We grow accustomed to the Dark

POEM TEXT

We grow accustomed to the Dark —
When Light is put away —
As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp
To witness her Goodbye —

A Moment — We Uncertain step
For newness of the night —
Then — fit our Vision to the Dark —
And meet the Road — erect —

And so of larger — Darknesses —
Those Evenings of the Brain —
When not a Moon disclose a sign —
Or Star — come out — within —

The Bravest — grope a little —
And sometimes hit a Tree
Directly in the Forehead —
But as they learn to see —

Either the Darkness alters —
Or something in the sight
Adjusts itself to Midnight —
And Life steps almost straight.

SUMMARY

We get used to darkness when the light disappears—like, for example, when a neighbor briefly holds up a lamp as she says her goodbyes.

Once the light is gone, we hesitate for a moment, and step uncertainly into the new darkness of the night. But soon enough, our eyes adjust, and we hit the road, standing tall.

The same is true of difficult times in life, which challenge us with a bigger (and less literal) form of darkness: those dark nights of the mind, when no guiding light, like the moon or stars, reveals itself.

The most courageous people venture clumsily into those darknesses, sometimes banging into a tree with their foreheads. Soon enough, though, they get used to the dark.

Then the darkness itself changes—or, perhaps, our eyes adjust to this metaphorical midnight. Then people find a way through life that is almost straight.

THEMES

HUMAN COURAGE AND RESILIENCE

"We Grow Accustomed to the Dark" is a testament to human courage and resilience. Just as people's eyes adjust to their new surroundings after turning off a light, people themselves will learn to find their way through metaphorically dark times (which might refer to moments of great pain or to confrontations with the unknown). In other words, though life can often be hard, people can persevere through all manner of difficulties. The poem also subtly implies that people should accept that such difficulties are simply part of life—and are, in fact, important to our growth.

The "larger [...] Darknesses" of life might refer to times of intense grief, loss, doubt, or fear; the speaker might also be talking about times when people must step forward into an uncertain, or "dark," future. What's clear is that such darkness is inevitable, something "We"—that is, all human beings—have to face.

Navigating this darkness without any "Moon" nor "Star"—that is, without any guidance to show the way—may be upsetting and disorientating. But just like you can't have light without darkness, you can't have courage without a little fear. What's important, the speaker implies, is that people take that first, tentative step into the "night"—even if they can't be sure they're heading in the right direction. This might mean facing one's fears, dealing with trauma, or simply embracing the fact that the future is impossible to predict. Whatever one's personal "darkness" may be, the speaker has faith that one can find one's way through it.

The "Bravest" of all, the speaker says, "grope" (or blindly feel) their way along until their eyes adjust to their new surroundings. They might accidentally smack their head into a branch on the journey (a metaphor for coming up against an obstacle), but they will, the speaker says, "learn to see."

The poem thus celebrates perseverance through hardship and uncertainty, while also encouraging people to confront their pain and fear slowly but directly. When met with such courage, "the Darkness alters," or "something in the sight" becomes adapted to that darkness. It doesn't really matter whether it's a person's sight or the darkness itself that changes; what matters is that life becomes more bearable—a little less dark—through this simple act of bravery and acceptance. No longer groping around blindly, "Life" can step "almost straight"; people will be able to move forward with confidence and integrity.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

We grow accustomed to the Dark —
When Light is put away —
As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp
To witness her Goodbye —

The poem opens with the word "We." Already, the reader knows that the speaker is making a universal statement about humanity: that everyone "grow[s]" grow accustomed to the Dark / When Light is put away." That is, everyone gets used to darkness when the light is gone.

Nowadays, people are more used to turning a light off than putting it away—so in line 2, the reader might imagine the neighbor holding, not an electric porch light, but an old-fashioned handheld kerosene lamp (like this). The speaker imagines this neighbor holding this lamp up to say goodnight, and then leaving—taking the light of the lantern with her.

Think about how your eyes slowly adjust when you're standing in a dark room—from not being able to see at all, to slowly making out shapes. That's what the speaker is describing, but applying it to human experience in general, not just eyesight.

In literature, light usually stands for knowledge, warmth, and understanding, while darkness often represents opposite qualities—fear, sadness, the unknown, and so on. This symbolism is important to making sense of the poem.

It's not so easy to make one's way through that kind of darkness! Dickinson's characteristic dashes at the end of lines 1, 2, and 4 make the poem feel a little tentative, as though it is fumbling about in the dark to find its footing.

It's also worth noting how the poem offers no information about the neighbor's identity—nor, in fact, that of the person she bids farewell. This *lack* of specifics gives the poem a mysterious atmosphere, and helps readers understand that this opening scene isn't meant to be taken literally. Instead, the speaker is using an extended metaphor that compares human resilience through tough times to the way that people's eyes adjust to darkness.

LINES 5-8

A Moment — We Uncertain step
For newness of the night —
Then — fit our Vision to the Dark —
And meet the Road — erect —

After a "neighbor" has gone back inside the house and "put away" her lamp, the "We" of the poem fumbles into the darkness (and remember, the poem was written before electrical street lighting was the norm—so being outside without a lamp would be very dark indeed!). That use of "We" again draws the reader into the poem and makes it clear that this is a poem about a universal human truth—not just a story about a time when the speaker got lost on the way home!

Plunged into darkness, it takes "a Moment" or two to adjust. People step "uncertain[ly]," waiting for their eyes to get used to the sudden lack of light. The caesura after "Moment" (another Dickinson dash) gives line 5 a sense of hesitation, so the poem itself seems briefly unsure of where to go. The night then seems "new[]" because its darkness so profoundly contrasts with the light source that has just disappeared. The poem alliterates "newness" and "night," suggesting how strange and overwhelming the darkness feels at first.

But this uncertainty is short-lived. Soon enough, we "fit our Vision to the dark"—in other words, we get used to it. The assonance of "fit" and "Vision" in line 7 mimics this process, as if the line is "fitting" itself to itself! Then, the speaker says, we "meet the Road — erect." To stand "erect" suggests a certain pride and inner strength as we start to walk through this darkness. Notice, though, how the caesura in lines 7 and 8 still suggests a degree of difficulty, breaking up the sentence awkwardly. The lines are still choppy and unpredictable, much like walking along a road in pitch black darkness.

When the poem uses words like "Vision," "Dark," and "Road," the reader senses that this is all part of the poem's extended metaphor about persevering through challenges and uncertainty. Roads are a common metaphor for life itself. The speaker is saying that, while people may stumble through life's dark moments at first, they will still have the courage to face their metaphorical journeys with strength.

LINES 9-12

And so of larger — Darknesses —
Those Evenings of the Brain —
When not a Moon disclose a sign —
Or Star — come out — within —

In the third stanza, the poem fully takes off into the realm of metaphor and symbolism. The down-to-earth image of how people adjust to actual darkness suddenly takes on a deeper meaning. The poem reveals that the first eight lines were an extended metaphor for something else: the ability to "grow accustomed" to actual darkness mirrors people's remarkable resilience during hard times.

The connecting conjunction "And" at the start of line 9 signals a shift into this new section of the poem. The poem moves from the actual darkness of lines 1 to 8 towards "larger—Darknesses" in line 9 (where a caesura maintains the hesitant tone by creating a short and unexpected pause). These larger darknesses are metaphorically described as "Evenings of

the Brain" in which no moon or stars appear to light the way. These "Evenings" are what are sometimes called dark nights of the soul—life's periods of crisis, fear, and uncertainty. These darknesses are "larger," of course, because they are far more significant events than the struggle to make visual sense of actual darkness.

The whole stanza is full of sibilance that creates a hushed, tense, and even sinister atmosphere::

> And so of larger — Darknesses —
> Those Evenings of the Brain —
> When not a Moon disclose a sign —
> Or Star — come out — within —

Sibilance also suggests the sound of wind, perhaps evoking the feeling of being lost outside at night—like a sailor at sea, unable to navigate because the stars are obscured by clouds.

The two dashes in line 12 evoke this image as well, as though the "Star" being mentioned is only briefly visible now and then, between the pauses. Stars not only provide light, but are also classic symbols of guidance. The speaker is describing what happens when people don't *have* that guidance, when they don't have anyone or anything to lead the way forward.

LINES 13-16

> *The Bravest — grope a little —*
> *And sometimes hit a Tree*
> *Directly in the Forehead —*
> *But as they learn to see —*

The fourth stanza praises those people who meet darkness head on, rather than shying away from it. Doing so comes with risk, the speaker implies—perhaps, of failure, disappointment, sadness, or pain. Even as the poem acknowledges that life often seems threatening and unknowable, it argues *against* the idea that people should turn away from "Darknesses."

In fact, it's in *meeting* the metaphorical darkness that people can "learn to see," even if they hit a few bumps along the way. Lines 13-15 are cluttered and clumsy, mimicking this "groping" in the dark.

The caesura after "bravest" in line 13 is intentionally awkward, breaking the sentence up *just before* the main verb arrives (until then, the word "bravest" dangles in the air unresolved). And the enjambment between lines 14 and 15 is as surprising as the tree branch that smacks the wanderer in the forehead in those lines. This adds extra weight to assonance between "Tree" and "Directly," an internal rhyme that makes it feel as if the poem is momentarily finding its footing only to walk straight into that tree!

This noisiness also finds expression in the poem's meter in line 15:

> Directly in the Forehead —

Where the poem has mostly used iambic tetrameter, here it leaves out its final beat, temporarily falling out of step to match the pain of suddenly hitting a tree in the dark—or, to put this in the poem's metaphorical context, the feeling when life throws up something unexpected and difficult.

This comical moment quickly becomes more harmonious, mimicking the way that people become "accustomed to the Dark"—coping with what life throws at them. The /ee/ sound becomes a full, clear, perfect rhyme between line 14's "Tree," and line 16's "see," the only true rhyme in a poem full of slant rhyme. In fact, the poem's slant rhyme is so *slanted* that most of it it barely even registers as rhyme.

This tree/see rhyme is perfectly timed to suggest a new clarity, as though something important is coming into focus. This bold rhyme literally brings the poem's subtle rhyme scheme into view, mimicking the way that darkness becomes bearable when faced "directly."

It's also worth noting how Dickinson generally chooses nouns that could be drawn from any era in human history, giving the poem an allegorical atmosphere—as though it speaks of a truth about the human experience that has always been true and always will be. The "Bravest" crash into a "Tree" as opposed to, say, a 19th-century carriage.

LINES 17-20

> *Either the Darkness alters —*
> *Or something in the sight*
> *Adjusts itself to Midnight —*
> *And Life steps almost straight.*

In the fifth stanza, the poem explains how bravery—or human resilience—helps people make sense of metaphorical darkness. Taking on that darkness "alters" it, making it more bearable. In other words, life will sometimes be tough—but these tough times will be more tolerable if they are accepted, even embraced, as an inherent part of the human experience. The speaker presents this idea in two ways:

1. The darkness itself changes ("alters"). Perhaps, metaphorically speaking, the sun comes up, and whatever was depressing or frightening someone looks less awful than they thought. The darkness in this idea is like a monster that, once confronted, shrinks away, small and meek.
2. Or an individual's "sight/ Adjusts" itself to the darkness and helps them find their way. A change in perspective gives the "Darkness"—sadness, fears, worries, and so on—a new context that alleviates some of the pain. The poem praises human grit and determination, the ability to survive life's troubles through reframing the meaning of life itself.

The poem doesn't need the reader to decide between these two interpretations. Either way, the darkness *feels* less dark through the simple act of being brave.

But Dickinson's poems rarely provide neat, optimistic conclusions. Even with this new-found ability to move through, or change, the darkness, "Life steps almost straight." Life doesn't become *fully* straight, as though it has a clear destination to be reached by the most efficient journey. There's still something a bit off about the way life goes; even the best-laid plans might come with a few surprises. Nevertheless, taking the "step" onto the metaphorical road of life is, the poem gently argues, better than not moving at all.

The strong /s/ and /t/ consonance in this stanza is the poetic equivalent of an idea coming into focus:

> Either the Darkness alters —
> Or something in the sight
> Adjusts itself to Midnight —
> And Life steps almost straight.

The crispness of /t/ sounds suggests a growing clarity, like an image in the dark slowly coming into focus. The /s/ sound, on the other hand, evokes wind and whispering (think about the sibilant sound of storms, and the hushed tones of people talking in the dark). This helps conjure the "Midnight," the darkest point in the night—or, metaphorically, the hardest times in life. These two sounds together reflect the complicated bravery in the face of inevitable suffering that this final stanza celebrates.

All in all, then, the poem praises the human ability to survive and persevere—even when the way to do so can seem obscured by darkness.

SYMBOLS

THE NEIGHBOR

The neighbor of the first stanza symbolizes human contact and connection—a warmth that stands in contrast to the cold darkness of suffering. Even though the poem uses "We" throughout, there's definitely something isolated about the image of people stepping out into literal and/or metaphorical darkness, and this "neighbor" saying her "Goodbye" suggests that the poem's "we" approaches the darkness very much alone.

The word "neighbor" itself echoes the biblical commandment "love thy neighbor"—and love is often depicted as a kind of light, like the neighbor's lantern, illuminating with the darker parts of the human experience. That said, the fact that the neighbor doesn't reappear in the poem perhaps suggests that there are some times in life in which only the individual themselves can find a way through. In other words, there won't always be a neighbor around to help light the way, and we must all sometimes face our inner darkness alone.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp / To witness her Goodbye —"

THE ROAD

Symbolically, this poem's "Road" can be read as life itself. On the one hand, this could be just a road—the direction that someone has to walk in order to make their way home through the darkness. On the other, it's the journey that all of us must make through life.

People often use metaphors of space, direction, and journeying to describe life—think about what it means if someone says, "I don't know where my life is going." This poem's "road" is one that's obscured in darkness (and full of trees waiting to whack passersby in the forehead), and suggests that life is inherently a difficult journey—but one that the "Bravest" can transform with courage.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "And meet the Road — erect —"

THE MOON AND STARS

Within the poem's larger extended metaphor of light and darkness, the moon and stars symbolize guidance and clarity. Sometimes the sky is dark and cloudy, symbolizing the times in life when times get tough—periods of grief, personal doubt, depression, and so on. Without a "Moon" or a "Star" for guidance in this metaphorical night sky, people don't know how to find their way in life. But just as navigators on the seas use the moon and stars to chart a course to their destination, life sometimes has guiding lights to give it purpose and meaning. Friendship, love, ambition—all of these can help an individual "meet the Road" of life. Sometimes, though, life seems truly bleak and dark, and nothing provides a source of metaphorical light.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-12:** "Those Evenings of the Brain — / When not a Moon disclose a sign — / Or Star — come out — within —"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"We grow accustomed to the Dark" uses alliteration sparingly. Generally speaking, though, patterns of sound like alliteration, consonance, and assonance help to bring a poem's world vividly to life on the page. Take the shared /n/ of "newness" and "night" in line 6. This alliteration pulls readers' attention to this image of sudden, unfamiliar darkness.

One strong example comes at the end of the poem (and is specifically an example of sibilant alliteration):

> Either the Darkness alters —
> Or something in the sight
> Adjusts itself to Midnight —
> And Life steps almost straight.

These two separate pairs of words that start with an /s/ sound evoke how the poem's wanderers learn to find their way—to see straight in the dark. Those matched pairs are like one foot falling confidently in front of another, which relates to the way that bravery, according to the poem can help to meet life's challenges—to walk through life "almost straight."

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "newness," "night"
- **Line 11:** "sign"
- **Line 12:** "Star"
- **Line 18:** "something," "sight"
- **Line 20:** "steps," "straight"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration and consonance, brings drama to the poem's more abstract moments—and helps bring images to life on the page. (See the entry on consonance for a longer discussion of how these sonic devices work.)

One good example comes in line 7, where the speaker describes the moment when the human eye adjusts to new darkness. The reader is told how "we" (people) manage to "fit our Vision to the dark." The short /ih/ vowel joins these two words, or "fits" them together, mimicking the process of the eye's adjustment (which, remember, is part of the poem's extended metaphor for human resilience in dark times!).

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "fit," "Vision"
- **Line 9:** "larger — Darknesses"
- **Lines 14-15:** "Tree / Directly"
- **Line 18:** "sight"
- **Line 19:** "Midnight"

CAESURA

The poem uses many strong em-dashes as caesurae. Dickinson loved em-dashes, and often used them at the ends of lines, too. But within lines, caesura disrupts the poem's rhythm, preventing it from flowing too easily—or, to put it in the poem's language, from *finding its feet*.

Caesura represents the "uncertain step" with which people find their way in both literal and metaphorical darkness (hard times in life and confrontations with the unknown). The poem's words and phrases "grope" their way from the first line to the last, almost—but, because of the caesura, never quite—finding a steady rhythm.

The caesurae also have some more specific effects. There are three examples in the second stanza:

> A Moment || — We Uncertain step
> For newness of the night —
> Then || — fit our Vision to the Dark —
> And meet the Road || — erect —

The first caesura creates a short pause after the word "moment," giving the poem its own moment of adjustment before carrying on. Notice how the other two caesurae do something similar, briefly halting the poem before the mention of taking a step, fitting "our vision to the Dark," and standing up tall and confident. Each caesura, then, marks a hesitation before something more positive and affirmative.

The caesurae in the following stanza have a rather different effect:

> And so of larger || — Darknesses —
> Those Evenings of the Brain —
> When not a Moon disclose a sign —
> Or Star || — come out || — within —

The short pause between "larger" and "Darknesses" in line 9 adds weight to the long /a/ assonance, which makes these darknesses—times of trouble—seem all the more big and scary. The caesurae in line 12 have another effect altogether, mimicking the way a star might seem to suddenly appear or disappear behind clouds.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Moment — We"
- **Line 7:** "Then — fit"
- **Line 8:** "Road — erect"
- **Line 9:** "larger — Darknesses"
- **Line 12:** "Star — come out — within"

- **Line 13:** "Bravest — grope"

CONSONANCE

Clusters of consonance bring the poem's sounds and images to life. Two main sounds dominate the poem's consonance—/t/ and /s/. The first of these is subtly present in the first stanza, but becomes more noticeable in the second. Here, the speaker describes how people, when confronted with literal darkness, are able to adjust their eyes and "meet the Road." The crisp repeated /t/ suggests a growing clarity and purposefulness, as though the poem itself—and its sound patterning—is coming into view more clearly.

In the fourth stanza, the /t/ has a more comical effect:

> The Bravest — grope a little —
> And sometimes hit a Tree
> Directly in the Forehead —
> But as they learn to see —

These /t/s are more like obstacles laid in the reader's path. Try reading them out loud to notice how they trip up the tongue, much like an unexpected tree in the road might trip up the feet!

Elsewhere, the sibilant /s/ evokes the darkness and danger of the road. Poems often use sibilance to suggest things like the sea or the wind (think about the hissing sound of wind in branches), or to create a hushed, whispered effect. Both effects are at work in the poem, particularly in the third stanza:

> And so of larger — Darknesses —
> Those Evenings of the Brain —
> When not a Moon disclose a sign —
> Or Star — come out — within —

The imagery here evokes a cold, stormy night, and the sibilant /s/ helps create this dramatic atmosphere. But of course, the poem isn't just talking about an actual "Evening[]." These are "Evenings of the Brain": psychologically difficult times when life seems hard. Perhaps that whispery sibilance even hints at conflicting internal voices in somebody's mind (perhaps the voice that tells them *not* to face life bravely).

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "accustomed to"
- **Line 2:** "Light," "put"
- **Line 5:** "Uncertain step"
- **Line 6:** "newness," "night"
- **Line 7:** "fit," "to"
- **Line 8:** "meet," "erect"
- **Line 9:** "so," "Darknesses"
- **Line 10:** "Evenings," " Brain"
- **Line 11:** "When," "not," "Moon," "disclose," "sign"
- **Line 12:** "Star," "out"
- **Line 13:** "Bravest," "little"
- **Line 14:** "sometimes hit," "Tree"
- **Line 15:** "Directly"
- **Line 16:** "But," "to," "see"
- **Line 17:** "Darkness," "alters"
- **Line 18:** "something," "sight"
- **Line 19:** "Adjusts itself to Midnight"
- **Line 20:** "steps almost straight"

ENJAMBMENT

Most lines in "We Grow Accustomed to the Dark" end with Dickinson's characteristic em-dash. In a few instances, though, the poem uses enjambment either for dramatic effect or to suggest a kind of clarity.

In the first stanza, for example, the enjambment after "Lamp" leaves bright white space at the end of line 3, subtly representing how the Neighbor's lamp makes it possible to see in the dark. The enjambment between lines 18 and 19 has a similar effect, signaling a determination to embrace the metaphorical darkness that comes with being a human being. The white space after "sight" similarly suggests not exactly brightness but a *lesser* darkness. The poem praises the "bravest" people, those who are willing to venture through darkness—so both of these enjambments help contrast dark with light.

Line 5's enjambment is a little different because it comes soon after "We Uncertain step"—a phrase which, while not grammatically incomplete, is grammatically tense until line 6 completes it. This builds a sense of uncertainty, as though the poem itself isn't completely sure where it's going.

The enjambment between lines 14 and 15 helps create a sudden and unexpected instance of assonance/internal rhyme between "Tree" and "Directly." This stanza is about running into obstacles in metaphorically dark times, and the enjambment makes this /ee/ vowel sound ring out loud and awkwardly, the poem's equivalent of stumbling into an unexpected problem.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Lamp / To"
- **Lines 5-6:** "step / For"
- **Lines 14-15:** "Tree / Directly"
- **Lines 18-19:** "sight / Adjusts"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The poem uses extended metaphor throughout. Most readers will take the "dark" in the title to mean something more than literal darkness, and Dickinson's poems tend to use concrete imagery to discuss complicated, often abstract ideas or truths

about life. What seems like a literal dark night in the first stanza quickly becomes a rich metaphor for human confusion and suffering.

While the poem opens with a discussion of what *appears* to be literal darkness, the capitalization of "Dark" and "Light" hints at their deeper symbolism. The second stanza essentially says the same thing as the last stanza (that people can become "accustomed to the Dark"), meaning that by the end of the poem the lines between literal discussion and metaphor have become intentionally blurred. "Fitt[ing] our Vision to the dark" is what people do in the night time, but also what they do—or can do—in "larger" moments of spiritual and existential crisis. In these dark nights of the soul, the metaphorical guiding lights of life (represented by the moon and stars) can seem far away and hidden.

Facing metaphorical darkness is not without its risks, as the poem acknowledges in lines 13 to 15:

> The Bravest — grope a little —
> And sometimes hit a Tree
> Directly in the Forehead —

The night, both literal and metaphorical, is full of potential obstacles. The mention of the poor "Forehead" smacking into a tree fits in with the poem's interest in psychological pain. Soon enough, though, either the eyes adjust to let more light in or, perhaps, the sun comes up and ushers in a new day.

The speaker doesn't play down the difficulties of life, but suggests that being brave helps "Life" to walk "almost" straight—not *completely*. There may not be a clear, well-lit path through life, but that doesn't mean the journey can't be embraced.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

VOCABULARY

Accustomed (Line 1) - Used to.

Disclose (Line 11) - Make something known and/or visible.

Grope (Line 13) - Move uncertainly/clumsily.

Alters (Line 17) - Changes.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem consists of five quatrains (four-line stanzas). Dickinson often uses quatrains; they're by far the most common stanza form in her poetry. The quatrains here are also known as ballad stanzas, because their alternating pattern of iambic tetrameter (lines 1 and 3 in each stanza) and iambic trimeter (lines 2 and 4) often turns up in old folk songs and hymns.

This regular stanza form gives the poem a sense of direction and purpose—which the poem's tale of being lost in life's woods undercuts! In other words, there's a tension between the poem's neat form and the *untidy* way in which life, according to the poem, usually unfolds.

METER

The poem uses ballad meter throughout, giving it a rhythmic sound that is typical of Dickinson's poetry. Ballad meter uses quatrains with an alternating pattern of iambic tetrameter (the first and third lines of each stanza) and trimeter (the second and fourth).

An iamb is a poetic foot with an unstressed-**stressed** beat pattern; tetrameter means there are four of these iambs in a line, whereas trimeter means there are three. The first stanza offers a perfect example of the meter at work:

> We **grow** | ac**cus**- | tomed **to** | the **Dark** —
> When **Light** | is **put** | a**way** —
> As **when** | the **Neigh**- | bor **holds** | the **Lamp**
> To **wit**- | ness **her** | Good**bye** —

The poem's meter creates a sense of forward motion and propulsion, tying in with the discussion of "meet[ing] the Road" of life itself. The poem implicitly praises those who are willing to travel through the "Darkness" of life, rather than shy away from it. The dependable meter supports this argument, pushing the reader onwards.

That said, the poem also creates tension by disrupting the steady onward step of its iambic meter. The poem talks about the need to adjust to the darkness, and how the dark contains obstacles (like the comical "Tree" in line 14). This is achieved less by metrical variation and more by the use of em dashes, both at the ends of lines and as caesurae. This give the poem a slight tentativeness, as though it too is afraid of taking the next step (but does so nonetheless).

Finally, the poem saves its most noticeable metrical variation for the final stanza. It's no coincidence that this is when "the Darkness alters"—the meter *also* alters support this image:

> Eith**er** | the **Dark**- | ness **al**ters —
> Or **some**- | thing **in** | the **sight**
> A**djusts** | it**self** | to **Mid**night —
> And **Life** | steps **al**- | most **straight**.

Both the first and third lines of this stanza (lines 17 and 19 overall) are "alter[ed]" or "adjust[ed]," each of them missing

their usual final stress. The meter subtly echoes the way in which people become "accustomed to the Dark," how simply looking at something in the dark can bring it into better view. The poem returns to the "straight" and purposeful sound of its meter in the last line, signaling its approval of the "bravest"—those people who push on through the darkness that life throws at them.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem uses quatrains whose rhyme scheme runs like this:

ABCB

This common pattern, sometimes called the "ballad stanza," turns up in a lot of Dickinson's poetry. In other poems, these rhymes create a sense of forward motion and expectation as readers wait for that second B rhyme to appear. But this poem mostly uses slant rhyme—so the scheme isn't actually all that noticeable at first! Pairs like away/goodbye and brain/within are subtly linked by a shared sound, but not by a clear rhyme.

This makes the poem feel more tentative than an ABCB scheme normally might. This idea—that something is just a little off—fits in perfectly with the poem's literal and metaphorical darkness. The dark holds unexpected surprises and obstacles, just like life—and if the rhymes were bright and obvious, they wouldn't match the poem's tone.

With this in mind, it's worth looking more closely at the two points when the poem uses a true rhyme. In the fourth stanza, "tree" rhymes with "see," a clear rhyme that represents how the "bravest...learn to see" in the dark. In other words, a clear rhyme mimics clear sight.

In the last stanza, the first rhyme word—"sight"—rhymes perfectly with "Midnight" in the next line, cutting across the rhyme scheme. This rhyme is bright and clear, even if midnight isn't, reflecting how the "Bravest" learn to navigate the dark. The final slant rhyme—"sight" with "straight"—responds to the last line's image of life stepping "almost straight" by returning to the poem's usual wonky rhyming. Anything else would feel way too strong and suggest that "Darkness" can be entirely overcome or destroyed, when, in fact, it can only be embraced and "alter[ed]."

It's also worth nothing how "Tree" links up with "Directly" in line 14, which can be read as either assonance or internal rhyme. This is a clunky, sudden rhyme, as though the poem is tripping over itself—just like the "Bravest" people do as they "grope" though the metaphorical darkness of life and run smack into a tree.

SPEAKER

The poem doesn't give away anything specific about its speaker. The speaker in Dickinson's poem's is often read as Dickinson herself, and this poem's focus on psychological difficulty—long dark "Evenings of the Brain"—might emerge from Dickinson's sometimes-painful inner life. But the reader doesn't have to interpret things this way to understand and appreciate this poem.

Whoever this speaker is, it's clear they feel a quiet admiration for the "Bravest" people—those who are willing to tackle life's "larger [...] Darknesses" head on. Doing so, the speaker believes, makes the darkness lighter, or, at the very least, less scary. But perhaps not everyone can be so brave, the speaker calls "the Bravest" "they," suggesting that the speaker admires these courageous folks from afar.

The other important thing to note here is that the speaker mostly uses the first-person plural, and talks in general terms about what "we" experience throughout the poem. This implies that the poem describes a universal truth about life, one that "we" can all relate to. Facing metaphorical dark times, the poem suggests, is so common that everyone knows what it's like.

SETTING

The poem is set on a dark road late at night—but that road might as much be a road in "the Brain" as a real one! The poem uses its dark, rocky road as a symbol of life itself.

Out on this symbolic road, the darkness of the night sky represents "those Evenings of the Brain" when life seems especially tough or uncertain. Sibilance in this section of the poem, built up by words like "Darknesses" and "disclose," conjures the hissing sound of a windy night, creating the impression that the reader is out in the cold (check out this guide's Devices section on consonance for more about this). Out here, there's always the chance of running directly into a concealed "Tree"—one of life's many unpleasant surprises.

This harsh, unforgiving setting allows the poem to offer praise for those people who are willing to take life on—to embrace darkness, rather than shy away from it. Life itself, then, becomes a kind of an obstacle-laden journey into the dark that is nonetheless worth undertaking.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Though a prolific writer, Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) published only a handful of poems during her own lifetime—and "We grow accustomed to the Dark" wasn't one of them. It wasn't until after Dickinson's death that her sister Lavinia found and published her work. But this poem, written around 1862, didn't even appear in early collections: it was first printed in 1935!

While it's one of Dickinson's lesser-known poems, "We grow accustomed to the Dark" shares many traits with more famous

works like "Because I could not stop for Death," "I'm Nobody! Who are you?," and "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died." Like those poems, this one expresses complex ideas in deceptively simple language. As is typical of Dickinson's poetry, the reader sense that there is much more going on than meets the eye.

Dickinson was such an original and unusual poet that her work arguably stands alone. Though she expressed admiration for poets like William Wordsworth, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, their influence is not easy to detect directly in the poem. In fact, some critics see Dickinson as an ahead-of-her-time Modernist—and Modernist writers like Virginia Woolf indeed admired (and were influenced by) Dickinson's psychological brilliance and inward gaze.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This poem was written during the American Civil War, a time of great societal uncertainty and darkness. While Dickinson was famously reclusive and didn't get involved in the war directly, she was firmly on the Northern side of the conflict. Perhaps her shyness informs this poem's admiration of "the Bravest" people—those who are willing to face life head on and "meet the Road."

While Dickinson did very little actual travel, she arguably traveled further than anyone else in terms of poetic imagination. But her brilliance came alongside a great deal of suffering. The poem's focus on mental "Darknesses," which it describes as "Evenings of the Brain," can be considered in the context of Dickinson's own struggles with anxiety, depression, and possibly epilepsy—conditions that had yet to be explored as diseases in the 19th century.

It's also worth considering how much society's relationship with light and darkness has changed since the poem's composition. It wasn't until after Dickinson's death that street lighting became commonplace—meaning that setting out after sunset was much more likely to bring about an encounter with true darkness. The poem gestures towards humankind's long-lasting relationship with the night sky, referencing the way that the moon and stars can help with navigation.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Dickinson's Darknesses — A theory about the poet's notorious reclusiveness. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/feb/13/emily-dickinson-lyndall-gordon)
- The Poem Out Loud — Check out an animation and reading of the poem. (https://www.pw.org/content/we_grow_accustomed_to_the_dark_by_emily_dickinson)
- More Poems and Dickinson's Biography — A valuable resource from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)
- Dickinson's Process — An intriguing article about the more material side of Dickinson's writing. (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/12/05/emily-dickinsons-singular-scrap-poetry)
- Dickinson's Letters — Fascinating excerpts from Dickinson's correspondence. (https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1891/10/emily-dickinsons-letters/306524/)

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 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
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

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