# Wild nights - Wild nights!

## POEM TEXT

Wild nights - Wild nights!
Were I with thee
Wild nights should be
Our luxury!

Futile - the winds -
To a Heart in port -
Done with the Compass -
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden -
Ah - the Sea!
Might I but moor - tonight -
In thee!

## SUMMARY

The speaker begins by exclaiming about wild nights—an image that might equally suggest literal stormy nights and nights of passion. If only she were with an unknown addressee, she says, nights like this would bring them immense (and shared) pleasure.

Wild winds, the speaker goes on, can have no effect on a heart that is safely lodged in port—an image which suggests that the speaker imagines herself as a sailor or a boat, and her beloved as a safe harbor. When the speaker's heart is in such a port, it has no more need of the tools of navigation: it's found the place it can rest.

The speaker then turns to a very different image of her imagined ocean: no longer a dangerous, tempestuous place, but Paradise itself. She exclaims over this imagined sea, with an "Ah!" that could express pleasure, pain, or both. The poem returns at its end to the image of the beloved as a harbor, which the speaker wishes she could enter this very night.

## THEMES

### SEXUAL PASSION

Dickinson's compact poem is a small explosion of desire. The speaker imagines herself as both a sailor and a boat on a stormy sea, wishing desperately to be resting in the "port" of her love (an image with a strong sexual innuendo built into it). The poem ultimately presents passionate love as something paradoxical: it's both wild and comforting, dangerous and secure.

The speaker begins by exclaiming "Wild nights - Wild nights!" as if looking out into a storm. She then imagines how her experience of such nights would be transformed into "luxury" if her beloved were with her. Aside from the literal storm the speaker is looking out into and wishing she could share with her beloved, those "wild nights" and their "luxury" (a word that had sexual connotations in Dickinson's time) suggest a passionate sexuality. In other words, the speaker is implying that, if only her beloved were around, they'd have a great time.

The speaker goes on to build a contrasting image of the satisfied, passionate heart as a boat in port, beyond the reach of storms. The speaker's image of herself as a boat resting in a harbor creates a sense of simultaneous calm and wildness. While "the winds" would still be blowing if she were safely harbored with her love, those winds would be "futile," unable to affect her in the way they do now. The security of satisfied love would create a place of safety and rest *within* her wild desire.

The image of the speaker as a boat at sea suggests her own smallness and helplessness in proportion to the ocean of her desire, but also her determination: the "compass" and "chart" give a sense of her drive to seek a known place, and then to be done with that searching. In representing her beloved as the port, she creates a feeling that the beloved is her home, a place of undisturbed security. Being with her love, again, offers both a sense of wildness and tranquility.

In the final stanza, the speaker's use of religious imagery completes her picture of passion as a thing that is simultaneously stormy and calm. From the wild nights of the previous stanzas, the speaker transitions into a quite different image: "rowing in Eden." Eden, the earthly paradise from the Bible, is an image of perfection—and of shameless sexuality. (Readers may remember that before Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and are driven from Eden, they are naked and unashamed.) To be "rowing in Eden," then, is to be on a calmer and more blissful sea than the one the speaker has previously shown.

The exclamation "Ah! - the sea!", in both its energy and its ambiguity, then brings together all the visions of passion readers have seen so far. That "Ah!" could be a cry of relief, of fear, of pleasure, or of pain—and all of these possibilities are present at once. Finally, the poem closes on a passionate punch: if you're thinking that the "in" of "in thee" is a pretty vivid sexual image, you are not wrong. The speaker is utterly caught up in her imagining of the sexual consummation she wishes for with

her beloved.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-12

## LONGING AND ABSENCE

"Wild nights - Wild nights!" can be read, on the one hand, as a poem about the simultaneous wildness and comfort of sexual intimacy. But the speaker's beloved never actually appears in the poem; the whole thing is simply the speaker imagining how great things would be if the beloved were there. This doesn't make the poem any less passionate or exciting, however, and in this way, the poem suggests that there is a strange pleasure in the *longing* itself.

In the first stanza, the poem creates a tension between what *is* and what the speaker wishes were so. The subjunctive "were I with thee" sets up the whole dilemma of the poem. All of the poem's energy surrounds the *absence* of the beloved. The speaker's imagining of the fulfillment of the night that could be, if the beloved were only there, evokes by contrast the intense longing that she is actually experiencing.

The image of the boat securely resting in port further suggests an opposite reality: the speaker's heart is being tossed around on the seas of passion even as she describes consolation. While the speaker's image of the boat in port evokes feelings of comfort and security, it also emphasizes the speaker's different reality: she is *not* in this comfortable port she imagines, and *not* with her lover, but still out on the sea being knocked around by the winds of desire.

This doesn't seem to distress the speaker all that much, however. On the contrary, the final stanza suggests the deliciousness of this longing in its own right. From the images of storms and seeking in the second stanza, the speaker abruptly transitions into the very different image of "rowing in Eden." The seas of Eden—flawless, shameless, and calm—suggest a deep pleasure in the speaker's at-sea-ness. Even if it isn't everything she wishes for, there's a delight in her desire for her beloved.

The speaker's exclamation, "Ah! - the Sea!", further emphasizes the complexity of her response to her own predicament. That "Ah!", following both the images of the storm and of Eden, could equally be a cry of pleasure or of pain, once again suggesting the intensity of the speaker's desire itself. The poem then ends on a return to the subjunctive: "Might I but moor - tonight - / In thee!" In her passion, the speaker's feeling of "if only" has become itself both a storm and a resting-place.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-12

## RELIGIOUS FERVOR

The nature of the love expressed in this poem is complex and, in some ways, unresolved: the "thee" the speaker addresses could as easily be God as a human lover. And if the reader does interpret the speaker's beloved to be God, then the poem implies the simultaneous ecstasy and comfort of faith.

In this reading, the speaker's longing for God is passionate and physical. God appears here as a sheltering home for the speaker, but the comfort of God's embrace is also—like sexual passion—wild and ecstatic.

The clear distinction between the speaker as a boat and God as a port suggests the difference in the kinds of love these two beings experience and provide: the speaker searches, while God receives and shelters. The image of God as a "port" further works to create a sense of homecoming. The port is the safe, comfortable place where the speaker can be permanently secure. However, the winds continue to whip outside in this image: the "port" of God does not just mean eternal calm, but eternal passion.

The speaker's desire to discard the "compass" and "chart" of the second stanza suggests the longing to be done with seeking, to rest—and also to move past intellectual human ways of navigating the world. In this image, the security of God could be imagined as something that goes deeper than any kind of human understanding.

In the final stanza, "Rowing in Eden" has obvious religious connotations, providing a vision of reunion with the joys of paradise: in the Bible, Eden is humanity's original home, a place of shameless bliss. As in the earthier reading of the poem, there's a sense here that the delights of longing are all part of the experience of love: desire, for God as much as for a lover, is itself a pleasure.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-12

# LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

## LINE 1

*Wild nights - Wild nights!*

"Wild nights - Wild nights!" begins with a bang. Many of the poem's feelings and themes are already present in this single powerful line.

The quick repetition of "Wild nights - Wild nights!" (a technique known as epizeuxis), with that emphatic exclamation point at the end, gives readers a sense of intensity right from the start. These are not the kind of wild nights that one can quietly wait

out with a nice cup of tea. The speaker's insistence on this phrase puts readers right in the middle of the storm with her: the reader may be spurred to imagine her looking out into the wind and the rain, marveling at nature's power.

Consider the speaker's use of the word "wild" to describe these nights. Wildness has connotations not only of intensity, but of beastly ferocity: the untamed energy of the natural world. Already, then, readers get a hint that there may be something animal and bodily in this storm.

One could read the metrical feet in this first line as either iambs or spondees: that is, either placing stresses on the even-numbered syllables, like so:

Wild nights - Wild nights!

Or stressing every word equally, like so:

Wild nights - Wild nights!

Either way, there is a drumbeat rhythm to the words, like a pounding heart, that again reflects the intensity of the speaker's feelings. This powerful rhythm is supported and tied together with strong assonance on the long, flat /i/ sound:

Wild nights - Wild nights!

No other vowel sound appears in this first line. This assonance not only contributes to the feeling of power already discussed, but might make readers think of the "I" who is, as will soon be clear, all alone in this wild night.

## LINE 2

*Were I with thee*

The second line introduces a major character into the poem: the nameless "thee" whom the speaker wishes to be with. The poem uses apostrophe to make this "thee" an immediate presence.

The use of the word "thee" here is telling. Though "thee" might just sound old-fashioned to a modern reader, at its roots it's related to the French and Italian "tu": the informal "you," the "you" that one uses to address a good friend, a family member—or a lover. It may also be familiar to the reader from its Biblical use as a form of address to God. Long story short, whoever this "thee" is, they're someone to whom the speaker feels intensely close.

Just as telling as the "thee" is the "were." That subjunctive "were" lets readers in on something that will be fundamental to the way this poem works: the speaker's beloved isn't there.

This line is also strongly alliterative and consonant:

Were I with thee

Its /w/ sounds link this line up with the lines before and after it (with their repetition of "Wild"), and its /th/ sounds slide into each other in an image of the speaker's longing: she wishes she might be united with her beloved as those /th/ sounds unite "with" and "thee."

The meter here is textbook iambic dimeter, two iambs per line:

Were I with thee

This heartbeat rhythm makes "I" and "thee," the only two people in this poem's world, stand out.

## LINES 3-4

*Wild nights should be*
*Our luxury!*

The third and fourth lines bind together all the wealth of emotion readers have gotten from the two deceptively simple lines before.

Those "wild nights" return again, asking the reader to reconsider them. Where before the reader may have imagined these nights as simply stormy, now readers see that those storms are going on in all sorts of places besides the weather. If the speaker is undergoing a wild night, it's in her *heart* as well as outside. That is, she's also imagining yet another kind of wild night: if she were with her lover, nights like this would be their "luxury."

The word "luxury" deserves a closer look. If readers dig down to the roots of the word, they'll find that, before it developed its modern sense of plain old pleasure and excess, it had a specifically sexual meaning. Dickinson certainly knew that, but even if readers didn't, they might be able to get a sense from the sound of the word itself, with its long /l/ and that drawn-out /x/.

So: the speaker is having a wild night of passionate desire, within a wild night of stormy weather, because she's longing for a wild night of ecstasy with her absent lover. A lot is happening in very few words here!

Take a look at the way the whole first stanza fits together formally:

Wild nights - Wild nights!
Were I with thee
Wild nights should be
Our luxury!

A few things may stand out to the reader. Aside from the varied (but always strong) meter, there's an unusual rhyme scheme here, with three lines in a row rhyming on long /ee/ sounds. This rhyme ties together "thee," "be," and "luxury"—words connected to solidity and pleasure. But though the speaker feels a steady desire for these things, the "were" and the

"should" stand between them. The speaker is able to vividly imagine the "luxury" she craves, but she's frustrated in her desire for it.

## LINES 5-6

*Futile - the winds -*
*To a Heart in port -*

After the first stanza's wildness, the reader may be brought up short by the first word of the next stanza. The word "futile," meaning pointless or ineffectual, stands in contrast to the power seen in the previous stanza, and is further set apart by the caesura that divides this line into two. For a split second, the reader might wonder what, exactly, is futile here, and possibly connect the word to the speaker's frustration.

It's not the *speaker* who's frustrated in this line, however, but rather the storm winds. Powerful though they might be, they can do no harm to "a Heart in port." Line 6 introduces one of the poem's major extended metaphors: with the image of the "port," the scene moves to the ocean.

The speaker here imagines how different it would be like to undergo the storms of passion if she were no longer "at sea." In this image, her "Heart" is a boat or a sailor, and her beloved is the sheltering harbor. The reader may note, though, that the winds of passion wouldn't stop blowing if the speaker were "in port"—they just wouldn't be able to disturb the speaker. The first stanza's wildness thus doesn't disappear here. Instead, it's transformed. The passion that the speaker feels would become manageable—even a "luxury"—in the company of her beloved.

Notice what the speaker is doing with consonance in line 6: "a Heart in port" is a heart that has found a resting place that matches it. The meter of these lines also becomes more varied:

Futile - the winds -
To a Heart in port -

With a trochee (DUM da) in line 5 and an anapest (da da dUM) and an iamb (da DUM) in line 6, the speaker creates a choppier, hastier rhythm—not unlike the waves of a stormy sea.

## LINES 7-8

*Done with the Compass -*
*Done with the Chart!*

The speaker extends her nautical metaphor here with another moment of forceful epizeuxis. Her images of navigational devices, the "compass" and the "chart," suggest her feeling that she's desperately searching for her absent love—and very ready to be finished searching.

Look at the strong rhythm of lines 7 and 8:

Done with the Compass -
Done with the Chart!

Continuing that forceful, oceanic rhythm from the first two lines of the stanza, these lines land heavily on the word "Done" (which is also emphasized through the anaphora of "Done with the"). It's as if the speaker is imagining throwing down her compass and her map upon finally reaching safe harbor. The repetition here also means these lines are strongly alliterative; there's also a moment of assonance in "Done with the Compass." These devices enhance the lines' sense of force even further.

But, as in the first stanza, these lines don't let readers forget that the speaker isn't actually in this place she imagines. Besides the fact that the speaker is here lost in her own imagination, there's a hint of her difficulty in the rhyme scheme. Look back at the whole stanza and consider the rhyme words:

Futile - the winds -
To a Heart in port -
Done with the Compass -
Done with the Chart!

You'll notice that this is not a perfect rhyme, but a slant rhyme: the "port" and the "Chart" are subtly mismatched. There's also a moment of telling internal rhyme here: the "Heart" rhymes with the "Chart." Perhaps the heart itself has something in common with a map, telling the speaker where she needs to go.

Notice how the speaker's imagining of what it might be like to rest in the harbor of her love raises the opposite idea in the reader's mind. It's just because the winds *would* be "futile" if she were with her lover that the reader feels they are definitely *not* futile now.

## LINES 9-10

*Rowing in Eden -*
*Ah - the Sea!*

Abruptly, the speaker moves from the wild and stormy sea to a very different place. In the previous stanza, the speaker has imagined herself secure from the dangers of passionate winds in the port of her love—and in so doing has given the reader an opposite picture of the stormy sailing she's undergoing now.

But now the speaker finds herself in Eden. And Eden isn't plain old paradise, but something more complex. The reader is probably familiar with the Biblical Garden of Eden: humanity's first home, a place of innocent pleasure. Adam and Eve, the first humans, get kicked out after they eat the forbidden fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (not just the Tree of Knowledge, as it's often misremembered—that would be a pretty different story). But even before they're expelled, the first thing that happens after they eat the fruit is that they realize they're naked, and are ashamed.

To return to Eden, then, is not just to go to a place of bliss, but to a place of *shameless* bliss, without any sense of right or

wrong to get in the way. (See the "Symbols" section for more on this idea.) The ocean of passion that the speaker has imagined as so dangerous and wild has another side: the speaker's unabashed delight in her own desire.

This makes the exclamation in line 10 all the more potent. That "Ah - the Sea!" carries in it a wealth of possible meaning. Coming after these contrasting images of storm and pleasure, "Ah" could be a sigh of delight or of pain—or indeed of both.

The assonance and softness in these lines (as well as the melodiousness of the vowel sounds more generally) helps to contribute to this sense of strange bliss:

> Rowing in Eden -
> Ah - the Sea!

Here, the poem returns to those strong /ee/ sounds of the first stanza, but also gives readers a smooth sequence of varied vowels: /o/, /ee/, /ah/, /ee/. Around them are breathy /h/ and /s/ sounds. After the harder consonant sounds of the previous stanza, this is a moment of sudden relief.

There's something odd and striking about the idea of "rowing" in Eden, as well: when one thinks of Eden, one thinks not of an ocean but a garden. The speaker's language here startles us through its strangeness, its gentleness, and its contrast with what's come before. She's moved into a new way of understanding her predicament.

### LINES 11-12

> *Might I but moor - tonight -*
> *In thee!*

The last two lines of the poem deliver a final punch of longing and passion. Consider the sounds of these lines first. They're tightly woven with formal devices, using alliteration, assonance, consonance, and internal rhyme:

> Might I but moor - tonight -
> In thee!

Soft, murmuring /m/ sounds alternate with sharp /t/ sounds, again evoking that combination of pleasure and pain. There are many links back to the first stanza here: a return to the lonesome long /i/ assonance of the first stanza, to the wistful use of the subjunctive in the "might," and to the strong /ee/ rhymes.

But there are also some pretty distinct differences between these lines and everything that's come before them, and one of those differences is in the meter:

> Might I but moor - tonight -
> In thee!

Here, the usual pattern of two beats per line breaks, so that there are three stresses in line 11 (four, in fact, if readers can the first foot as "Might I") and only one in line 12. That means that those two last words, "in thee," are left out on their own. It also gives special prominence to an unexpected word: not *with* thee or *near* thee, but *in* thee. There's a feeling of intense intimacy in this word—both sexual and spiritual.

In her return to the sounds of the first stanza and her journey through a very different landscape than the one the poem has previously created, the speaker captures the constant, inescapable intensity of her passion: a thing of both pleasure and pain.

## SYMBOLS

### STORMS

From the speaker's very first exclamation, the reader feels the intensity of the stormy weather she's going through—both externally and internally. Storms, in this poem, represent both the pleasures and dangers of desire. The speaker's description of the "wild nights" as having the potential for "luxury" suggests that, while her passion is violent and potentially perilous as a storm, there's also something delicious about it.

The speaker goes on to describe the storm-winds of passion as unable to have any effect on the heart that's found security with its beloved. But it's important to note that those winds don't go away: finding safe harbor doesn't *diminish* a tempestuous passion, but keeps the lover secure *in the midst* of those howling winds.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Wild nights - Wild nights!"
- **Lines 3-4:** "Wild nights should be / Our luxury!"
- **Lines 5-6:** "Futile - the winds - / To a Heart in port -"

### SEAFARING

Images of boats, sailors, harbors, and navigation help the speaker to imagine her relation to her beloved. The speaker presents her own heart—and by extension herself—as a sailor or a boat. The beloved, meanwhile, is the harbor. These images set the speaker up as wanderer and seeker and the beloved as shelter and destination, symbolism reinforced with the navigational images of "compass" and "chart." The symbols of boat and port also make room for an intensely sexual image of the speaker literally entering the beloved.

Notably, there's no suggestion that even if the speaker and her beloved were together, they'd ever head for dry land: even if

the speaker is securely docked in her beloved, the passionate ocean is always going to be a part of the picture.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 6-8:** "To a Heart in port - / Done with the Compass - / Done with the Chart!"
- **Lines 9-12:** "Rowing in Eden - / Ah - the Sea! / Might I but moor - tonight - / In thee!"

## THE OCEAN

If the lovers are a boat and a port, their passion is not just a storm, but a stormy ocean. In its depth, its violence, its vastness, and its changeability, the ocean has always been a symbol for love. This poem's ocean symbolism in particular plays on the sea's different moods.

The sea appears here both as a storm-lashed wilderness from which the speaker hopes to retire, and as a place of heavenly delight. In the second stanza, the ocean is beset by winds, and the speaker a sailor; in the third stanza, the ocean is Eden, and the speaker is "rowing" there—a gentler sort of activity than trying to navigate a sailing ship home in a storm. The double nature of passion is thus represented in the ocean's different possibilities: it's equally a place of dangers and delights.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 5-6:** "Futile - the winds - / To a Heart in port -"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Rowing in Eden - / Ah - the Sea!"

## EDEN

Eden is a powerful symbol not only for idyllic pleasure, but for a more complicated emotional state: shamelessness.

In the Biblical book of Genesis, Eden is humanity's original home: a perfect garden where Adam and Eve live in bliss. They're cast out of the garden when they eat the forbidden fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. What happens when they eat this fruit? They realize that they're naked, and they become ashamed.

In raising the image of Eden here, the speaker brings up not only bliss and sexual freedom, but *shameless* sexual freedom. Together, this symbol suggests, she and her lover experience a full and strangely innocent passion.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Line 9:** "Eden"

# POETIC DEVICES

## ALLITERATION

There are a few moments of alliteration in the poem, some of which are due to the poem's use of repetition. Only a few initial sounds are repeated and repeated: /w/, /n/, /d/, and /m/.

The most persistent sound in the poem is the /w/ that appears in "wild," "were," and "with" in the first stanza, and "winds" and "with" in the second. This persistent /w/ might mimic the whooshing of storm winds. It might also link wildness, windiness, and with-ness (i.e., togetherness) in the reader's mind—three ideas that share an intimate and complex connection in the poem's meaning, too.

Later, the /d/ sounds in the repeated "Done" of lines 7 and 8 land with a thump, as if those devices are being thrown down. In line 11, the soft /m/ sounds of "Might" and "moor" fit in with the final stanza's mood of blissful softness: "Rowing in Eden" might well make a person go "mmmmm. (Take a look at the Devices entry on "consonance" for further discussion of how the poem's alliteration weaves a pattern of harder and softer sounds.)

Alliteration is also important to this poem in the places where it stops. Take a look at those few lines where *no* alliteration appears (4, 6, 9, 10, and 11). The reader may notice that these lines have one thing in common: they're all moments when the speaker is imagining scenes of greater peace, delight, and calm than what she's presently experiencing. The break in the density of alliteration also reflects an all-too-brief break in the speaker's turmoil.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Wild," "nights," "Wild," "nights"
- **Line 2:** "Were," "with"
- **Line 3:** "Wild," "nights"
- **Line 5:** "winds"
- **Line 7:** "Done," "with"
- **Line 8:** "Done," "with"
- **Line 11:** "Might," "moor"

## APOSTROPHE

Apostrophe is fundamental to the shape of this poem. In a strange way, the direct address to a lover who isn't there brings the lover into the room, or wherever the speaker is daydreaming.

The use of apostrophe here makes the speaker's desire immediate, and perhaps scratches her itch for her lover's company (though, of course, scratching an itch can make it worse). While the beloved isn't there, the speaker can use apostrophe both to reach out to the beloved and to bring the two of them together in one shared "our." If they can't be

together in person, they can be together in the speaker's mind and language.

Consider, as well, the use of "thee" in the speaker's apostrophe. While to a modern reader this might just look archaic or flowery—you know, "poet language"—it might be helpful to remember that "thee" in English was once the equivalent of the informal "tu" you find in French and Italian: the word you'd use to address someone you knew very well. It's for this same reason that one of the most influential English translations of the Bible, the King James version, addresses God as "thee." A "thee" is not just any old "you," but a specially intimate beloved.

**Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "thee"
- **Line 4:** "Our"
- **Line 12:** "thee"

## ASSONANCE

The smoothing effects of the poem's assonance help to create a feeling of total immersion in a powerful emotional experience. This is visible in the very first line of the poem, where the same long, flat /i/ vowel sound appears in every word. The sound is persistent as the wind and weather, around and inside the speaker.

Those long /i/ sounds return at the end of the poem, connecting the "wild nights" to "might," "tonight," and—notably—"I." That the vowel sound of the first-person singular pronoun connects all these words suggests that the stormy "nights" are inside of the "I" as much as the "I" is inside the stormy nights.

Long /ee/ sounds also make regular appearances here, not only in the form of assonance but as one of the poem's most prominent rhyme sounds. (Take a look at the "Rhyme Scheme" section for further discussion of rhyme in the poem.) Connecting "thee," "be," "luxury," "Eden," and "Sea," the /ee/ assonance traces links between the places where the speaker takes most pleasure. Long /ee/ sounds often feel pleasing and sweet to the ear of the English speaker; it makes sense that they should appear so prominently when the speaker is thinking of shared bliss with her beloved.

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Wild nights," "Wild nights"
- **Line 2:** "I," "thee"
- **Line 3:** "Wild nights," "be"
- **Line 4:** "luxury"
- **Line 7:** "Done," "Compass"
- **Line 8:** "Done"
- **Line 9:** "Eden"
- **Line 10:** "Sea"
- **Line 11:** "Might I," "tonight"
- **Line 12:** "thee"

## CAESURA

Emily Dickinson was a master of caesura, and used it lavishly in many of her poems; it's one of the most distinctive features of her work. Here as elsewhere, she will often mark a mid-line break with a dash, giving her work a sense of tension or held breath.

In this particular poem, the caesurae help to enhance the poem's passionate mood. Notice how the breaks often fall alongside some of the many exclamation points. In these lines, the speaker unites intensity with a suspense—a rhythm that might mirror the speaker's frustration. These regular, rhythmical breaks make the lines seem to pant with desire.

Caesura has other useful effects, too. Take a closer look at the caesura in line 5:

> Futile - the winds -

This caesura creates that panting rhythm mentioned above, but it also does something interesting with the poem's meaning. That initial "Futile," separated out by the caesura that follows it, could be meant to describe any number of things—including, just for instance, the speaker's desire. The caesura allows the meaning of "Futile" to flow outward into the poem before "the winds" enter to clarify things, helping to create the sense that the speaker is not just rapturous or transported, but thwarted, too.

**Where Caesura appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "-"
- **Line 5:** "-"
- **Line 10:** "-"
- **Line 11:** "-"

## CONSONANCE

Consonance, like assonance and alliteration, is tightly woven into the fabric of this short poem. It helps not only to create a sensually satisfying pattern of sound, but to suggest the union that the speaker longs for—and the mixture of frustration and delight that she feels. Consonance here mirrors the paradoxical nature of desire in this poem: painful and urgent and soft and delectable all at once.

Let's take a closer look at the specific consonant sounds that the speaker chooses. Strong /w/, /t/, /d/, /m/, and /n/ sounds predominate. Often, the softer and more drawn-out /w/, /n/, and /m/ sounds are interwoven with those harder sounds. Consider the first stanza:

> Wild nights - wild nights!

Were I with thee
Wild nights should be
Our luxury!

The words "Wild nights" open the poem's pattern of alternating soft and hard sounds—a pattern that will continue all through the poem. This rhythm of softness and hardness helps to create the feeling that the speaker's experience is both delectable and painful.

Notice especially the first two lines of the last stanza:

Rowing in Eden -
Ah - the Sea!

The /w/ and /d/ pick up on sounds from the previous stanza. Here, the gentle /w/ again sits next to a harder /d/, but this /d/ is muted: not an initial thump, like "Done," but muffled in the vowel sounds of "Eden." Next to the altogether soft and whispering "Ah - the Sea!", this use of consonance helps to introduce the speaker's contrasting image of the pleasures of the ocean of passion.

**Where Consonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Wild," "nights," "Wild," "nights"
- **Line 2:** "Were," "with"
- **Line 3:** "Wild," "nights"
- **Line 5:** "Futile," "winds"
- **Line 6:** "To," "Heart," "port"
- **Line 7:** "Done," "with," "Compass"
- **Line 8:** "Done," "with"
- **Line 9:** "Rowing," "Eden"
- **Line 11:** "Might," "moor"

## ENJAMBMENT

Like caesura, enjambment helps to create the poem's feeling of panting, struggling desire. Take a look at the enjambment of the first stanza:

Were I with thee
Wild nights should be
Our luxury!

On the one hand, enjambment speeds up these lines, which topple into each other and down the page. The clear enjambment creates a sense of smoothness from lines 2 to 4, which continue on without pause. This, in turn, might reflect the way the speaker wishes to be united with her beloved, for there to be no barriers between them. At the same time, however, the fact that the speaker's desire is split across lines creates a sensation of a broken continuity that mirrors the speaker's frustration at her separation from her beloved. Her sentences, like she and her lover, are *divided*.

This first stanza also contrasts with the rest of the poem, where every line ends either with a dash or an exclamation mark. Yet these lines also sometimes end right in the middle of phrases—and as such still feel enjambed, rather than end-stopped. There's thus a tension here between the forward push of enjambment and the pause created by punctuation. This can be seen with lines 5-6:

Futile - the winds -
To a Heart in port -

And lines 11-12:

Might I but moor - tonight -
In thee!

This choppy movement connects with many of the poem's images: waves on the sea, gusts of wind, perhaps even a pounding heartbeat. Both the urgency and the difficulty of the speaker's feelings are communicated in the rhythmic breaking-apart of her lines.

**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 2-3:** "thee / Wild"
- **Lines 3-4:** "be / Our"
- **Lines 5-6:** "winds - / To"
- **Lines 11-12:** "tonight - / In"

## REPETITION

Repetition is used throughout the poem. This first example is the epizeuxis of "Wild nights" line 1. This is an emphatic form of repetition, and here it helps to create the poem's sense of immersion in an overpowering atmosphere.

The initial repetition sets the scene and lets readers feel their way into the speaker's state of mind. The repetition of "Wild nights - Wild nights!" might give you the feeling of looking out into a storm, shaking your head in amazement at its power; there's a sense of intensity and marvel that one "Wild nights!" alone just couldn't convey. Doubling here suggests overwhelm or massiveness.

The repetition of "wild nights" also helps the reader to get a sense that more than one kind of "wild night" might be under discussion here. By repeating the words, the speaker insists that readers pay close attention to them. This effect becomes even more pronounced when the speaker returns to the words a third time in line 3: only the words "Were I with thee" stand between the initial exclamation and this one. This might help the reader to transform their understanding of the "wild nights": if at first readers were just seeing a storm, now readers are given the opportunity to consider how the "thee" might be involved in the wildness.

The doubling of "wild nights" could also hint at a connection between the speaker and her beloved: perhaps two "wild nights" are being experienced—one here, one wherever the speaker's lover is.

Later, the anaphora of "Done with the" in lines 7 and 8 adds emphasis to the speaker's passion upon being united with her beloved, in her fantasies at least. Were she to be with her beloved, she would no longer have any need whatsoever for navigational devices like a "Compass" or a "Chart," because she would be securely resting "in port."

**Where Repetition appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Wild nights - Wild nights!"
- **Line 3:** "Wild nights"
- **Line 7:** "Done with the Compass -"
- **Line 8:** "Done with the Chart!"

### EXTENDED METAPHOR

The entirety of this poem could be read as an extended metaphor—or a tapestry of extended metaphors. There's not a noun here that isn't laden with multiple meanings. (The "Symbols" section covers a lot of what there is to say here in more depth, so be sure to follow up in that section if you're interested in the poem's many metaphors.)

The overarching metaphor here is of a boat at sea in a storm, searching for safe harbor. But that metaphor breaks out into various rich branches. For example, the metaphorical sea that represents the speaker's desire is seen both as a place of wild storms and, in yet another layer of metaphor, as Eden—a paradise. The storm itself is also an image of desire, enveloping and shaking the speaker from both the inside and the outside.

The speaker is the boat or the sailor on it, trying to find their way to the harbor that is the lover. The act of sailing, navigating with the "Compass" and "Chart," is especially revealing here: while the speaker knows exactly what her desired destination is, it's no easy matter to get there.

The richness of metaphor in this poem in itself evokes desire. Love has a way of making a lover see their beloved in everything; here, love has overpowered the speaker to such an extent that it creates a whole metaphorical world.

**Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-12

## VOCABULARY

**Luxury** (Line 4) - Indulgent delight, with a connotation of voluptuousness or excess. (Interestingly for this particular poem, the oldest meaning of the word is specifically related to sexual pleasure.)

**Futile** (Line 5) - Pointless, fruitless, or powerless.

**Port** (Line 6) - A harbor; a place where boats dock.

**Compass** (Line 7) - A tool used for navigation, both on land and at sea, by showing direction relative to north, south, east, and west.

**Chart** (Line 8) - A map, especially a nautical map.

**Eden** (Line 9) - The biblical Garden of Eden.

**Moor** (Line 11) - To fasten a boat to a dock, the shore, or an anchor.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

The poem uses only three punchy stanzas, each of which is a quatrain (meaning it has four lines).

While this poem follows no particular form, it does reflect a lot of Emily Dickinson's distinctive poetic habits—while breaking from some others. Dickinson has a particularly strong and recognizable voice. She's known for writing short, rhythmical poems, mostly in iambic feet. While this poem follows that trend, she's here using shorter lines than she often does: only two feet per line, where often she'll vary lines of three and four feet. Readers can see this shortness on the page. The poem is compact, tightly wound yet full of meaning and emotion—perhaps reflecting the intensity of the speaker's desire ready to burst forth.

### METER

"Wild nights - Wild nights!" is a very rough iambic dimeter. This means it mostly has two iambs per line, poetic units consisting of an unstressed beat followed by a stressed beat, da DUM). This rhythm feels like a heart beat—da DUM da DUM da DUM—which makes sense, given that the poem is about the speaker's intense passion. The poem's meter isn't totally regular, however, and moves through a complex variety of metrical feet.

Its first stanza, for instance, actually starts off with two intense spondees, or poetic feet with two stressed beats in a row:

> Wild nights - Wild nights!

This reflects the intensity of the speaker's feelings in this moment. The poem then moves into steady iambic dimeter, with the exception of the spondee (Wild nights) opening line 3:

> Were I with thee
> Wild nights should be
> Our luxury!

Line 5 then opens with a trochee (essentially the opposite of an iamb; stressed-unstressed), while line 6 starts with an anapest (two unstressed beats followed by a stressed beat, da da DUM) followed by another iamb:

> Futile - the winds -
> To a Heart in port -

The feet are, clearly, all over the place. The main constant in this whirlwind of rhythms is the steady beat of dimeter—that is, except in the very last stanza of the poem, when the "tonight," which would metrically complete the last line, hangs on to the end of line 11 instead, leaving that last "in thee" of line 12 all alone:

> Might I but moor - tonight -
> In thee!

This is an effect the reader can only really see on the page, and it's easy for it to slip our notice: read the poem aloud and it'll sound quite regular.

The meter here brilliantly mirrors the poem's emotions. Between the steady, constant heartbeats of the speaker's desire, everything is in a frenzy.

### RHYME SCHEME

"Wild nights - Wild nights!" uses a deceptively complex rhyme scheme. The poem's shortness and its two-beat lines might at first make the reader imagine that the rhyme scheme is going to be a classic ABAB or ABCB pattern. But when you chart the rhyme, look what you find:

ABBB CDED FBAB

While the poem does rhyme the second and fourth lines of each of its stanzas—a familiar pattern in rhyming poetry—what happens in between is suitably wild.

The poem loves rhyming on a long /ee/ sound, which ends many of its most loaded and powerful words: "thee," "Sea," "luxury." The first stanza is unusual in its use of three rhymes in a row. This linkage of "thee," "be" and "luxury" brings home the sweet intensity of the poet's emotion: the sound introduced into the poem with "thee" just won't let go. In the last stanza, the poem returns not only to its /ee/ rhyme but to the word "thee" itself—the "thee" who is the motivating aim of this poem.

Something similar happens with the cross-poem linkage of "nights" and "tonight": the speaker's desire for the beloved to be with her right this very instant is highlighted by the return, not just to general "nights," but to this specific "tonight."

The second stanza uses slant rhyme, pairing "port" with "chart." This almost-rhyme helps to suggest the speaker's current state: while she longs to be "Done with the Chart!", she isn't, and the imperfection of the rhyme drives that home.

The complexity of this rhyme scheme also allows the "winds," the "Compass," and "Eden" to stand alone and unrhymed, giving them a special prominence in the poem.

## SPEAKER

Readers get no real clues about the speaker's identity. Though this guide has referred to the speaker as a "her," she isn't even necessarily female (though we can argue that many of Dickinson's love poems seem to be told from her own perspective). But while it's hard to say who the speaker might be, it's easy to get a sense of her personality: one thing readers can see for sure is that this person is wildly passionate. The intensity of her emotion tells readers that her inner life is rich, imaginative, and tempestuous.

The speaker's image of herself as a sailor is a good example of this passion. She feels that her frustrated desire has made her a wanderer, tossed around on a vast and stormy ocean.

Though she feels at the mercy of her passion, the speaker also has the power to comfort herself with her own imagination. In a moment of delight in the last stanza, she imagines her storm-tossed wandering as "rowing in Eden." This image of her sea-wanderings in paradise suggests that, while she's overpowered by her emotions, her vivid imagination allows her to experience those feelings fully and to transform them into something delicious. Caught in both a literal and a figurative storm, the speaker uses her imagination to explore and transform the passion that has gripped her.

## SETTING

The poem could be said to be set in two places: one real, and one imaginary. Appropriately for a poem about overwhelming desire, the imaginary place is much more vividly portrayed than the real one.

The first and last stanzas hint at a literal storm on a real night; one can imagine the speaker looking out into the wind and rain and seeing a reflection of her own passions. But these are just the barest of hints: all readers really know about the speaker's surroundings is that, frustratingly for her, they don't contain her beloved.

The imagined setting is a stormy ocean and a blissful harbor. But both these places are paradoxical. Storms still rage around the security of the harbor (though they can't do any damage to the heart that docks there), and the ocean transforms in the last stanza from a place of dangerous winds to paradise itself.

# CONTEXT

## LITERARY CONTEXT

Dickinson fits into her literary context by standing out from it. Though she wrote in the mid to late 1800s, some critics class her as a proto-Modernist (a 20th-century literary movement) for her psychological subtlety and experimentation with form. She was, certainly, one of the greatest voices of American Romanticism, a school of thought that believed in the importance of the self, nature, and the individual human relationship with God.

Her thought and work were influenced by the English Romantics of a generation or two before her (especially Wordsworth and Coleridge's revival of ballad meter), by contemporary American transcendentalist writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, by the novels of the Victorian English writer Charlotte Bronte, and by Shakespeare.

Critics best guess is that "Wild nights - Wild nights!" was written around 1861, during Dickinson's most intense and productive period of writing. During this time, she wrote hundreds of poems, keeping them in little hand-bound booklets. (You can find a link to an image of her manuscript for this poem in the "Resources" section of this guide.) She shared these with no one; they were only discovered after her death by her sister Lavinia, who got them published.

Dickinson herself offered this definition of poetry in a letter to her friend Thomas Wentworth Higginson: “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?”

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dickinson lived in a chaotic world, but was famously separate from it: at the age of 35, she became a recluse, and only rarely emerged from her family home thereafter.

But all through Dickinson's most productive period of writing, the American Civil War was raging. This bloody and drawn-out conflict was (to put it mildly) disheartening and disillusioning to all who lived through it, but its horrors also inspired a counter-surge of optimistic and forward-thinking political and literary movements.

A Northerner who lived her whole life in Amherst, Massachusetts, Dickinson was firmly on the side of the Union forces. In the face of the public turmoil and division of the war, Dickinson wrote poems passionately invested in human inner life. "Wild nights - Wild nights!", while it shows no direct connection to its historical context beyond a feeling of turmoil, responds to its time in its seriousness and depth of feeling.

# MORE RESOURCES

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- An article by Dickinson's publisher, Thomas Higginson — This 1891 article from the Atlantic is Dickinson's publisher's account of his correspondence with her and the posthumous printing of her poems. (https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1891/10/emily-dickinsons-letters/306524/)
- A Short Biography of Dickinson — The Poetry Foundation's biography of Dickinson, with links to more of her poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)
- Dickinson's Manuscript Copy of the Poem — The manuscript for "Wild nights - Wild nights!" in Dickinson's own handwriting. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/235495)
- The Emily Dickinson Museum — The official website for the Emily Dickinson museum, with further information on her life and works. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/)
- Sarah Arvio's Reading of "Wild nights - Wild nights!" — A short piece from the Poetry Society of America on a writer's first experience reading this poem (including opinions on some of the readings discussed in this guide). (https://poetrysociety.org/features/old-school/on-wild-nights)

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- 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?
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- Success is counted sweetest
- There's a certain Slant of light
- This is my letter to the world

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

Nelson, Kristin. "*Wild nights - Wild nights!*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 7 Jan 2020. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "*Wild nights - Wild nights!*." LitCharts LLC, January 7, 2020. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/emily-dickinson/wild-nights-wild-nights.