They shut me up in Prose –

POEM TEXT

They shut me up in Prose –
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet –
Because they liked me "still" –

Still! Could themself have peeped –
And seen my Brain – go round –
They might as wise have lodged a Bird
For Treason – in the Pound –

Himself has but to will
And easy as a Star
Look down opon Captivity –
And laugh – No more have I –

SUMMARY

Society tries to hold me back with boring, restrictive conventions—much like how, when I was a little girl, my parents locked me in a closet because they wanted me to settle down.

Settle down—ha! If only they could have seen how my mind kept moving about. They might as well have punished a bird for not following their rules by putting it in the pound.

That bird simply has to decide to leave, and, just as easily as a star looks down from the sky, he'll fly away and look back down on the thing meant to keep him captive, laughing. I can set myself free just as easily.

THEMES

SOCIAL REPRESSION AND IMAGINATIVE FREEDOM

The poem's speaker feels constrained by social conventions (which she metaphorically calls "Prose"), and compares this sense of confinement to being locked away as a little girl so that she would be "still." Even as society aims to repress her, however, the speaker laughs at the idea that anyone could imprison her rebellious, rambunctious *mind*. The poem thus celebrates the power of the imagination, which offers freedom from the dull, rigid, and often sexist confines of mainstream society.

"Prose," which refers to writing that's *not* poetry, is here a metaphor for the boring, restrictive, and "prosaic" codes of society, including those that expect women (like the speaker) to be quiet and obedient. When the speaker says that "[t]hey" attempted to "shut [her] up in Prose," then, she's talking about the way that both the people around her and society in general have been eager to reign in her individuality.

The speaker also remembers being "put in the Closet" as a child, because "they liked [her] 'still.'" In other words, the speaker's family wanted the speaker to follow norms for girls and be well-behaved. They *literally* confined the speaker in an attempt to restrain her energy and freedom, and the speaker feels like the world now figuratively does the same thing to her as an adult. (This is almost certainly a reference to the fact that, in Dickinson's time, women were expected to spend their time and energy caring for their husbands and children—not writing poems.)

The speaker, though, easily escapes these forms of confinement through her "Brain"—that is, through her ability to think and imagine. Scoffing at the idea that she was ever truly "[s]till," the speaker imagines what "they" would have done, if, having confined her, they could see how much her "Brain" continued to think and "go round." There was no way anyone could have locked up her mind because the "Brain," she insists, is always free.

The speaker then compares her mind to a "Bird" who people foolishly try to constrain in a cage without a roof: the bird can simply fly away, and "[l]ook down" over his former "Captivity." The speaker suggests she too could "fly away" through her mind; no one can limit her ability to imagine other realities.

Ultimately, then, the poem suggests that societal repression can always be thwarted by the freedom and power of the imagination. The speaker even "laugh[s]" at attempts to hold her captive, suggesting that societal restrictions are laughably powerless compared to the power of one's mind. The world might *think* that it's got the speaker under its control, but it can never grasp all the thoughts swirling around in her imagination.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

THE POWER OF POETRY

"They shut me up in Prose—" explores how people can find freedom through their imaginations, and, by extension, through writing poetry. The speaker associates "Prose"—or any writing that is *not* poetry—with social restriction, suggesting that she could never feel free by writing

in this form. By contrast, the poem implies that *poetry* is the true art of the imagination, allowing the writer genuine freedom and discovery.

The speaker says that "they"—meaning society at large—attempted to "shut [her] up in Prose." While the speaker uses "Prose" as a metaphor for restrictive social norms, she *also* suggests that this literal form of writing is inherently boring and limiting—something that can only "shut [her] up" or imprison her, or any writer.

Importantly, prose is a way of writing used within everyday society, in everything from textbooks to legal documents. Prose is not only metaphorically *connected* to social conventions; it is also *part* of these conventions and helps to sustain them. Prose, then, the poem suggests, is not an art form that can allow for true imaginative freedom, beyond the bounds of these conventions.

By contrast, the poem implies that poetry—which is, in a sense, the *opposite* of Prose—allows the speaker to move beyond these boring, restrictive conventions of daily life. Poetry, the speaker suggests, is the art form truly connected with the imagination. The speaker illustrates this idea through the poem itself, leaping imaginatively from her own experiences of confinement, to those of a bird, and then a star. Only within poetry, the poem implies, are such quick imaginative leaps possible.

The poem's line endings also reinforce this sense of poetic freedom: instead of ending sentences or lines with punctuation (as would be required by the conventions of prose), the speaker uses dash lines, creating a sense of ongoing energy, openness, and momentum. The poem as a whole, then, is not bound by the rules governing prose. In breaking free of these rules, the poem suggests that that poetry is boundless in its potential, allowing the writer, too, to experience boundlessness and possibility.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

They shut me up in Prose –

The speaker says that "They"—meaning the people around her and/or society as a whole—have attempted to "shut [her] up," or imprison her, "in Prose." Prose is any writing that is *not* poetry. Here, the speaker uses "Prose" as a metaphor for all of the boring, confining, and "prosaic" conventions of society. The speaker means that she has been "shut up" or confined by these conventions.

To understand what this means for the poem, it can be helpful to remember that the poet, Emily Dickinson, was a woman living in 19th-century New England. Women's roles were limited and tightly circumscribed in this world: they would be expected to marry and have children, and to be quiet and obedient.

The "Prose" of social conventions, then, likely stands for all of these codes of behavior. These conventions would attempt to "shut" the speaker "up" literally, in limiting what she could do with her life, and figuratively, in the sense of silencing her. (As it happens, Dickinson did *not* obey these conventions: she never married, and in her poetry, she subverted a range of cultural norms throughout her life!)

The speaker, then, makes it clear from the outset that she has experienced confinement and constraint—or at least, *attempts* to confine her. She associates this confinement with societal conventions, and by extension with societal codes of behavior for women at the time Dickinson was writing.

Interestingly, though, the speaker *also* associates this sense of restriction and limitation with prose writing itself, with all of the conventions of syntax and punctuation that go along with it. The speaker implies that she could never escape the restrictive conventions of daily life by writing in prose; she can only do so through poetry.

LINES 2-4

As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet –
Because they liked me "still" –

Using a simile, the speaker compares the sense of restriction she feels in society to the literal confinement she experienced as a child. The societal attempt to "shut [her] up," the speaker says, is a lot like what happened "when [she was] a little Girl" and her parents (referred to here as another "They") "put [her] in the Closet" because they wanted her to be "still."

In other words, the speaker's family wanted her to settle down, to follow societal conventions for girls and be quiet and well-behaved. They went so far as to literally put her in a "Closet" to contain her energy and freedom, and this comparison creates a vivid image of confinement and enclosure. It also suggests that the speaker has been something of a rebel or free thinker since childhood.

The parallelism of this stanza emphasizes the speaker's lack of agency. In line 1, she says "They shut me"; later, it's "They put me," and finally "They liked me." The parallelism emphasizes the parents' physical control over the speaker during childhood, and how all this locking up was done on behalf of what *other* people wanted and expected of her.

The speaker, though, communicates the sense that even as a child, she saw through all this. She puts the word "still" in quotes, imbuing it with a sense of irony; the quoted word sounds like something the speaker's parents would have said,

but also something that the speaker—and the reader—can see through. By putting the word in quotes, the speaker suggests that she never bought into this code of behavior.

The ending of the stanza also reinforces this sense of the speaker resisting her confinement. Instead of ending the stanza (and the sentence) with a period, the quatrain ends with a dash, which is characteristic of Dickinson's poetry. This dash creates a sense of open-endedness and possibility and denies the sentence the closure.

The poem also registers the speaker's resistance to confinement through its rhyme scheme. While the stanza has set up an ABCB rhyme scheme in this opening quatrain, "Girl" and "still" are slant rhymes. Instead of reaching a sense of musical closure at the end of the stanza, th the reader is left anticipating where the poem will go next.

LINES 5-6

Still! Could themself have peeped –
And seen my Brain – go round –

The speaker begins the next stanza with a moment of anadiplosis, repeating the word "still"—this time as rhetorical exclamation: "Still!" Readers can almost hear the "ha!" here; despite her parents thinking that she'd settled down after being put in the closet, the speaker laughs at the idea that she ever truly *was* still. Sure, on the *outside* she might have seemed to quiet. But on the inside, it was a different story.

The speaker imagines what "themself" (meaning her parents) would have done if they could have taken a peek into her mind, which kept on buzzing about despite her captivity. In describing her "Brain" as going "round," the speaker links thought and imagination to motion and freedom.

Here, then, the poem juxtaposes the image of the "Closet," which represents confinement, and the image of the speaker's "Brain," which is clearly not restrained by any physical limitations. No one, the speaker implies, could have stopped her from thinking and imagining whatever she wanted. Her *body* might have been "still," but her mind was not, and never would be.

The consonance of "Brain" and "round" reinforces the connection between the speaker's mind and her freedom, or the ability to "go round" wherever she pleased. The poem also makes use of a midline caesura in line 6, in the form of a dash between "Brain" and "go round." This dash breaks up the line at a rather awkward moment, perhaps reflecting the notion that the speaker is going to do whatever she darn well pleases with her thoughts and writing. The sudden stop and start created by that dash also conveys the movement the speaker describes.

LINES 7-8

They might as wise have lodged a Bird
For Treason – in the Pound –

The speaker points out how futile and ridiculous it was to try to make her be "still" through an analogy. One might as well convict a "Bird" of "Treason," or disloyalty to the government, and then lock it up in a "Pound," or a fenced area without a roof. Doing so would, of course, be completely absurd! No one would expect a bird to obey human laws, and by extension the speaker argues that no one should expect her mind to obey the restrictive social conventions around her. And, of course, the bird would be able to simply fly away—just as the speaker's mind can "fly away" and travel whatever it wants.

The alliterative /b/ sounds in "Brain" and "Bird" (both of which are also capitalized) reflects the fact that the bird here is a symbol for the speaker's mind, and suggests an image of the speaker's imagination easily soaring away from her surroundings. The assonance of "might" and "wise," meanwhile, calls attention to the irony of the words, since it is clear within the context of the poem that the speaker's parents are neither mighty (in one meaning of the word "might") *nor* wise: they can't exert true control over the speaker, and they have no idea how free she truly is!

In contrast to the opening stanza, this rhymes in this quatrain are full and clear: "round" and "pound" rhyme exactly with each other. This full rhyme creates some sense of musical closure (and *enclosure*) in the poem. Yet the speaker also continues to convey *resistance* to this confinement through the ongoing use of dashes, which propel the reader forward over the stanza's ending.

LINES 9-11

Himself has but to will
And easy as a Star
Look down upon Captivity –

The speaker complicates her original analogy here:

- First, she compared her mind to a bird;
- Now, she compares that bird (using a simile) to a star.

These sequential comparisons create a sense of imaginative leaps on the page, enacting the sense of freedom—through one's imagination and through the art form of poetry—that the speaker describes. It's as though the speaker is *showing* the reader how quickly and easily her mind can move in a poem!

Beyond this subtle showing off, the speaker is making an important point by building on the image of the bird, which again is symbolic of her imagination, flying free of its confinement. She says the bird has only to "will" it—or decide to leave—and he can fly above this enclosure and, as easily "as a Star" up in the sky looks down in the earth below, look down at the cage that had been designed to hold him captive.

- Note how the speaker subtly personifies the bird in

this description, calling attention to its "will" or intention and ability to "laugh." This personification deepens the symbolic connection between the speaker and the bird.

The image of the bird high in the sky suggests that the bird has a *perspective* that those who tried to confine it can never share. Through the symbolic connection between the bird and the speaker's brain, the speaker implies that her imagination can rise above everything that is restrictive in her environment.

LINE 12

And laugh – No more have I –

The speaker imagines the "Bird," like a star in the sky, "[l]ook[ing] down" over the cage that had been designed to hold it captive. Looking down at this former "Captivity," the speaker says, the bird would only "laugh."

In this description, the speaker continues to personify the bird, imagining it "laugh[ing]" at the ridiculous attempt to keep it from flying. As in the previous lines, this personification reinforces the connection between the speaker's mind and the bird. The speaker, too, would only "laugh" at any attempts to constrain her thoughts and imagination. Like the bird, the speaker has to do "No more" than "will" it, or decide to be free, and she will be. Just as the bird can fly away, she, too, can escape her constraints through her imagination and her poetry.

Reflecting this sense of "flying away" from convention and constraint, the poem's rhyme scheme changes radically in this final quatrain. After the regular DEFE pattern of the second stanza, this stanza creates an entirely new pattern of BGHH. In other words, lines 9 and 10 don't rhyme with each other at all (though "will" in line 9 echoes line 4's "still."), but lines 11 and 12 form a rhyming couplet.

"Captivity" and "I" make a slant rhyme, to be fair, but they make a rhyme nonetheless. That final "I" stands in stark contrast to the idea of "Captivity" and the confinement the speaker has escaped.

At the same time, the reader unmistakably hears the *difference* in these final vowel sounds. The word "I," then, which communicates the speaker's individuality and independence, stands alone in the poem, creating a sense that the speaker has truly "will[ed]" herself free of both the social constraints and the "Prose" with which the poem began. Ending on the word "I" brings the poem back to the speaker herself, centering her experience in all this and reminding readers that despite attempts to "shut" her "up in Prose," she's written this very *poem*.

SYMBOLS

THE BIRD

The bird in the poem symbolizes the freedom and the power of the speaker's imagination. The speaker uses an analogy to compare her own confinement to that of a bird in a "Pound"—a kind of fenced enclosure without a roof. The speaker envisions the people around her foolishly attempting to convict the bird of "Treason," or disloyalty to the government. This would, of course, be very silly, and speaks to how ridiculous the speaker feels it is that the world attempts to reign in her thoughts.

Of course, the bird only has to "will" it, or decide to leave, and he can fly away into the sky. The speaker too, the poem suggests, can "fly" away from her restrictive circumstances, through the imaginative power of her mind. The bird, then, speaks to the ease with which the speaker can escape her confinement, and the inner freedom she can find through her own will.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-12:** "They might as wise have lodged a Bird / For Treason – in the Pound – / Himself has but to will / And easy as a Star / Look down upon Captivity – / And laugh"

THE STAR

The star in the poem symbolizes distance and perspective. Set far up in the sky, it introduces a new point of view into the poem. Looking down on earth from such a height, all human activity—including those societal norms that confine the speaker—would appear small and even inconsequential.

In the poem, the speaker describes escaping her confinement through her imagination. She compares this ability to escape to a bird flying away, and then compares the bird to a star. By extension, then, the speaker compares *herself* to the star. She suggests that through her mind, her imagination, and her poetry, she too can gain this kind of perspective. From such a "height," those social norms that attempt to restrict her would seem laughably insignificant.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "And easy as a Star / Look down upon Captivity –"

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The speaker treats "Prose," which refers to any writing that is not poetry, as a metaphor for restrictive and boring social norms. She says that "[t]hey," meaning the people around her and society as a whole, attempt to "shut [her] up" within such conventions, limiting her energy and freedom.

To better understand this metaphor, it's helpful to remember that Dickinson was a woman living in 19th-century Amherst, Massachusetts. She lived in a small, socially conservative, religious town at a time when women's roles were tightly circumscribed: they were expected to marry and have children, not be poets or artists, and they were also expected to be quiet and obedient. Dickinson chafed against these expectations, and one could well imagine that she felt "shut up" by such a context!

Within the poem, the metaphor implies that the speaker found societal conventions dull and confining. The metaphor connects these *social* confinements with *literal* prose, which the speaker suggests is *artistically* confining. Since prose is a type of writing associated with everyday life, the metaphor implies that the speaker could never escape the limitations of everyday life by writing in prose. Instead, the poem implies that *poetry* is the art form most deeply connected to the imagination, allowing the speaker to escape the bounds of society and find true, imaginative liberation.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "They shut me up in Prose –"

ANALOGY

The speaker uses an analogy to illustrate the impossibility of ever locking up her mind. The speaker says that those who once put the speaker "in the Closet" might as well have punished a bird for "Treason" by putting it in a "Pound." (Note that, in Dickinson's day, a pound was a roofless outdoor enclosure for stray livestock—not a building for stray pets!)

The bird represents the speaker's mind/imagination in this analogy, which relies on the following ideas:

1. Charging a bird with treason, or disloyalty to the government, is ridiculous; a bird isn't beholden to human society's rules! Similarly, the speaker can think and imagine whatever she wants; society can't police her thoughts or punish her just for being different.
2. Putting a bird in a "Pound" is also ridiculous, because the bird could just fly away. All the bird would have to do is "will" it, and it could soar above this "Pound" and look back down upon the structure that tried to keep it captive. The speaker is saying that she can escape her own "Captivity" as easily as this bird flies away from a roofless cage.

Writers use analogies to illustrate or explain a point. Here, that point is that it's impossible to imprison one's imagination. Neither physical walls nor social conventions can keep the *mind* captive.

The speaker uses several instances of figurative language within this analogy as well. First, when she describes her brain "go[ing] round," she isn't saying that her brain is *literally* moving in circles. Instead, the poem uses this image of movement—like the bird flying—to convey the sense of freedom the speaker felt despite being stuck in a closet.

As she extends the analogy, the speaker also uses a simile to compare the bird flying away to a "star" that looks down from the sky. The simile helps the reader to imagine just how far the bird—and by extension, the speaker's imagination—can go despite attempts to confine it.

Where Analogy appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-12:** "They might as wise have lodged a Bird / For Treason – in the Pound – / Himself has but to will / And easy as a Star / Look down opon Captivity – / And laugh –"

SIMILE

The poem includes two similes to illustrate the speaker's sense of both confinement and freedom. First, the speaker uses a simile to compare the *metaphorical* imprisonment she experiences in society to the *literal* confinement she experienced as a child:

- Society tries to "shut [the speaker] up" in "Prose" (a metaphor for boring social norms), just as, when she was a child, her parents or some other caregiver put the speaker "in the Closet" because they wanted her to be quiet and well-behaved.
- The simile shows readers how society's insistence that the speaker be quiet and obedient (and perhaps that she stop spending so much time writing poetry) feels remarkably limiting and restrictive.

Yet the speaker also shows how these attempts to confine her could never succeed through an analogy in which she compares her mind to a bird in a roofless cage. Using another simile, she says that this bird (and, by extension, the speaker's mind) could look down on its former "Captivity" just as easily as a star can look down from the sky.

- In a sense, this second simile in the poem (where the speaker compares the bird to the star) can be read

as a reply to the first.
- The second simile illustrates just how far the speaker's mind can travel, moving well beyond the bounds of her surroundings and into the open, free space of her imagination.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "They shut me up in Prose – / As when a little Girl / They put me in the Closet – / Because they liked me "still" –"
- **Lines 9-12:** "Himself has but to will / And easy as a Star / Look down opon Captivity – / And laugh –"

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker personifies both the bird and the star in the poem. She emphasizes the bird's "will," or agency, through which it can decide to fly away from the fenced area where it has been kept. She also imagines both the bird and the star looking down from the sky at these human forms of confinement. Both the bird and the star, she says, could simply "laugh" at these ridiculous attempts to hold the bird captive.

These instances of personification reinforce the connection between the bird, the star, and the speaker's imagination. By personifying the bird, the poem helps the reader more clearly imagine the speaker's mind easily flying free from her physical confinement. The reader can envision the speaker's imagination rising above society's constraints and then looking back down on them through the lens of the speaker's own art. She too, the poem suggests, can just "laugh" at these attempts to confine her.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-12:** "Himself has but to will / And easy as a Star / Look down opon Captivity – / And laugh –"

ANADIPLOSIS

The speaker uses anadiplosis at the close of the first stanza, ending line 4 with the word "still" and then starting line 5–and the next stanza—with that exact same word.

The first time the speaker says "still," she's talking about the way that her parents or some other caregivers "liked [her]" to behave. She notably puts the word "still" in quotation marks, suggesting that this is what she was *told* to be. Even as a child, readers get the sense that the speaker rolled her eyes at the idea that she had to act a certain way.

When the speaker repeats the word "still" at the start of the second stanza, she does so as a kind of rhetorical exclamation. "Still!" she says, the exclamation mark suggesting the speaker scoffing or laughing at the very idea of being quiet and obedient. People only *thought* that she was following their orders, the speaker implies here, when in reality, as the next lines will show, her mind kept churning. This moment of repetition thus emphasizes the gap between how others *wanted* the speaker to be—still, quiet, well-behaved—and the reality of her untamable mind. The fact that the repetition occurs across a full stanza break reinforces that distance.

Where Anadiplosis appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** ""still""
- **Line 5:** "Still!"

JUXTAPOSITION

Throughout the poem, the speaker juxtaposes confinement and freedom, stillness and movement, and physical and mental worlds.

In the poem's first stanza, she focuses on confinement and stillness:

- When the speaker describes having been "shut [...] up" in "Prose" and put away as a child "in the Closet," these images of enclosure vividly depict the confinement the speaker has endured.
- The image of the "Closet" in particular conveys a small, dark space, where the speaker has been put in order to make her be "still" and well-behaved.

In the next stanza, the speaker juxtaposes this stillness against the insistent movement of the speaker's "Brain," which the speaker describes as "go[ing] round":

- Whereas the first stanza relied on stillness, then, the poem now evokes movement and boundless energy.
- The speaker thus also juxtaposes her inner world with the physical reality of the stuffy closet, and in doing so highlights the power of the mind and imagination.
- The bird analogy makes the juxtaposition here all the sharper: readers can envision the animal quickly flapping its wings and soaring out of its roofless cage.

Finally, the speaker describes a "Star" in the night sky looking "down" on the world. This creates an image of distance and perspective that feels incredibly far away from the closet of the first stanza. The vastness of the night sky contrasts with the suffocating restrictions of the world below, and through this juxtaposition the speaker highlights sense of boundlessness, freedom, and possibility that her imagination offers her.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

ENJAMBMENT

The poem uses enjambment and end-stopped lines to subtly evoke the contrast between freedom and confinement.

The majority of the poem's lines are end-stopped, especially in its first half, and this lends the poem a measured, even pace overall. One could even read the end-stopped lines as being "well-behaved" (in a grammatical sense), just as society wants *the speaker* to be. This section of the poem focuses on attempts to confine the speaker, so it makes sense that the lines would feel somewhat enclosed.

At the same time, the poem also *resists* this end-stopping. For one thing, the frequent use of dashes leaves the reader without a sense of closure and finality, despite the implied pauses at the end of many lines. Dashes create a sense of energy, freedom, and momentum, in keeping with the speaker's own imaginative freedom and the movement the poem describes.

And, of course, the poem also includes more moments of enjambment that speed things up as the speaker moves from the outside world and into her own mind. The most striking enjambment comes in line 7:

> They might as wise have lodged a Bird
> For Treason – in the Pound –

Much like the dash lines elsewhere in the poem, this enjambment pushes the reader forward over the line break. It mirrors the line's point too: that the "bird"—and the speaker's mind—can easily escape attempts at confinement.

Though many of the line endings here are ambiguous, the final stanza contains enjambment as well that again pulls the reader forward and evokes the speaker's internal sense of freedom.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "Girl / They"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Bird / For"
- **Lines 9-10:** "will / And"
- **Lines 10-11:** "Star / Look"

ALLITERATION

The poem uses alliteration very sparingly, making the device all the more striking when it does appear. In the second quatrain, for instance, bold /b/ sounds connect "Brain" and "Bird." (The capitalization of both words also draws attention to this connection.) This alliteration reinforces the idea that the speaker's "Brain"—her mind—is like a "Bird," because she can easily escape confinement and "fly" wherever she wants to through her imagination.

Similarly, when the speaker describes the bird and the star looking down from the sky and "laugh[ing]" at the bird's former "Captivity," alliterative /l/ sounds connect "[l]ook" and "laugh." This soft alliteration conveys the sense that the bird, the star, and, by extension, the speaker don't have to fear their former confinement. Instead, they can regard it from a distance, and "laugh" at these attempts to keep them "still."

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Brain"
- **Line 7:** "Bird"
- **Line 11:** "Look"
- **Line 12:** "laugh"

ASSONANCE

The poem contains several moments of assonance that create music and emphasize the difference between the speaker and those who would confine her. This assonance comes in the second stanza, where long /ee/ sounds connect "peeped," "seen," and "treason" and long /i/ sounds link "might" and "wise."

All this assonance makes the second stanza feel particularly musical. The first stanza, by contrast, doesn't contain any assonance (and even its sole end rhyme is only a slant rhyme: "girl"/"still"). This makes sense on a thematic level, given that the first stanza is about the speaker being "shut up" and the second is about her powerful mind and swirling imagination.

As the speaker moves from the strict outside world of "Prose" and into her own "Brain," the poem gets more *poetic*. The alliteration of /b/ sounds in this stanza with "Brain" and "Bird" add to this boost in poetic volume as well.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "peeped"
- **Line 6:** "seen"
- **Line 7:** "might," "wise"
- **Line 8:** "Treason"

VOCABULARY

Prose (Line 1) - Any writing that is not poetry.

Peeped (Line 5) - Looked into., especially as one might through a partly open door or other slight opening.

Lodged (Line 7) - To "lodge" has different meanings, but there are two relevant meanings of the word in the poem. First, to "lodge" something means to fix it firmly in place; the speaker imagines people attempting to anchor or fix the bird in place within a caged area. To "lodge" also means to reside somewhere temporarily. In the poem, the speaker uses this meaning somewhat ironically, as she imagines a bird being "lodged" in a "Pound" as a person might "lodge" at an inn.

Treason (Line 8) - A crime that involves disloyalty to or betrayal of one's government.

Pound (Line 8) - In Dickinson's time, a "pound" referred to a fenced or caged outdoor area without a roof. It was a place for stay livestock, rather than a building for animals like cats and dogs.

Opon (Line 11) - An archaic version of "upon."

Captivity (Line 11) - The state of being confined or imprisoned.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"They shut me up in Prose—" is made up of three quatrains, or four-line stanzas. Quatrains are pretty standard for Dickinson's poetry. Here, they give the poem a measured, even shape.

On the one hand, they might evoke containment—their four lines suggesting the four walls of a room, for instance. Just as importantly, though, the poem also radically *resists* the containment of its form. Instead of ending sentences, lines, or stanzas with periods, the speaker turns to dashes throughout. This is again very common in Dickinson's poetry, and suggests are resistance to regular rules of grammar and syntax.

Where conventional punctuation, like commas or periods, would bring the reader to a partial or full stop, these dashes propel the reader forward over the ends of lines and stanzas. The poem, then, enacts what the speaker describes: a movement *out* of containment and enclosure, and *toward* freedom and possibility. The poem's final dash line, which occurs right after the last word, "I" creates a sense of the speaker herself flying out of the poem, reinforcing the idea that the speaker is bound neither by societal convention nor by the typical strictures of "Prose."

METER

The poem is primarily written in iambs, a type of metrical foot in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable. Most lines have three iambs, making the overarching meter here iambic trimeter. Consider, for example, the poem's first two lines:

They shut | me up | in Prose—
As when | a lit- | tle Girl

The poem also incorporates variation into this pattern. For example, the second stanza begins with a stressed syllable, in the word, "Still!" This stress calls attention to the word and its repetition, just as the speaker begins to describe how she *wasn't* still at all:

Still! Could | themself | have peeped –

The poem also varies its rhythm by changing up the number of syllables in the third line in every stanza. Line 3, for example, has an extra unstressed syllable dangling at its end:

They put | me in | the Closet –

And line 11 has *two* extra beats, for a total of eight syllables (though some readers might smoosh the syllables of "Captivity" together a bit):

Look down | opon | Captiv- | ity –

While variations like this are pretty common in poetry, it's interesting that both of these lines end on words related to confinement ("Closet" and "Captivity"). That both have extra syllables in them might suggest the speaker struggling against this captivity.

Finally, the poem's seventh line is again eight syllables long, making it iambic tetrameter (meaning it has four, rather than three, iambs):

They might | as wise | have lodged | a Bird

It's again as though the speaker is rebelling against the poem's metrical constraints, with the extra foot here suggesting the bird's power to escape its cage.

These syllabic patterns also allude to a kind of meter that was important in Dickinson's time: hymn meter, or the typical meter used in religious hymns. Hymns often used what was called short meter (repeating lines of six syllables) and common meter (lines alternating between six and eight syllables in length).

By drawing on hymn meter, as Dickinson did in many of her poems, the poem nods to important social conventions of the time (as the word "hymn" suggests, many poems using this meter were tied to religion). Just as importantly, though, the poem also *diverges* from the set meter of hymns. It creates its *own* pattern. Through its meter, then, the poem subtly illustrates what the speaker describes, as it acknowledges social conventions yet moves beyond them to create its own music.

RHYME SCHEME

"They shut me up in Prose—" has an interesting rhyme scheme that follows this pattern:

ABCB DEFE BGHH

Both the first and second quatrain adhere to a regular ABCB pattern: "Girl" and "still" rhyme in the first quatrain, and "round" and "Pound" rhyme in the second. This fixed rhyme scheme conveys evenness and containment; each quatrain, ending on a closing rhyme sound, creates a kind of enclosure. The rhyme scheme, then, can be read as illustrating the confinement the speaker has experienced.

Importantly, though, the poem introduces variation into this

fixed pattern. Note that in the first quatrain, "Girl" and "still" are not complete rhymes, but slant rhymes. From the very beginning, then, the poem introduces an element of *resistance* to the rhyme scheme's containment, suggesting that even as a "Girl," the speaker was never truly "still."

As the speaker describes escaping this confinement entirely through her imagination, the rhyme scheme also changes dramatically, with the last quatrain following a different pattern:

- Here, the first line ends with a B ending: "will" rhymes with "still" from the opening stanza.
- Then the poem includes the new G rhyme sound of "Star."
- The poem closes with what can be read as a rhyming couplet, with "Captivity" and "I" creating a sound close to rhyme.

Even here, though, the reader unavoidably hears the *difference* between the two sounds, so that the "I" at the poem's ending creates its own, new line ending, shifting away from the "Captivity" that came just before. The poem's rhyme scheme, then, helps to convey what the speaker describes: a movement out of containment and enclosure, toward imaginative, and musical, freedom.

SPEAKER

Several aspects of the poem suggest that the speaker is the poet Emily Dickinson herself:

1. The reader knows that the speaker is female, since she talks about being "a little Girl."
2. The poem also describes the restrictive circumstances in which the speaker lives: she describes being "shut [...] up" in the boring "Prose" of societal conventions. Dickinson herself chafed against the oppressive social and gender norms of her era.
3. Finally, the rejection of "Prose" implies that the speaker has found freedom specifically though its alternative: poetry. In contrast to prose writing, which is associated with the very constraints the speaker wants to escape, the poem suggests that poetry is the art form of freedom and allows the speaker limitless possibilities.

The poem, then, can be read as describing Dickinson's own experience as a poet, and even more specifically as a female poet, within the context of 19th-century New England. At the same time, the poem's take on restriction and freedom is likely one that that many women, artists, and free thinkers can relate to today.

SETTING

The speaker compares the feeling of being restricted by society to being put in a closet as a child, so the setting can be thought of, in part, as that closet itself. The reader can imagine the speaker enclosed in this dark, limiting space, which lends a sense of claustrophobia to the poem's opening lines.

As the poem progresses, however, the speaker breaks free of this setting, and the confinement that it represents, through her imagination. The poem's setting thus moves from the closet itself into the speaker's mind, where her imagination allows her to transcend all physical limitations. She describes a bird flying free of a "Pound," or fenced enclosure without a roof, and then imagines a "Star" in the sky looking down over the outdoor scene. When the speaker escapes confinement through her imagination, then, the setting of the poem moves into the natural world, a place unbound by social convention. Here, the bird, the star, and the speaker's mind can move freely.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson's work stood apart from the literary establishment of her day in terms of both form and content. Though she is now famous for her use of slant rhymes, idiosyncratic punctuation, loose meter, and unconventional capitalization, these were quite innovative for her time. Her poems are also filled with unique and striking imagery and figurative language, as well as deeply personal considerations of nature, faith, and death. And despite being notoriously reclusive, she found a sense of wonder and freedom in her writing that she celebrates here and elsewhere; take "I dwell in Possibility," where, as in this poem, Dickinson rejects the restrictions of stodgy "Prose" in favor of the freedom and "possibility" of the poetic imagination.

Though Dickinson published only a handful of poems during her lifetime, it would be a mistake to view her *only* as a literary recluse, or to think that she didn't intend for her poetry to be read in the future. She ordered many of her poems into sequences that she then sewed together into fascicles (or booklets), saving many other poems as unbound sheets. Dickinson included "They shut me up in Prose—" in Fascicle Twenty-One, which dates from late 1862.

After Dickinson's death, various people close to the poet sought to gain rights to and publish Dickinson's work. Yet these early editions dramatically changed Dickinson's poem's so that they would align with more traditional norms of rhyme and meter. In the 20th century, Harvard scholars Ralph Franklin and Thomas Johnson each published editions of Dickinson's poems, providing their own numbering system but ignoring Dickinson's original ordering. Only in 2016 did Harvard

University Press publish a version of Dickinson's poems that preserves Dickinson's original ordering of the poems and keeps multiple versions intact.

In a way, then, the story of Dickinson's work reflects the story the speaker tells in this poem. People within the literary establishment sought to alter Dickinson's work and make it look like more conventional poetry; in a sense, they attempted to "shut [the poems] up" in the "Prose" of literary convention.

Although in her life she published little, Dickinson read widely and was influenced by a range of writers past and present, including Shakespeare, Milton, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and her contemporary Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Her work also bears influences from religious scripture. Dickinson is considered a major American poet, who along with Walt Whitman helped to shape a distinctly American poetry for centuries to come.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dickinson wrote "They shut me up in Prose—" in 1862, in what was then the small, religious, conservative New England town of Amherst, Massachusetts. This historical context is important to the poem, and especially to understanding the speaker's experiences of personal and social confinement.

When the speaker refers to being "shut [...] up" within "Prose," or punished as a child so that she would be "still," she calls to mind to a range of societal conventions of the time. Within this time period (and of course, in any places into the present), girls and women were expected to be quiet, still, and well-behaved. Women would be expected to marry and have children, not become poets.

Dickinson wrote the poem, then, within a cultural context that was acutely restrictive and limiting, especially for women. Within such a world, the speaker's assertion of imaginative freedom and autonomy is all the more striking and remarkable.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Emily Dickinson Archive — View original manuscript versions of many of Dickinson's poems and read more about her work at the Emily Dickinson Archive. (https://www.edickinson.org)
- The Emily Dickinson Museum — Learn more about Dickinson's life and work at the website of the Emily Dickinson Museum, which is located at Dickinson's former home in Amherst, Massachusetts. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org)
- Dickinson Electronic Archives — Read Dickinson's correspondence, critical articles about Dickinson's work, and more at the Dickinson Electronic Archives. (http://archive.emilydickinson.org/index.html)
- Manuscript Version of "They shut me up in Prose—" — View the original manuscript of "They shut me up in Prose—" in Dickinson's handwriting. (https://journeys.dartmouth.edu/whiteheat/they-shut-me-up-in-prose-f445a-j613/)
- Biography of Emily Dickinson — Learn about Dickinson's life and poetry, and read a range of her poems, through the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)

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
- 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'm Nobody! Who are you?
- I started Early — Took my Dog —
- I taste a liquor never brewed
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- Success is counted sweetest
- Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
- There's a certain Slant of light
- The Soul selects her own Society
- This is my letter to the world
- We grow accustomed to the Dark
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

HOW TO CITE

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