an old-fashioned ship that might be involved in a daring sea battle. But even such a grand ship has nothing on a "Book," the speaker insists. A frigate, after all, can carry people to wild and distant places. But a book can carry people to "Lands" that never even existed—and it can do it instantaneously.

LINES 3-4

Nor any Coursers like a Page
Of prancing Poetry —

If a "Book" can outclass a "Frigate" in its power to carry people away, the speaker goes on, then "Poetry" can beat even the finest "Courser" (or swift, powerful horse).

Take a look at the parallelism in these first four lines:

> There is no Frigate like a Book
> To take us Lands away
> Nor any Coursers like a Page
> Of prancing Poetry —

This repeated sentence structure makes the speaker sound firm and insistent, as if they're saying: *really, seriously, boats and horses have nothing on books.*

The movement from a "Frigate" to "Coursers" here also suggests that the speaker sees books and poetry as subtly different *kinds* of vehicles. If a book is a mighty sailing ship carrying people over far-off seas, a poem is a lively, "prancing" horse, galloping across the land. (And a lot of Dickinson's other poems about the nature of prose and poetry suggest that she thought about that distinction a lot.) Both prose and poems take their readers to faraway places. But while a book is pretty impressive, a poem is *alive*.

This metaphor might remind readers that they're looking at a page of "prancing poetry" right now! And the strong alliteration here only underlines that fact:

> Nor any Coursers like a Page
> Of prancing Poetry —

All those popping /p/ sounds draw a lot of attention to themselves, and to the speaker's own poetic art. Part of the joy of "prancing Poetry," after all, is that it just plain sounds good: poetry can use patterns of sound just like this to turn everyday words into music.

The combination of musical sounds with vivid, adventurous images of "Frigate[s]" and "Coursers" helps the poem to *do* exactly what it *describes*. Even now, in the space of four short lines, readers have started to go on one of the very journeys the speaker describes, traveling into a pleasurable imaginative world. And, as the speaker points out, they haven't even had to go to sea or jump on a horse to make that journey.

LINES 5-6

This Traverse may the poorest take
Without oppress of Toll —

Not only is literature the most powerful vehicle in the world, the speaker goes on, it's also the cheapest. Because books are available to everyone, inexpensively or for free, they're the most democratic form of "travel" there is. Even the very "poorest" people can make a literary journey without having to worry about the "oppress of Toll"—that is, without the burden of figuring out how to pay for their travels.

Part of what's great about reading, then, is that it's *democratic*. It's an enriching, enlivening journey that every single literate person can make. The speaker's excitement about this idea suggests that they see reading as a great good, something that can make the whole world better for everyone.

The language of these lines suggests that the speaker sees reading as more than a way to escape into an imaginative world. It's also a way to get out from under the "oppress[ion]" of daily life. Money worries are obviously one major flavor of that oppression. But there's also a hint here that reading can give people a vacation from plain old day-to-day pressures: from monotony, chores, worries.

Take a look at the way the speaker uses the word "traverse" here:

> This Traverse may the poorest take

Usually, "traverse" is a verb, meaning "to make a crossing": people might "traverse" a mountain range or an ocean, for instance. But here, the speaker uses the word as a noun, suggesting that the journey of reading is always a kind of crossing. By reading, people "cross" from their daily lives into their imaginations—leaving their worries, financial and otherwise, behind them.

All of this is deeply exciting to this speaker. Listen to the energy of the end-stop here:

> This Traverse may the poorest take
> Without oppress of Toll —

Ending these lines with an expectant dash, the speaker seems to be caught up in enthusiasm, ready to hurry on to the next line as swiftly as those "Coursers" galloped back in line 3.

LINES 7-8

How frugal is the Chariot
That bears the Human Soul —

The final lines of the poem lift off from the world of literary adventure into something even more mysterious when the speaker marvels that the "Chariot / That bears the Human Soul" should be as "frugal" (humble and cheap) as a mere book. In other words, it's downright amazing that a book or a poem—just regular old ink and paper—should be able to take people's very souls on such wild journeys.

If literature can "bear[] the human soul," it's not just there to entertain people, to offer them a vacation from their daily lives. It's also there to *enrich* them, taking them on deep inward

journeys. And there's an important pun here: to "bear" the human soul might also mean to "bare" the human soul, or expose it. That pun suggests that an important part of reading might be coming face to face with the soul—perhaps the author's soul, perhaps one's own soul, and perhaps both at once.

The image of the "Chariot" here might even allude to the biblical story in which the prophet Elijah gets swept up into the heavens by a flaming chariot—a picture of a dramatic soul-journey if ever there was one!

These fervent closing lines suggest that the author of this poem sees reading, not just as fun and astonishing, but as a deeply important human activity. By reading, every single person can transcend their own lives, visiting places they've never been and meeting other souls face to face—and come back with their own souls enriched by the journey.

POETIC DEVICES

EXTENDED METAPHOR

"There is no Frigate like a Book" is built around a central extended metaphor of reading as a kind of travel. To this poem's speaker, a book is like any number of glamorous vehicles, from a sailing ship to a gilded chariot—except it's even better. While "frigate[s]" and "Coursers" might be elegant and swift, they're nowhere near as powerful as books, which can instantaneously "transport" people to places they've never been—and even to places that don't really exist.

Those "places" themselves might be metaphorical, too. When the speaker describes books carrying the "Human Soul," there's the sense that books have the power to take people on enriching *spiritual* voyages. Reading, in this speaker's eyes, can be a journey to a deeper understanding of one's own inner life, as well as a way of visiting other people's imaginative worlds.

Books thus don't just have the power to carry people away in the blink of an eye, taking them right out of their daily lives. They also have the ability to make those daily lives better and deeper when the reader returns from their "voyage." By presenting reading as a metaphorical journey of the soul, the poem's speaker suggests that people return from their literary adventures *changed*—and often richer for their travels.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

ALLUSION

The poem's speaker imagines a book as "the Chariot / That bears the Human Soul"—a chariot (or two-wheeled, horse-drawn cart) that might allude to a famous one in the biblical tale of Elijah. In this story, when it's the prophet Elijah's time to leave the earth, he doesn't die: he gets swooped up into the skies in a flaming chariot, so suddenly he loses his coat in the rush.

Dickinson, a minister's daughter, would certainly have known this story. And the idea of the chariot as a heavenly, soul-transporting vehicle has filtered down in all sorts of folktales and songs—for instance, the old hymn "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

So when this poem's speaker describes books as a "frugal," not-very-flashy "Chariot" for the "Human Soul" itself, they seem to be playing off this tradition. There's something marvelous about the idea that a plain old book, a bundle of paper and cardboard and ink, could swoop up a person's very spirit just as dramatically as Elijah's chariot swooped up Elijah.

This allusion also underlines the spiritual dimension of reading in the poem. For this speaker, reading isn't just a fun way to escape one's dreary everyday life for a while: it's a way to enrich one's soul.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "the Chariot / That bears the Human Soul —"

PARALLELISM

The parallelism in the first stanza of this poem helps the speaker to make a clear point: books are by far the finest way to travel.

Take a look at the way the first lines of the poem mirror each other:

> There is no Frigate like a Book
> To take us Lands away
> Nor any Coursers like a Page
> Of prancing Poetry —

By repeating similar grammatical structures, the speaker stresses the poem's big central idea: *grand sailing ships and powerful horses are both pretty cool*, the speaker seems to say, *but they don't have the power to sweep people right off their feet the way books do.*

The repeated sentence structure here also allows the speaker to point out that this claim applies both to prose and to poetry (though Dickinson, as a poet, often seemed to feel that poetry had a little extra something that prose couldn't match). And perhaps the parallelism also draws attention to the speaker's ideas about what "Book[s]" and "Poetry" resemble: books are closer to a big, stately "Frigate" (or a sailing ship) and poems trot with the lively energy of "Coursers" (powerful, swift horses).

The parallelism in the first half of the poem thus helps the speaker to clearly and energetically state their central ideas

about the power of literature.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "There is no Frigate like a Book / To take us Lands away / Nor any Coursers like a Page / Of prancing Poetry —"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem's enjambments create suspenseful, exciting momentum. By continuing sentences over line breaks, the speaker evokes the exhilaration of reading.

For instance, take a look at the way enjambments work in lines 5-8:

> This Traverse may the poorest take
> Without oppress of Toll —
> How frugal is the Chariot
> That bears the Human Soul —

These swift enjambments feel feel vibrantly energetic, as if the speaker is fizzing with enthusiasm for literature (and for how delightfully cheap it is to enjoy all the pleasures of reading). And in turn, that helps the *reader* feel swept up, encouraging them to gallop along on the very "Coursers" of poetry the speaker evoked back in line 3.

And that momentum is only enhanced by the fact that all the end-stops in these lines are suspenseful dashes—one of Dickinson's very favorite punctuation marks, and one that readers can find in just about any of her poems.

Both the poem's enjambments and its end-stops thus play an important role in helping the poem to *do* exactly what it's *describing*. As the speaker gets caught up in their descriptions of the exhilarating, imaginative joy of reading, the reader experiences that very joy.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Book / To"
- **Lines 3-4:** "Page / Of"
- **Lines 5-6:** "take / Without"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Chariot / That"

ALLITERATION

This short poem is packed with punchy alliteration. The repeated sounds here help the speaker to evoke the energy and delight of reading, and to draw readers' attention to some of the poem's big ideas.

For instance, take a look at the alliterative /p/ sounds in lines 3-4:

> Nor any Coursers like a Page
> Of prancing Poetry —

Those popping /p/ sounds feel as lively as the "prancing Poetry" they describe, and evoke the sounds those coursers' hooves might make as they trot. What's more, these emphatic repeated sounds draw attention to the fact that the reader is looking at a page of "prancing Poetry" at this very moment! Part of the fun of reading poetry, after all, is appreciating the way it plays with the *sounds* of words.

And listen to the alliteration in lines 5-6:

> This Traverse may the poorest take
> Without oppress of Toll —

The repeated /t/ sounds here are crisp, clean, and sharp—all words that might describe the speaker's ethical stance here, too. This democratic speaker is delighted that you don't have to be rich to go on a literary "journey." And the ringing /t/ sounds here suggest that the speaker might also have a few choice words to say about the way that the "oppress of Toll" *usually* weighs on people who don't have much money.

Back at the beginning of the poem, though, the alliteration feels gentler:

> There is no Frigate like a Book
> To take us Lands away

This subtle repetition of long, drawn-out /l/ sounds evokes the wide-open vistas of the land of the imagination.

Across the poem, alliteration thus draws attention to important moments, evokes what the speaker is describing—and just plain sounds good.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "like"
- **Line 2:** "Lands"
- **Line 3:** "Page"
- **Line 4:** "prancing," "Poetry"
- **Line 5:** "Traverse," "take"
- **Line 6:** "Toll"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, is part of what makes this poem fun to read: repeated vowel sounds musically weave words together in "prancing Poetry."

Sometimes assonance draws attention to important ideas, too. For instance, listen to the repeated vowels in the poem's last two lines:

> How frugal is the Chariot
> That bears the Human Soul —

Here, the round /oo/ of "frugal" (or inexpensive and humble) connects with the /oo/ of the rather grander "Human Soul." And that's just the speaker's point: a simple, cheap little book has the power to move the soul itself.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "is," "Frigate"
- **Line 2:** "take," "away"
- **Line 3:** "Nor," "Coursers"
- **Line 5:** "may," "take"
- **Line 7:** "frugal"
- **Line 8:** "Human"

VOCABULARY

Frigate (Line 1) - A grand sailing ship.

Coursers (Line 3) - Swift, strong horses.

Traverse (Line 5) - Journey—with connotations of crossing *over* something, as one might cross a mountain range or an ocean.

Oppress of Toll (Line 6) - The burden of paying fares.

Frugal (Line 7) - Inexpensive, modest.

Chariot (Line 7) - A two-wheeled horse-drawn cart, often lavishly decorated. Associated with both the splendor of ancient Rome (where chariots were used in war and in racing) and with heaven itself (think of the hymn "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot").

Bears (Line 8) - Carries, transports.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"There is no Frigate like a Book" is a short, simple poem, written as a single eight-line stanza (or octet).

That octet also breaks down into two four-line stanzas (or quatrains), which take the form of ballad stanzas. This means they use common meter and an ABCB rhyme scheme (a form Dickinson loved and used often—see the Meter and Rhyme Scheme sections for more on that). Here, the first quatrain marvels at the transporting magic of literature, and the second quatrain delights in how cheap books are, considering their power.

In one sense, this compact poem feels like a little nugget that readers can eat in one bite. On the other hand, it's doing exactly the expansive magic trick it describes: it manages to fit grand images of sailing ships, prancing horses, and splendid chariots into a tiny space.

METER

This poem uses one of Dickinson's favorite meters: common meter, also sometimes called ballad meter. That means that the lines here alternate between iambic tetrameter—lines of four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm—and iambic trimeter, lines of *three* iambs.

Here's how that looks in lines 1-2:

There is | no Frig- | ate like | a Book
To take | us Lands | away

This singsongy meter is—as its name suggests—pretty common, and turns up everywhere from nursery rhymes to hymns. Dickinson used common meter all the time, exploring complicated ideas and feelings in a deceptively simple way.

That simplicity helps the poem to make its point: even this plain little scrap of writing can conjure a grand and vivid adventure in its reader's mind.

RHYME SCHEME

"There is no Frigate like a Book" uses the following rhyme scheme in each of its quatrains:

ABCB

This pattern, which is the standard rhyme scheme for a ballad stanza, appears in a lot of Dickinson's deceptively simple poems. But readers will quickly notice that there's something different about the first set of B rhymes here. The words "away" and "poetry" aren't perfect rhymes, but slant rhymes, only partly matched. Those out-of-the-ordinary sounds reflect the exhilarating freedom and novelty the speaker finds in books: reading helps the speaker to have out-of-the-ordinary *experiences*, too.

SPEAKER

All the reader learns about this poem's speaker is that they love and value reading. Books, to this speaker, aren't just a way to pass the time: they're vehicles that carry their readers to the furthest reaches of the imagination, enriching their very souls.

This fair-minded speaker also seems delighted that the power of literature is available to everyone. One doesn't have to be rich to take a literary journey—and to the speaker, that's a very good thing indeed. In their eyes, literature isn't just powerful, it's democratic.

Readers might well imagine this passionate, imaginative speaker as Dickinson herself: she enclosed this poem in a letter to a friend, and it expresses ideas she deeply believed in.

SETTING

There's no distinct setting in this poem. Everything takes place in the speaker's imagination. But that's precisely the point! This speaker feels as if they're sailing away on the high seas, galloping on a noble steed, or racing in a chariot—all because they're reading a book.

Since a book works on the imagination, the speaker suggests, it can carry its readers far away from the everyday place they sit. It almost doesn't matter what the speaker's actual surroundings are like: with a book in hand, they're in an internal world of exhilarating adventure and wonder.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was one of the leading lights of the American Romantic movement but only became widely known years after her death. Famously reclusive, she published only a few anonymous poems during her lifetime. "There is no Frigate like a Book" is one of the many poems she drafted on odd scraps of paper—old envelopes, the backs of grocery lists—and kept in a private trunk in her bedroom. But this one did see the light of day: she enclosed it in a letter to her cousins Frances and Louisa Norcross.

With its common meter, its singsongy quatrains, and its dramatic dashes, this poem is a textbook example of Dickinson's characteristic style. Dickinson often used deceptively simple forms to communicate her vast, strange, and imaginative inner life. Some critics see her less as a Romantic and more as an early Modernist, the forbear of inward-looking, experimental 20th-century writers like Virginia Woolf. But the passionate love of literature on display in this poem also fits right in with Dickinson's contemporary world. For instance, Dickinson was a big fan of novelist Charlotte Brontë, who similarly found solace, inspiration, and adventure in books.

While Dickinson was unknown during her lifetime, she's become one of the most famous and beloved of all poets since her death. Writers from Elizabeth Bishop to Evie Shockley count her as a major influence.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson's passionate personality and volcanic intellect wouldn't have been too comfortable for many of the people around her in 19th-century rural Massachusetts. In that respectable, conventional time and place, women weren't expected to be geniuses.

And the 19th century in general was a pretty tough time to be a woman who wanted to write. Dickinson's hero Charlotte Brontë was only one of the great 19th-century women writers who published under a male pen name—and many of those writers, like George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) and George Sand (Amantine Dupin), are still better-known by their pseudonyms today.

To the reclusive Dickinson, literature thus wasn't just a vehicle, but a channel: a way of both traveling beyond the confines of her situation and fully expressing her wild inner world, without drawing the unwanted attention of the neighbors. For much of her short life, Dickinson rarely left the family home she shared with her parents and her sister Lavinia. But her poetry careened from the heights of the sky to the shadowy land of death.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to two versions of the poem read aloud: the first the edited version Dickinson's first publishers released, and the latter the rediscovered original. Dickinson's early editors often made substantial changes to her distinctive style. (https://youtu.be/9Kn7P2J5n_A)
- Dickinson's Life — Learn more about Dickinson's life and times at the website of the Emily Dickinson Museum. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/)
- The Unknown Dickinson — Read an essay by one of Dickinson's biographers about Dickinson's unconventional life. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/feb/13/emily-dickinson-lyndall-gordon)
- The Poem in Dickinson's Hand — See images of the poem in Dickinson's own handwriting. Dickinson often wrote on tiny scraps of paper: one of the drafts of this poem appears on the torn corner of an envelope! (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/12177383)
- Dickinson's Legacy — Watch a recent discussion about Dickinson's influence on American poetry. (https://youtu.be/pHyJayP9pac)

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 —
- 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 to see it lap the Miles

- 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
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- Success is counted sweetest
- Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
- The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
- There's a certain Slant of light
- 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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