Whose cheek is this?

POEM TEXT

Whose cheek is this?
What rosy face
Has lost a blush today?
I found her—"pleiad"—in the woods
And bore her safe away.

Robins, in the tradition
Did cover such with leaves,
But which the cheek—
And which the pall
My scrutiny deceives.

SUMMARY

Whose cheek am I looking at? Whose pink face has lost its flush of color today? I found this nymph-like figure in the trees and took her home to safety.

Robins, so the story goes, would cloak the dead with leaves. But whether this is a cheek or funeral shroud... I can't figure it out.

THEMES

THE BEAUTY AND FRAGILITY OF LIFE

The speaker of "Whose cheek is this?" considers the quickly fading beauty of a dead flower in the woods. The speaker carries the flower "away" to protect it, yet its "rosy face" has already "lost [its] blush"—to the point that its withered petals make the speaker think of dead children and a funeral pall. The poem thus hints that life is as fragile as it is lovely: there's no keeping even the most innocent little flower safe.

The poem repeatedly emphasizes the beauty and vulnerability of the little flower. First, the speaker compares finding the flower to stumbling across a young woman's body in the woods, her "rosy face" growing cold and pale. The flower is a creature both beautiful and vulnerable, like a lost "pleaid" (a nymph-turned-star in Greek mythology). The speaker tries to keep the flower safe by taking it "away," an action suggesting that the wood is filled with danger and that the flower might be defiled or destroyed were it to be left out in the open.

The sight of the flower also prompts the speaker to think of an old folk tale known as "Babes in the Wood." In this story, two young children meet their untimely end in a forest just like the one the speaker rescues the flower from; robins cover the children's bodies with leaves. The speaker's images of the innocent young dead, as well as the lost "pleiad," suggest that life is fragile—especially, perhaps, for the most innocent and loveliest of creatures.

Yet even as the speaker tries to protect the flower, the poem also implies that there is no such thing as *true* safety; with life, the poem suggests, comes danger and the ever-present threat of death. Sometimes that death comes far too soon, snuffing life out at its most beautiful and unguarded. (If the speaker was the one who plucked the flower in the first place, then the desire to keep it "safe," ironically, would have been the very thing that hastened its demise.)

Ultimately, the speaker's inability to decide whether the flower looks more like a "cheek" or a "pall"—that is, a cloth spread over a coffin or tomb—suggests the proximity between life and death. The world couldn't have one without the other; death always lurks in the shadows, even in the sweetest of scenes.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Whose cheek is this?
What rosy face
Has lost a blush today?

The poem begins with the speaker metaphorically describing a (presumably pink) flower that they come across in the woods as a "cheek." This flower is dead, or just about: its once "rosy face / Has lost a blush." The flower hasn't yet decayed, but it no longer glows with the same bright color that it did only recently; blood no longer rushes to this metaphorical "cheek."

The speaker talks about the flower as if it were a human being, and this personification makes the poem's imagery more striking and urgent. By using the words "cheek" and "rosy face," as opposed to, say, "petal" and "flower," the poem implies that the speaker isn't *just* talking about a literal plant here. This little flower becomes a symbol of vulnerable beauty in general, and perhaps of the fragility of life itself.

Note, too, how instead of saying "who is this" or "what is this," the speaker asks "Whose cheek" this flower belongs to and "what rosy face" has lost its color. Such language subtly reflects how the flower has been *severed* from its life source and now

lies isolated and vulnerable in the woods. The enjambment between "face" and "has" mirrors the flower's separation from its roots/stem/branch.

The poem's language and form further evoke the flower's vulnerability. These lines are very short—two lines of iambic dimeter (da-DUM da-DUM) followed by one of trimeter (da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM):

> Whose cheek | is this?
> What ros- | y face
> Has lost | a blush | today?

These brief, largely monosyllabic lines also feature lots of delicate sibilance ("rosy face," "lost a blush"). Overall, the poem feels hushed, gentle, and reverent.

LINES 4-5

> *I found her—"pleiad"—in the woods*
> *And bore her safe away.*

The speaker recounts coming across the "cheek" (the fading flower) "in the woods" and, fearing for its safety, taking it "away" (perhaps to the speaker's home).

The speaker's role here is ambiguous. The flower might have been dead/dying by the time the speaker found it, having fallen or been uprooted by the wind, an animal, etc. In this reading, the speaker takes the flower away in order to protect it, presumably from getting trampled, eaten, decaying further, and so on. Of course, it's also possible that the flower *wasn't* dead when the speaker first saw it, and that the speaker plucked it in order to bring it home for safekeeping—ironically killing it in the process.

However readers interpret the speaker's actions, it's clear that the speaker thinks that the woods are dangerous. This is no place for a delicate little flower, the poem implies. Think about the role that the woods play in fairy tales and folklore: the woods are typically presented as dark, mysterious, and wild.

These lines continue to personify the flower, now describing it with the female pronoun "her" and calling it a "pleiad"—a minor nature deity in Greek mythology. This description heightens the sense of the flower's beauty and vulnerability. It's also possible that the speaker has a specific nymph in mind:

- According to myth, the seven Pleiades were sisters whom Zeus transformed into stars. The youngest sister, Merope, was the only one to marry a mortal. She hid her face in shame for doing so, becoming the faintest star in the cluster.
- Merope is often called the "Lost Pleiad." Her story ties into the idea of the flower being lost, vulnerable, and isolated in the woods.

Note, too, that the name of the aster flower comes from the Greek word for star. Recall that Dickinson attached a flower to this poem when she sent it to her sister-in-law; it's very possible that she attached an aster and was making a pun.

LINES 6-10

> *Robins, in the tradition*
> *Did cover such with leaves,*
> *But which the cheek—*
> *And which the pall*
> *My scrutiny deceives.*

The second quintain (five-line stanza) opens with an allusion to an English folk tale known as "Babes in the Wood." The story involves two children who get lost in the woods and wander aimlessly until they die. Robins then cover the children's bodies with leaves.

The speaker associates the flower with these children. The flower, like them, has been cut down before its time. The allusion emphasizes the fragility of life and the vulnerability of innocence and beauty. Both stories also imply a kind of reverence for such qualities: both speaker and robins try to shield the figures they come across from further destruction, to protect and respect them even in death.

The poem's final three lines complicate the comparison between the flower and the children, however. The speaker isn't sure whether this flower represents "the cheek" of a life cut short or if it's part of the "pall"—that is, the cloth laid across a coffin or tomb (much like the blanket of leaves that the robins assemble to cover the children's bodies).

Notice how parallelism sets out these two options side-by-side, emphasizing their similarity:

> But which the cheek—
> And which the pall

The flower looks like *both* a cheek *and* a pall, managing to evoke life and death at the same time. Perhaps, this image suggests, life and death are not truly separate but rather two sides of the same cosmological coin. Or, maybe, the speaker is suggesting that life is only ever a hair's breadth away from death—that a blushing cheek can fade into a dull pall at the drop of a hat. The speaker ends on a note of doubt, their "scrutiny" firmly "deceive[d]." That is, no matter how closely they look, they can't decide what the flower really is or represents. This ambiguous ending might reflect the mysterious, unknowable nature of death itself.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

The poem contains two allusions. First, in line 4, the speaker calls the flower a "pleiad." This alludes to the Pleiades from

Greek mythology, seven nymphs sisters whom Zeus transformed into stars. The youngest sister, Merope, became estranged from the others for reasons that vary in different tellings but usually involve her marriage to the mortal Sisyphus. Because she dallied with a human man, her star became the faintest in the Pleiades cluster.

Known sometimes as the "Lost Pleiad," Merope fits right into this poem about a lost, vulnerable flower that has either fallen from a branch or been cut off from its roots. The mention of a "pleiad" also brings to mind a lovely young woman, emphasizing how the flower's delicate beauty and vulnerability stand out against the darkness and wildness of the woods. It's also possible that Dickinson attached an aster flower to this poem when she sent it to her sister-in-law: "aster" comes from the ancient Greek for "star," so Dickinson might be making a playful pun.

In the next stanza, the poem alludes to the English folk tale "Babes in the Wood." In this tale, two young children meet an untimely demise in the woods. Robins come along and cover their bodies with leaves from the forest floor, something the speaker describes in lines 6-7:

> Robins, in the tradition
> Did cover such with leaves,

The speaker is implicitly comparing her own actions—carrying the flower "safe away"—to the robins'. Both the speaker and the birds come across innocent figures in the woods and do their best to shield their bodies from further harm.

The allusion hints that the speaker is talking about more than just flowers, and that the poem is really about the fragility of life in general as well as the futile longing to protect innocence and beauty. The flower, like the babes in the wood, was cut down in its prime. Its death seems harsh and inexplicable, but that's one of the poem's points: death comes for everyone, and a "rosy" cheek can quickly take on the pallor of a funereal cloth.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "pleiad"
- **Lines 6-7:** "Robins, in the tradition / Did cover such with leaves,"

METAPHOR

The poem relies on metaphorical language throughout as the speaker compares the flower to a once-blushing "cheek" and a nymph. The speaker also personifies the flower, using female pronouns that make it sound as though the speaker has stumbled across the body of a lost young woman in the woods. All this figurative language makes the poem feel more urgent and tragic; this fading flower reflects the fragility and brevity of *all* life.

Take stanza 1, where the speaker calls the flower a "cheek" and wonders

> What rosy face
> Has lost a blush today?

The sight of the fading pink flower makes the speaker think of a face grown pale, drained of its energy and vitality. The word "blush" further evokes youthful vigor, lust, and beauty that have been lost too soon. In the next line, the reference to the lost "pleiad," a kind of nature goddess, makes the flower's death even more dramatic and tragic. There has been a great loss of beauty and magic here.

The second stanza, however, undermines the personification of the first. Looking closely at the flower, the speaker can't decide if it's a metaphorical "cheek" or a "pall" (a cloth that covers a coffin or tomb). These metaphors, placed side-by-side, question whether the flower stands in for life or for death—or, perhaps, both at once.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Whose cheek is this? / What rosy face / Has lost a blush today? / I found her—"pleiad"'"
- **Lines 8-9:** "But which the cheek— / And which the pall"

PARALLELISM

The parallelism of the poem's opening questions emphasizes the speaker's curiosity, wonder, and, perhaps, despair at finding the flower in the woods. Both questions are phrased in the same unexpected manner: the speaker doesn't ask "who" or "what" the flower *is* but rather who it *belongs* to: "Whose cheek"? "What rosy face"? This repetitive phrasing emphasizes the fact that the flower has been isolated in the woods and cut off from its life force (quite literally, in the sense that it has fallen from a tree or been plucked from the ground).

The poem ends with another example of parallelism. As the speaker observes the faded flower, they can't decide what it reminds them of more: a once-blushing "cheek" or a "pall," a cloth that covers a coffin or tomb. Symbolically, the speaker isn't sure if the flower is a sign of life or death. And the speaker presents this confusion by using repetitive language:

> But which the cheek—
> And which the pall

The clear parallelism of these lines evokes the fineness of the line between life and death. There's little difference in the lines' phrasing, implying that there's little difference between that "cheek" and "pall"; a rosy face can all too quickly lose its "blush."

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Whose cheek"
- **Line 2:** "What rosy face"
- **Lines 8-9:** "But which the cheek— / And which the pall"

SIBILANCE

There's some gentle sibilance in the poem's opening stanza:

> Whose cheek is this?
> What rosy face
> Has lost a blush today?

The soft /s/, /z/, and /sh/ sounds cast a hush over the poem, conveying the quiet and stillness of the woods in which the speaker comes across this flower. The whispery sounds also suggest that the speaker looks at the flower with a sense of awe and even mournful reverence. This is a scene of quiet contemplation; it sounds as though there's no one else around.

That said, readers might also sense something chilling about all that sibilance, which makes it seem, perhaps, like a cold wind blows through the poem. These whispered sounds might even evoke the presence of death. The sibilance in the poem's final moments is likewise rather threatening, or at least disconcerting: the /s/ sounds of "scrutiny deceives" are almost like the hiss of a snake.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Whose," "is this"
- **Line 2:** "rosy face"
- **Line 3:** "lost," "blush"
- **Line 10:** "scrutiny deceives"

VOCABULARY

Blush (Line 3) - A rosy, healthy glow.

Pleiad (Line 4) - In Greek mythology, the Pleiades were seven sister-nymphs linked with Artemis, the goddess of the hunt. Zeus later turned them into stars. The speaker is likely talking about one of the sisters in particular: Merope, who became estranged from the rest after falling in love with a mortal man and who is sometimes called the "Lost Pleiad."

Bore (Line 5) - Carried.

Pall (Line 9) - A cloth that covers a coffin or tomb.

Scrutiny (Line 10) - Close examination.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Whose cheek is this?" contains two quintains, or five-line stanzas. Its lines are short, for the most part. Though their lengths vary, they generally follow an iambic (da-DUM) rhythm. The poem sounds musical but never overly predictable or rigidly controlled. The poem focuses on a small, delicate natural object (a flower) and has a slight, delicate form to match.

METER

"Whose cheek is this?" uses iambic dimeter and trimeter, for the most part. An iambic foot consists of two syllables that follow an unstressed-stressed pattern (da-DUM). Dimeter lines feature two such feet, while trimeter lines have three. The poem opens with two lines of dimeter followed by one of trimeter:

> Whose cheek | is this?
> What ros- | y face
> Has lost | a blush | today?

The short lines and gentle beat make the poem sound delicately musical but not strict or rigid. There are two variations on the meter as well. Line 4 has four iambs, making it a line of iambic *tetrameter*:

> I found | her—"ple- | iad"—in | the woods

The extra foot stretches the line out, perhaps evoking the image of a nymph sprawled in the woods. Line 5 then falls back into iambic trimeter. The poem's rhythm is thus steady even as its lines vary somewhat in length.

Line 6 is the only one that doesn't fit with this pattern at all. It opens with a trochee (stressed-unstressed), calling readers' attention to those "Robins." The rest of the line is then metrically ambiguous, perhaps reflecting the birds' twitchy movements.

RHYME SCHEME

"Whose cheek is this?" features just two rhyming pairs. In the first stanza, lines 3 and 5 rhyme, creating the rhyme scheme of ABCDC. In the second stanza, lines 7 and 10 rhyme, creating a pattern of ABCDB. There's also some assonance between lines 7, 8, and 10 (leaves/cheek/deceives); one might argue that line 8 forms a slant rhyme with lines 7 and 10, but the effect is subtle.

The poem's loose rhymes work like its relatively loose meter, creating music without ever making the poem feel rigid or stiff. Ending stanzas with a rhyme also lends each a sense of sonic completion.

SPEAKER

It's fair to assume that the speaker of "Whose cheek is this?" is Emily Dickinson herself, given that she attached a flower to the poem and sent it to her sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson. The speaker's musings certainly reflect Dickinson's own fascination with the natural world and her frequent preoccupation with death.

That said, all readers learn from the poem itself is that the speaker is someone who finds a flower in the woods and takes it home for safekeeping. This is someone who respects and admires beauty, and who also recognizes its fragility.

SETTING

"Whose cheek is this?" seems to take place indoors, or at least somewhere "safe" from the "woods" where the speaker initially found the flower that inspires the poem.

Though the flower is *no longer* "in the woods," most of the poem focuses on this setting. The woods often connote danger and confusion; think of all the threatening forests in fairy tales. The speaker's desire to take the flower "safe away" implies that threats lurk in the shadows among the trees. The speaker develops this association by alluding to the "Babes in the Woods" folk tale, in which two children meet an untimely end in the woods.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was an important part of the American Romantic movement, alongside writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. She was also a one-of-a-kind writer with a distinct sensibility that set her apart from her contemporaries. Some people even see her as the grandmother of modernism, the 20th-century literary movement of experimental, introspective writers like T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf.

No one else sounds quite like Dickinson. Her poems use simple, folky forms (ballad stanzas, for instance) in innovative ways, experimenting with innovative slant rhymes, idiosyncratic punctuation, and unconventional capitalization. In only a few short stanzas, these poems explored profound philosophical questions, passionate loves, and the mysteries of nature.

Dickinson wrote "Whose cheek is this?" in the 1850s, making it one of her earliest poems. Like most of her writing, it wasn't published during her lifetime. She sent it to her sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson, along with a small fragment of a flower and a drawing of a robin.

In meditating upon the transition between life and death, "Whose cheek is this?" calls to mind some of Dickinson's most famous poems, such as "Because I could not stop for Death—" and " I heard a Fly buzz—when I died." The poem also alludes to the English folk tale "Babes in the Wood," which evidently made a lasting impression on Dickinson: it crops up in her letters throughout her life.

While Dickinson sent some poems—like this one—to friends and family, she concealed most of her work. Only after she died did her sister Lavinia discover a trunk of nearly 1,800 poems squirreled away in her bedroom. Published at last, Dickinson's poetry became internationally famous and beloved. Dickinson's work and her life story still influence all kinds of artists.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson lived in Amherst, Massachusetts all her life. She grew up in a strict Protestant environment that placed great emphasis on religious rules and social codes. Dickinson was also swept up for a time by the religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening, and her religious upbringing shows itself in the hymn-like rhythms of her poetry. Many of her poems also express wonder about the afterlife, often speculating—sometimes exuberantly—on what it's like to meet God and Jesus, if that is in fact what happens when people die (something Dickinson wasn't sure about).

Dickinson ultimately rejected organized religion and often questions the existence of God in her work—an activity that would have been scandalously at odds with her community. By all accounts, Dickinson's life was extremely unusual for the 1800s. Most women were expected to marry and have children, but Dickinson never did. In fact, towards the end of her life, she barely spoke to anyone but a small circle of close friends and family and spent much of her later years shut up in her room.

There is some debate about the precise nature of Emily's relationship with Susan Gilbert, to whom the poem was sent. Sue, like Emily, had a brilliant intellect and a wide-ranging curiosity, and the pair felt like kindred spirits in a world that didn't make much room for thinking women. Their feelings may have gone beyond friendship but, either way, Emily struggled with the change in the relationship that came with Sue's marriage to Austin, Emily's brother. Sue and Emily lived next door to each other and remained close until Emily's death. But that closeness was hard-won, marked by long silences and more often played out in the letters they still sent each other (even as neighbors) than in person.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Original Poem — Check out "Whose is this?" in

Dickinson's own hand. (http://www.emilydickinson.org/dickinson-cartoonist/whose-cheek-is-this)

- The Dickinson Museum — Find a trove of information about Dickinson's life and work at the Dickinson Museum. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org)
- Dickinson's Legacy — Learn how Dickinson's secret poetry was discovered and preserved. (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/12/05/emily-dickinsons-singular-scrap-poetry)
- Dickinson and Susan Gilbert — Learn more about the intense relationship between Dickinson and Susan Gilbert, the woman for whom this poem was written. (https://www.themarginalian.org/2018/12/10/emily-dickinson-love-letters-susan-gilbert/)
- Babes in the Wood — Check out an illustrated version of the old folk tale the poem alludes to in lines 6 and 7. (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/19361/19361-h/19361-h.htm)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- A Bird, came down the Walk
- After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
- A Light exists in Spring
- A Murmur in the Trees—to note—
- A narrow Fellow in the Grass
- An awful Tempest mashed the air—
- As imperceptibly as grief
- A still—Volcano—Life—
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- Before I got my eye put out
- Fame is a fickle food
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I cannot live with You –
- I cautious, scanned my little life
- I could bring You Jewels—had I a mind to—
- I died for Beauty—but was scarce
- I dwell in Possibility –
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- If I can stop one heart from breaking
- I had been hungry, all the Years
- I have a Bird in spring
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I like a look of Agony
- I like to see it lap the Miles
- I measure every Grief I meet
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- I started Early — Took my Dog —
- I taste a liquor never brewed
- It was not Death, for I stood up
- I—Years—had been—from Home—
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- Nature is what we see
- One need not be a Chamber — to be Haunted
- Publication — is the Auction
- Safe in their Alabaster Chambers
- Success is counted sweetest
- Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
- The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
- The Bustle in a House
- The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants
- There came a Wind like a Bugle
- There is no Frigate like a Book
- There's a certain Slant of light
- There's been a Death, in the Opposite House
- The saddest noise, the sweetest noise
- The Sky is low — the Clouds are mean
- The Soul has bandaged moments
- The Soul selects her own Society
- The Wind – tapped like a tired Man –
- They shut me up in Prose –
- This is my letter to the world
- We grow accustomed to the Dark
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

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