

An awful Tempest mashed the air—



POEM TEXT

- 1 An awful Tempest mashed the air—
- 2 The clouds were gaunt, and few—
- 3 A Black—as of a spectre's cloak
- 4 Hid Heaven and Earth from view—
- 5 The creatures chuckled on the Roofs—
- 6 And whistled in the air—
- 7 And shook their fists—
- 8 And gnashed their teeth—
- 9 And swung their frenzied hair—
- 10 The morning lit—the Birds arose—
- 11 The Monster's faded eyes
- 12 Turned slowly to his native coast—
- 13 And peace—was Paradise!

frightening in its intensity, the speaker also suggests that its power can inspire feelings of awe and wonder.

The speaker underscores nature's ominous, intimidating might by saying that the storm "mashed the air," just as a person might smash something with their fist or churn it to a pulp. The speaker also depicts the storm as a group of "creatures" who shake their "fists," grind their "teeth," and laugh upon townspeople's rooftops, and later outright calls the storm a "Monster." All of these descriptions suggest that this "Tempest" (this windy storm) has a menacing will of its own—and that it can turn that will against human beings.

The storm seems to completely overwhelm the speaker's surroundings, in fact, "cloak[ing]" everything in "Black" and hiding "Heaven and Earth from view" —essentially blocking out symbols of light, warmth, hope, and comfort. But, soon enough, morning comes, and the storm departs to its "native coast" (that is, back to where it came from). Again, then, the storm is separate from, and independent of, the human world. "The Monster's" eyes fade, the speaker says, reiterating the storm's agency; nothing people did made it go away, and it could theoretically come back at any time.

In its absence, however, the speaker takes care to note the dawn light and the waking birds, and seems to feel a sense of both relief and wonder at this moment. The world, only recently turned black, is now "Paradise"—"Heaven" itself. Perhaps the speaker *needed* to experience the storm to fully appreciate this calm: the storm brought out all of nature's frightening potential, and this has left the speaker in a state of awe.

The poem, then, spotlights the incredible power of nature. Experiencing this storm helps the speaker recognize the vast, unstoppable forces at work in the natural world. And this, in turn, leads to an awareness of how small and powerless human beings are—a feeling that, the poem subtly suggests, is strangely beautiful.



SUMMARY

An incredibly powerful storm churned the air. There were only a few dark, thin clouds, but the sky turned as black as the cape of ghost. The blackness was so complete that it made it impossible to see either the sky or the earth.

The storm was like a group of strange beings that laughed on the rooftops. These creatures made a sound like whistling through the air and shook their fists. They ground their teeth and swung their heads so that their hair whirled around.

Morning arrived with the light of dawn, and the birds woke up. The monstrous storm's eyes had turned pale, and the storm went back to the coast where it had come from. The peace in the wake of this storm felt like heaven!



THEMES



THE AWE-INSPIRING POWER OF NATURE

"An awful Tempest mashed the air—" describes an intense storm that violently rolls through the speaker's town, as well as the peaceful "Paradise" that follows in the storm's wake. The raw and sudden force of this "Tempest" represents the power of the natural world—something that, the poem implies, exists entirely independent of human beings. And while nature is sometimes

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-13



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

*An awful Tempest mashed the air—
The clouds were gaunt, and few—*

The speaker describes a terrible storm, or "Tempest," that churned or pounded the air. There were only a few clouds in

the sky, but those clouds had a “gaunt” (or thin, haunting) appearance.

Note how, right away, the speaker subtly [personifies](#) the storm, saying that it “mashed the air” the way a person might smash something with their fist. The adjective “gaunt” is also often used to describe a person’s appearance. From the outset, then, the speaker implies that this storm has its own agency, will, and power. This storm is in fact much more powerful than any individual human being: in modern usage, the word “awful” connotes that something is terrible, but it actually means “full of awe” or awe-inspiring.

Finally, the capitalized word “Tempest” might be read as an [allusion](#) to William Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*. In this play, a group of people is shipwrecked in a powerful storm (i.e., a tempest) and ends up on a remote island. A complex plot follows, but the tempest is a critical element of the play; after being washed ashore, the characters essentially lose their former identities— they are changed forever by the power of the storm.

Likewise, the poem describes this “Tempest”—a storm not unlike hurricanes often encountered in New England, where Dickinson lived—as transformative, as it will leave the speaker with a sense of awe at the intrinsic power of the natural world.

LINES 3-4

*A Black—as of a spectre's cloak
Hid Heaven and Earth from view—*

The speaker continues to describe the arrival of this storm. The sky became as “Black” as the cape or “cloak” that a “spectre” or ghost might wear, the speaker says. This [simile](#) again suggests that nature has its own agency and power, which is both awe-inspiring and frightening. The image of the “spectre” in particular suggests that the storm is not just powerful but also haunting and otherworldly. Readers might picture a ghoul draping a black cape across the sky.

This blackness of the storm was so complete, the speaker continues, that it made it impossible to see either “Heaven” or “Earth.” In other words, the storm completely overwhelms the speaker’s surroundings, hiding everything familiar “from view.”

The sounds of these lines add to their frightening effect. Note, for example, the [consonance](#) of “Black [...] spectre’s cloak,” which makes the phrase itself sound sharp and threatening. The [alliterative](#) /h/ sounds in “Hid Heaven” also draw readers’ attention to this phrase, in turn reinforcing the idea that the darkness of the storm has completely concealed the sky.

These lines conclude the poem’s first [quatrain](#), or four-line stanza. In doing so, they also establish the poem’s ABCB [rhyme scheme](#), meaning that lines 2 and 4 rhyme: “few” creates a full rhyme with “view.”

This quatrain also establishes the poem’s use of [common meter](#), the type of meter used in traditional [ballads](#). In this meter, lines

are made out of [iamb](#)s, a type of metrical foot with one unstressed syllable followed by one [stressed](#) syllable (da-DUM). Lines alternate between iambic tetrameter (four iambs per line, eight syllables total) and iambic trimeter (three iambs per line, six syllables total). Here’s line 3 as an example:

A Black—as of a spectre's cloak

This steady metrical rhythm creates a feeling in the poem like that of a song, as though the speaker, in describing this storm, is telling an ancient, archetypal story like those told in traditional ballads. The even meter also suggests that—at least for now—despite the power of this storm, the speaker is still able to describe it within the measured container of the poem itself.

LINE 5

The creatures chuckled on the Roofs—

The speaker compares the storm to a group of “creatures” laughing on the rooftops. This [metaphor](#) conveys the sound of the storm, illustrating the restless noise of the wind as it “mashe[s]” against the roofs of houses.

Although this description [personifies](#) the storm in the sense that it “chuckled,” or laughed as a person might, the poem doesn’t actually describe the storm as *human* here. Instead, the poem represents the storm as a group of unidentifiable beings—as unnamed “creatures.”

While the storm seems to have its own agency and power, then, this power is radically *different* from that of human beings.

The poem suggests that in encountering the power of the natural world, people experience a sense of profound otherness.

The “creatures,” far from benevolent, also seem haunting and frightening, much like the “spectre” the speaker mentioned in stanza 1. The sharp, hard [consonance](#) /c/ sounds in “creatures chuckled” recall those of “spectre’s cloak,” in fact, again presenting the storm as something scary, cold, and indifferent to human experience—or maybe even as something that is actively malevolent.

LINES 6-7

*And whistled in the air—
And shook their fists—*

The speaker continues to describe the storm as a group of “creatures,” now saying that they “whistled in the air” and “shook their fists” as though in anger, indignation, or a threatening gesture. This [imagery](#) again conveys the powerful and frightening sights and sounds of the storm: the pitch of the wind as it whooshes through the air and pounds against buildings, tree branches thrashing about, etc.

These lines also continue the speaker’s [personification](#) of the storm, by saying that it can “whistle” and has “fists.” Again,

though, while the speaker describes the storm as having *some* human *qualities*, it stills seems not entirely human. It's spectral, ghoulish; the "creatures" seem like otherworldly beings that might appear in ghost stories. The storm, then, seems to have a human-like agency but also to be *other* than human, and this is part of what makes it so frightening.

Several elements of these lines reinforce the sense of the storm's distinct, otherworldly power. First, the [anaphora](#) of "And"—as well as the [parallel structure](#) of the lines, each of which begins with "And" and is followed by a verb—conveys the storm's energy and momentum, as one action leads to the next. Each of these lines also ends with dash, propelling the reader forward.

Finally, and importantly, these lines signal a shift *out* of the poem's use of [common meter](#): the line "And shook their fists" is made out of [iamb](#)s, but it contains only two metrical feet, instead of the *four* iambs that would conventionally appear if the poem were adhering to this meter. Technically, this makes it a line of iambic dimeter. This shift suggests that the storm is so powerful that it has burst out of the poem's container; it demands a meter all its own.

LINES 8-9

*And gnashed their teeth—
And swung their frenzied hair—*

Still describing the storm as a group of "creatures," the speaker now says that these creatures ground their "teeth" and "swung" their "hair" around in a kind of whirling turmoil. The "gnash[ing]" sound of teeth could illustrate the sound of branches grinding against roofs or windows in a strong wind, while the [imagery](#) of "frenzied hair" could be read as branches of trees and bushes swinging around.

Again, the "creatures"—and the storm they represent—are both [personified](#) and strikingly *not human*, most closely resembling traditional representations of ghouls or ghosts. And while the poem creates strong images of the *storm* through these "creatures," it also leaves much to the imagination, asking the reader to envision what these "creatures" actually look like. What the images *do* convey is a strong sense of the feeling of the storm, which seems threatening, otherworldly, and full of an intense, restless energy.

The poem continues its use of [anaphora](#), repeating the word "And" to reinforce the sense of the storm's momentum. This repetition of "And" also creates [polysyndeton](#) in these lines, linking each action together to suggest that the storm does *all* of these things simultaneously.

These lines conclude the poem's second stanza, which is a [cinquain](#)—a five-line stanza. The other stanzas are four lines each ([quatrain](#)s); the seemingly extra line here suggests that, at the height of its power, the storm resists containment in any human-made metrical form.

Similarly, since this stanza is a cinquain, the poem has also shifted out of the ABCB rhyme scheme it established in stanza 1. Although the second and last lines of the stanza again rhyme ("air" rhymes with "hair"), the first, third, and fourth lines don't. The rhyming pattern as a whole here is thus DEFGE, suggesting, again, that the storm's power exceeds the poem's established container—and by extension, exceeds human control or full understanding.

LINES 10-11

*The morning lit—the Birds arose—
The Monster's faded eyes*

The speaker describes how the storm finally departed with the dawn. Through a second [metaphor](#), the speaker compares the storm to a "Monster" whose "eyes" are now "faded" or less bright, as the storm diminishes in power.

In these lines, the [imagery](#) of the morning light and the peaceful birds strongly [juxtapose](#) with the previous imagery of the storm's violence. In the wake of this storm, the speaker experiences a sense of peace and calm. The poem also might suggest, however, that it took the full power of the storm to make the speaker truly *aware* of this peace. That is, the storm's initial *presence* is what allows the speaker to fully appreciate its *absence*. The poem thus implies that the speaker has been *changed* by this storm.

The depiction of the storm as a "Monster" also reinforces the idea that the storm—and by extension nature as a whole—has a kind of energy, will, and agency all its own. The poem thus implies that while the storm might be "faded" now, it could return at any time in its full frightening intensity.

The poem returns to [common meter](#), here, as these lines alternate between [iambic](#) tetrameter and iambic trimeter. This shift back to a regular metrical pattern suggests that in the wake of the storm, the speaker has regained a sense of familiarity and containment, a calm on the other side.

Finally, the mention of a "Monster" might develop the poem's possible [allusion](#) to [The Tempest](#). In Shakespeare's play, the sorcerer Prospero, a European nobleman who was previously shipwrecked on the island, views the character of Caliban, a native person of the island and Prospero's servant, as a kind of "monster." Of course, it is the *storm* that is the monster in Dickinson's poem, and it's not clear if Dickinson is actually alluding to Shakespeare's work.

LINES 12-13

*Turned slowly to his native coast—
And peace—was Paradise!*

The speaker says that the storm—this "Monster"—turned his eyes "slowly to his native coast," or the coast where the storm first came from. In other words, the storm has returned to the ocean and the speaker can enjoy the "peace" of its absence. This

sense of peace is so powerful that the speaker says that it is like a kind of "Paradise" or heaven.

Perhaps the speaker *needed* to witness the full power of the natural world to truly appreciate this heavenly calm. Since the poem has represented nature—and this storm in particular—as a being with its own agency and will, the poem implies that the storm could come back at any time: the speaker—and all people—are at the mercy of the natural world. Maybe the speaker experiences this newfound sense of smallness in the face of nature as a kind of beautiful awe.

These lines use several sound effects to reinforce their meaning. First, the [assonant](#) /oh/ sounds in "slowly" and "coast" convey the sense of this storm slowly diminishing and moving away. Then, the [alliterative](#) /p/ sounds in "peace" and "Paradise" emphasize that the calm in the storm's absence feels like heaven to the speaker.

These lines also return the poem to its [quatrain](#) form and regular ABCB [rhyme scheme](#); here "eyes" rhymes with "Paradise," while long /oh/ sounds also [assonantly](#) link "arose" and "coast." The conclusion of the poem, then, suggests that in the wake of the storm order has been restored.



SYMBOLS



DARKNESS

Darkness in the poem [symbolizes](#) the terror and otherness of the storm, which "cloak[s]" the sky in "Black." The speaker emphasizes how the storm's clouds make it impossible to see "Heaven and Earth." The speaker is *literally* referring to the fact that the storm decreases visibility, but, on a *symbolic* level, this suggests that the storm has brought the speaker into contact with some strange, overwhelming natural power that completely overwhelms and transforms the speaker's environment.

The speaker's inability to see "Heaven" suggests that the storm saps the speaker of joy and hope, while the inability to see "Earth" suggests that the storm cuts the speaker off from the comfort and security of the familiar. In the face of this immense natural power, the speaker's world has become strange and frightening.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "A Black—as of a spectre's cloak / Hid Heaven and Earth from view—"



DAWN

Dawn in the poem [symbolizes](#) renewal and new beginnings. The light that comes in the morning

signals that the frightening darkness of the storm has passed, while the later comparison of this calm, bright morning to "Paradise" suggests that the speaker hasn't simply been restored to a sense of normalcy; instead, the speaker seems to feel a new kind of wonder, awe, and awareness, as a result of having witnessed the natural power of the storm. The dawn here, with its rising sun and chirping birds, suggests that the speaker has a new outlook on, or at least appreciation for, the world itself.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "The morning lit—the Birds arose—"



POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

The poem uses [anaphora](#) to emphasize the storm's intense energy and power. Most notably, the word "And" repeats at the beginning of lines 6-9, when the speaker compares the storm to a group of creatures on the rooftops. This anaphora calls attention to the storm's actions as it "whistle[s]" in the wind, and "sw[ings]" branches around like "hair." The rhythm of the anaphora, which propels the reader forward through each line, also illustrates the intense energy of the storm and its wind and rain.

This anaphora is also an example of [polysyndeton](#). The combination of anaphora and polysyndeton in these lines conveys just how powerful the storm is by creating a piling up effect: the can "whistle[]" and "sh[ake] [its] fists" and "gnash[] [its] teeth" and "sw[ing] [its] [...] hair," all at once.

The poem also uses anaphora in the closing stanza, with the repetition of "The." Here, the effect of this anaphora is slightly different: the speaker describes the passage of the storm, and how the dawn finally arrives. This anaphora links the way nature looks *after* the storm—"The morning lit—the Birds arose"—with the storm itself—described as "The Monster[]." This instance of anaphora, then, ties the frightening power of the storm to nature as a whole, showing that this power has always been present within the natural world.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "And"
- **Line 7:** "And"
- **Line 8:** "And"
- **Line 9:** "And"
- **Line 10:** "The," "the"
- **Line 11:** "The"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem uses [personification](#) to convey the idea that the natural world has its own agency and power. For example, in the very first line, the speaker says that the “Tempest” (the storm) “mashed the air,” the way a person might pummel or smash something with their fist. The speaker then compares the intense darkness in the sky to the “cloak” or cape that a “spectre” (or ghost) might wear. In other words, the speaker implies that a human-like presence has taken over the environment with the arrival of the storm. Importantly, though, this presence is also distinctly *not* human: it is much bigger than a human, since it has the power to “mash” the air, and it is also somewhat haunting, like a ghost.

The speaker continues to treat the storm as a kind of otherworldly being with agency in the second stanza, comparing it to a group of “creatures.” These creatures grind their teeth and have “hair” that they can swing around, illustrating the way a storm might make branches grind against rooftops or swing violently around in the wind. Yet in depicting the storm as a group of “creatures,” rather than human beings, the speaker suggests that the storm is some kind of strange, unrecognizable entity that exerts its presence on the human world.

Finally, in the closing stanza, the speaker calls the storm a “Monster” whose “eyes,” having “faded” with the passage of the storm, “[t]urned slowly to his native coast.” Again, the speaker grants the storm agency while also making it clear that this force of nature is decidedly *not* human: the storm is a “Monster.” Nature’s power and presence, the speaker suggests, is far *greater* than the power of any individual person.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Lines 5-9
- Lines 11-12

SIMILE

The speaker uses a [simile](#) to describe the storm’s arrival, saying that the darkness it casts over the sky is as “Black—as of a spectre’s cloak.” In other words, the storm’s darkness makes the speaker think of the cape that a “spectre” or ghost might wear. The speaker then adds that it’s as though this “cloak” has completely covered up both “Heaven” (the sky) and the earth, making it impossible to see any ordinary surroundings.

In comparing the darkness of the sky to a “cloak” (a type of coat or cape usually worn by a person), the simile contributes to the idea that the storm has a kind of independent agency and autonomy—that it is like a human being in some ways. Yet, importantly, the simile also illustrates the storm’s otherworldly,

frightening quality, since the speaker compares this “cloak” of darkness to one worn by a ghost.

The fact that the speaker describes the darkness through a simile also might imply that it’s impossible to describe the darkness *directly*; the storm is so powerful, and the “Black[ness]” it brings is so complete, that it defies direct description or understanding.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “as of a spectre’s cloak”

METAPHOR

The poem uses two [metaphors](#) to illustrate the storm’s frightening intensity. First, in stanza 2, the speaker compares the storm to a group of unnamed “creatures” who “whistle[,]” grind their teeth, “sh[ake] their fists,” and “sw[ing] their frenzied hair.” Of course, the storm isn’t *literally* a group of creatures sitting on the rooftops, but this metaphor helps to convey the storm’s strange, almost human, and haunting quality. The speaker suggests that the storm is like a group of living things, unidentified “beings,” who act like people but are also otherworldly. Their actions—which could illustrate the noises of the storm as branches swing around and scrape the roofs of houses—seem restless and threatening.

Then, the speaker goes on to compare the storm as a whole to a “Monster,” saying that finally, with the passing of the storm, this “Monster” turns back to its “native coast,” or the ocean shore where it originated. This second metaphor reinforces the idea that the storm, and by extension the entire natural world, has a kind of independent agency and power.

This metaphor also emphasizes just how overwhelming and frightening the storm is. And since this “Monster”—and the natural power it represents—seems to have a will all its own, the poem implies that it could return at any time: the speaker, and all human beings, are ultimately at the mercy of the natural world.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** “The creatures”
- **Line 11:** “The Monster’s faded eyes”

IMAGERY

The poem is full of vivid [imagery](#) that helps the reader imagine what it is like to witness this storm. For example, the speaker describes the “Tempest” or storm as “mash[ing]” the air, creating a sensory image of tumultuous wind, and then says that the “clouds were gaunt and few,” conveying a vision of night and ragged clouds. The speaker goes on to depict the intense “Black” that covers the sky as a kind of “cloak.” All of these images paint a clear, haunting picture of the storm’s

arrival.

Then, the speaker compares the storm to a group of “creatures” who do things like “sh[ake] their fists,” “gnash[] their teeth,” and “sw[ing] their frenzied hair.” Interestingly, the speaker doesn’t use *literal* images of the storm, here; instead, these images ask the reader to imagine what they might stand for within the storm. For instance, the reader could envision the “frenzied hair” of these creatures as branches swinging wildly in the high wind. These images, though, convey how it *feels* to witness this storm; it is as though a group of “creatures” have taken over the rooftops.

Finally, the speaker uses imagery to illustrate how it feels when the storm finally passes. The speaker mentions the light of dawn and rising birds, conveying a peaceful scene that strongly contrasts with the unpredictable, fierce power of the storm that came before. This imagery at the poem’s ending shows the sense of wonder, awe, and calm the speaker feels in the storm’s wake.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Lines 5-9
- Lines 10-11

CONSONANCE

The poem uses [consonance](#) throughout to create music and convey the sounds of the storm. For example, consonant hard /c/ sounds appear in the first two stanzas, in “Black,” “spectre’s cloak” and “creature’s chuckled.” These sharp sounds help to evoke the storm’s frightening presence (and the /ch/ sounds of “creatures” and “chuckled” adds to the effect as well).

In the second stanza, /sh/ sounds connect the actions of those strange “creatures” who represent the storm. For example, the speaker says that these creatures “shook their fists and “gnashed their teeth.” The [sibilance](#) here also conveys the whooshing of the storm as it moves through the town. The /f/ and /s/ sounds in “fists,” “swung,” and “frenzied” add to the effect, filling the poem with the powerful sounds of rushing wind.

Sibilant sounds appear throughout the ending of the poem as well, in “slowly,” “coast,” “peace,” and “Paradise.” This sibilance conveys the hush and quiet that arises in the storm’s wake. The strong /p/ alliteration of “peace” and “Paradise,” meanwhile, draws readers’ attention to the speaker’s immense relief upon the storm’s passing.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “Black,” “spectre’s cloak”
- **Line 4:** “Hid Heaven”
- **Line 5:** “creatures chuckled”
- **Line 7:** “shook”
- **Line 8:** “gnashed”
- **Line 10:** “morning,” “Birds arose”
- **Line 11:** “Monster’s,” “eyes”
- **Line 12:** “slowly,” “coast”
- **Line 13:** “peace,” “Paradise”

ALLITERATION

The poem doesn’t have much [alliteration](#), but the few moments that do appear help to draw readers’ attention to certain phrases and images. For example, the speaker says that the intense darkness of the storm “Hid Heaven” from sight. The alliterative /h/ sounds add force and emphasis to the speaker’s declaration that the darkness of the storm is so all-encompassing that it has completely covered up the sky—and with it, anything “heavenly.” Alliteration thus underscores the fear and insignificance the speaker feels upon seeing the storm pass overhead.

The poem also ends on an instance of alliteration, as sharp /p/ sounds connect “peace” and “Paradise.” Again, alliteration adds emphasis to the speaker’s language. At this moment, it thus calls attention to just how calm and wondrous the speaker feels in the wake of the storm.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** “Hid Heaven”
- **Line 13:** “peace,” “Paradise”



VOCABULARY

Tempest (Line 1) - A powerful, windy storm. The word also possibly [alludes](#) to William Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*.

Mashed (Line 1) - Smashed or churned. The word illustrates the way the storm moves tumultuously through the air.

Gaunt (Line 2) - Thin or skeletal.

Spectre (Line 3) - A ghost or other disembodied spirit.

Cloak (Line 3) - A type of old-fashioned cape, worn as a coat. The word “cloak” also means to cover something up or conceal it from view.

Gnashed (Line 8) - Ground or clenched.

Frenzied (Line 9) - Frantic, chaotic, or turbulent.

Native coast (Line 12) - The coast where the storm originated or began.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem's 13 lines are organized into two [quatrains](#), or four-line stanzas, and one [cinquain](#), or five-line stanza. The first and third stanza are [ballad](#) stanzas, meaning they follow a specific [meter](#) and [rhyme scheme](#) (more specifics on this in the Meter and Rhyme Scheme sections of this guide). This regular pattern reflects the speaker's control over the poem. The middle stanza, however, has an extra line and messes with the poem's meter, which suggests the storm itself breaking free from this control.

To break things down more specifically:

- In the opening quatrain, the speaker describes the arrival of the storm. Although the beginning of this storm seems haunting and strange—the speaker notes “gaunt” clouds and the darkness that makes it impossible to see the earth or sky—the even pattern of the quatrain, with its steady meter and rhyme scheme, suggests that the speaker can still describe the storm in a measured, contained manner.
- But as the power of the storm takes over in stanza 2, the poem shifts *out* of this quatrain form. The speaker adds an extra line to the stanza for five total, and in doing so subtly conveys the storm's overwhelming power. The shift to this longer, uneven stanza length suggests that the storm has burst free from the form of the poem itself—that it has moved beyond human containment.
- Finally, the speaker describes the departure of the storm as the sun rises. At this point, the poem shifts *back* to the quatrain pattern with which it began, suggesting that as the storm passes the speaker can regain a sense of familiarity and control.

METER

The poem is mostly written in [common meter](#), the type of meter used in traditional [ballads](#). Common meter (or simply ballad meter, depending on the strictness of one's definition of these terms) alternates between lines written in [iambic tetrameter](#) (four iambs, feet with a da-DUM rhythm, for eight syllables total) and iambic trimeter (three iambs, or six syllables total).

Consider, for example, the poem's opening [quatrain](#) (and note that, in much 19th-century poetry, “heaven” would be read as one, stressed syllable):

An awful Tempest mashed the air —
The clouds were gaunt and few —
A Black — as of a spectre's cloak
Hid Heaven and Earth from view.

Here, each line follows a steady iambic rhythm, while the lines alternate between eight and six syllables apiece. This meter gives the opening and closing stanzas of the poem a measured, predictable rhythm.

Notably, though, the poem moves *out* of this metrical pattern in the second stanza. Although the stanza *begins* with common meter (the first line of the stanza is in iambic tetrameter, while the second is in iambic trimeter), the lines shift to four syllables, or two iambs, each as the speaker describes the intense power of the storm:

And shook their fists —
And gnashed their teeth

Technically, this is called iambic dimeter. What is important to note is that this shift helps to convey the overwhelming power of the storm; it seems that the storm itself has broken free from the regular meter with which the poem began. The shorter, four-syllable lines also convey the abrupt, quick movement of the tumultuous wind.

Finally, the poem moves back into common meter in the closing quatrain, illustrating the calm in the storm's wake.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's first and third [quatrains](#) use the [rhyme scheme](#) typical of a [ballad](#), meaning the second and fourth lines rhyme:

ABCB

In the first quatrain, “few” rhymes directly with “view,” while in the closing quatrain, “eyes” rhymes with “Paradise.” These rhyming quatrains create a sense of even, regular music, which appears both at the beginning and end of the storm.

The middle quatrain changes things up, however, using the pattern:

ABCDC

(Or, accounting for the new rhyme sounds: DEFGE.) This means that, as the speaker describes the storm at the peak of its intensity, the rhyme scheme changes. The five-line stanza includes three unrhymed lines, the sudden predominance of which helps to convey the unpredictable power of the storm.

At the end of the poem, as the speaker describes the storm passing, the regular rhyme scheme reappears:

ABCB

(Or, accounting for the new rhyme sounds: HIJI.) This reinforces the sense of peace and relief the speaker feels in the storm's wake.



SPEAKER

The speaker of “An awful Tempest mashed the air—” remains

anonymous and ungendered throughout the poem. That's because the poem isn't really about the speaker. Instead, it focuses on the storm itself.

Of course, many readers take the speaker to be a representation of the poet. Emily Dickinson lived in Amherst, Massachusetts, and would have been familiar with strong storms off the coast. She also wrote frequently about the natural world as she encountered it in New England.

Really, though, the speaker is both timeless and universal, standing in for *any* person who witnesses a powerful storm and then feels a sense of peace and calm in its wake.



SETTING

The poem takes place in a town as a severe storm passes through. There are "gaunt" clouds in the sky, and the world seems cloaked in darkness that shields both "Heaven and Earth from view." The storm is loud and frightening, with wind that whistles through the air, shakes the rooftops, and seems to whip the entire world into a frenzy.

The poem more specifically suggests that this storm happens somewhere much like the small New England town in which Dickinson herself lived. For example, the speaker describes the storm as finally returning to its "native coast," which suggests that the storm originated around the ocean and then blew onto the land—just as hurricanes do in the Northeast.

The storm transforms this landscape into something unfamiliar and frightening. The depictions of the storm as a group of "creatures" and as a "Monster" suggest that the speaker's environment has been taken over by an almost otherworldly presence that is at once terrifying and awe-inspiring. And on the sunny morning after the storm departs, this place feels like "Paradise."



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson wrote "An awful Tempest mashed the air—" in 1861 and sewed the poem into the ninth of her handmade booklets, or fascicles.

Although Dickinson published little in her lifetime, her poetry demonstrates a deep, ongoing dialogue with a range of literary influences. Her poems often reference work by [Milton](#), [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#), and [Elizabeth Barrett Browning](#), as well as the Bible, textbooks, magazines, and popular publications of her day. "An awful Tempest mashed the air—" is one of her many poems that possibly [alludes](#) to or whose imagery was inspired by William Shakespeare (specifically his play [The Tempest](#)).

On a larger level, the poem can also be read as in dialogue with

many Romantic writers who wrote about the idea of the [Sublime](#). An important concept to [Romanticism](#) as a whole, many writers and artists viewed the Sublime as the feeling of simultaneous awe, wonder, terror, and smallness people experience when encountering the vastness and power of the natural world. This poem draws on this sense of the Sublime as the speaker describes the immense power of this storm, which seems to have an agency and vast strength all its own.

The poem also shows some [Gothic](#) influences: the speaker's depiction of the storm as a kind of "spectre's cloak," and the images of haunting "creatures" on the rooftops echo the representations of ghosts, spirits, and other supernatural beings common within the genre.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson was born in 1830 in the small New England town of Amherst, Massachusetts, where she would also spend most of her life. Severe thunderstorms, hurricanes, and nor'easters are all common occurrences in New England (though much more so on the coast). The infamously reclusive Dickinson was also deeply curious about and observant of the natural world.

When considering the overwhelming presence of the storm in this poem, it can be helpful to remember that at the time Dickinson was writing in the early 1860s, electric light was virtually nonexistent and [no American homes were lit with electricity](#) (in fact, many American homes didn't gain electric power until the late 1920s). There would have been no electric or artificial light, then, to mediate the overwhelming darkness of such a storm, making its intense power even more palpable and frightening.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Gothic Literature](#) — The poem includes elements of the Gothic, a movement in literature and art that explored darkness, death, and the supernatural. Read more about the history of the Gothic in this essay at the British Library. (<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-origins-of-the-gothic>)
- [Biography of Emily Dickinson](#) — Learn more about Dickinson's life and poetry via the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson>)
- [Manuscript of the Poem](#) — View the original manuscript of the poem, in Dickinson's handwriting, at the Emily Dickinson Archive. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/12169488)
- [Emily Dickinson Museum](#) — Read more about Dickinson's

life and work, and learn about what Amherst, Massachusetts was like in the 1860s, at the website of the Emily Dickinson Museum.

(<https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org>)

- [Romanticism and the Sublime](#) – The poem draws on the Romantic idea of the Sublime, or the experience of coming into contact with the vast power of the universe and the natural world. Learn more about the history of the Sublime as a concept in literature and art in this article from the Academy of American Poets. (<https://poets.org/glossary/sublime>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- [A Bird, came down the Walk](#)
- [After great pain, a formal feeling comes -](#)
- [A narrow Fellow in the Grass](#)
- [As imperceptibly as grief](#)
- [Because I could not stop for Death –](#)
- [Hope is the thing with feathers](#)
- [I dwell in Possibility –](#)
- [I felt a Funeral, in my Brain](#)
- [I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -](#)
- [I'm Nobody! Who are you?](#)
- [I started Early – Took my Dog –](#)
- [I taste a liquor never brewed](#)
- [It was not Death, for I stood up](#)
- [Much Madness is divinest Sense -](#)

- [My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun](#)
- [Success is counted sweetest](#)
- [Tell all the truth but tell it slant –](#)
- [The Brain—is wider than the Sky—](#)
- [There's a certain Slant of light](#)
- [The Soul selects her own Society](#)
- [They shut me up in Prose -](#)
- [This is my letter to the world](#)
- [We grow accustomed to the Dark](#)
- [Wild nights - Wild nights!](#)



HOW TO CITE

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