A Bird, came down the Walk

POEM TEXT

A Bird, came down the Walk—
He did not know I saw—
He bit an Angle Worm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw,

And then, he drank a Dew
From a convenient Grass—
And then hopped sidewise to the Wall
To let a Beetle pass—

He glanced with rapid eyes,
That hurried all abroad—
They looked like frightened Beads, I thought,
He stirred his Velvet Head.—

Like one in danger, Cautious,
I offered him a Crumb,
And he unrolled his feathers,
And rowed him softer Home—

Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam,
Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon,
Leap, plashless as they swim

SUMMARY

A bird came down my front walkway. He didn't know that I could see him. He bit an earthworm in half and ate the little guy raw.

Then he drank a dewdrop from a handy blade of grass and hopped towards the wall to get out of a beetle's way.

His eyes nervously darted all around him. I thought they looked like scared beads. He moved his soft, velvety head.

Carefully, like someone in danger, I offered the bird a crumb. But the bird spread his wings and flew away. His wings moved more softly through the air than oars that dip into the ocean without making a ripple, or than butterflies that leap into the air at midday and swim through the sky without making a splash.

THEMES

THE BEAUTY AND BRUTALITY OF NATURE

The speaker of "A bird, came down the walk" watches a bird with fascination—only to scare it off by offering it a crumb. The speaker's imaginative meeting with the bird inspires wonder, but also seems to make both the speaker and the bird a little nervous. Nature, in this speaker's view, seems to be a place of both beauty and peril—and the poem implies that human beings are as much a part of that beauty and peril as animals are.

The speaker's everyday encounter with a bird hopping down the front walk is marked by a curious sense of danger. The first thing the speaker sees the bird doing is biting a worm in half and eating "the fellow, raw." The personification of both the bird and the worm suggests the unease the speaker feels at this sight: if these creatures are at all human-like, they can also feel human-like fear and suffering. At first, then, the speaker seems to feel some pity for the poor little worm, who gets gobbled up so nonchalantly by the bird. Nature seems to be a rather a brutal place.

To that end, the bird is not just a predator, but also prey! The bird itself has eyes like "frightened Beads," suggesting its own anxiety about its place in this bird-eat-worm, cat-eat-bird world. And when the speaker moves to offer the creature a crumb "Like one in danger, Cautious," this line suggests that the speaker, too, feels suddenly vulnerable to or aware of natural dangers. (The speaker is also afraid of scaring off the little animal of course!)

In spite of this sense of unease, the speaker is clearly fascinated and charmed by the bird's beauty. The speaker carefully observes the bird's "Velvet Head" and its little motions as it goes about its business, and takes pleasure in the courteous way it hops aside, like a gentleman, "To let a Beetle pass." When the bird flies away, the speaker imagines its flight through metaphors of boats and butterflies moving "plashless" through their elements. Here, far from being in danger, the bird seems to be a seamless, beautiful part of the natural world, at one with the air.

The speaker's enjoyment of the bird's elegance sits right next to the speaker's alarm at its predatory mercilessness, suggesting that nature maintains a delicate balance between the beautiful and the brutal. Enthralled by the bird's beauty, the speaker is also a little unnerved by its alien way of life, so different from a human being's. This curious balance of fear and wonder unites the speaker and the bird in spite of (and through!) their wariness of each other: merely being alive means being a part

of a lovely but fearful natural world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

A Bird, came down the Walk—
He did not know I saw—

"A Bird, came down the Walk" begins with an incident that seems both normal and strange. The speaker watches (apparently hidden) as a bird hops down a small walkway. This seems like a straightforward, unremarkable thing to witness, but the way the speaker describes it makes it seem like something more is going on here.

For example, consider the way the speaker describes the bird's movements. It's a little strange to say that a bird "came down the Walk," which makes it sound like the bird is a neighbor coming over for a casual chat. This impression only intensifies when the speaker calls the bird "he," thoroughly personifying this little animal.

But if the bird is a neighborly visitor, it's strange that the speaker would spy on him in this way. The speaker seems torn between viewing the bird as a friendly, human-like acquaintance and an odd, unfamiliar creature. These first two lines therefore establish a feeling of stealth and even a hint of anxiety on the speaker's behalf. At the same time, though, the reader might also find this scene pretty familiar—who hasn't sat still and quiet to watch a bird hop around without scaring it away?

The combination of neighborliness and anxiety that these first two lines set up actually forms the foundation for the poem's entire tone, which features a feeling of tension even though the poem describes a very simple, everyday occurrence. The bird is a little like a human, but it's also so unlike a human that the sight of a *real* human might scare it away. This highlights the exact kind of tension and contradiction that the rest of the poem will explore.

LINES 3-4

He bit an Angle Worm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw,

The hint of anxiety in the first two lines now leads to an unsettling description of the bird as it ruthlessly murders a worm. The speaker watches as the bird neatly snaps a worm in half before devouring it. In many ways, this is perfectly normal, since this is exactly what birds do: they eat worms. However, the speaker personifies the worm by referring to it as a "fellow."

And if the worm is enough of a person to be called a "fellow," it probably has some objections to being devoured!

It's important, too, that this common earthworm is called an "angle worm," a name it earned because fishers (also known as "anglers") like to use it as bait. The everyday world of this small walkway suddenly seems to follow the harsh and unforgiving laws of nature. This means that, just like the worm, the bird might someday find itself the prey of some even larger "angler."

Still, it's only natural that the bird would eat the worm. But the speaker's imagination casts both the bird and the worm as conscious players in a personified drama. This makes it a little uncomfortable that the bird devours its prey by tearing it in half and eating it "raw"—an unsparingly gruesome description. Although the bird has already been presented as a friendly neighbor, it now seems more like a terrifying predator. This shifting perception of the bird implies that the speaker is at odds with nature, unable to decide if the surrounding world is friendly and peaceful or merciless and threatening.

This first stanza also begins a metrical pattern that the rest of the poem will follow: two lines of iambic trimeter (three da-DUMs), one of iambic tetrameter (four da-DUMs), and a final line that returns to iambic trimeter. This means that line 3 is in iambic tetrameter, while line 4 is in iambic trimeter:

He bit | an Ang- | le Worm | in halves
And ate | the fel- | low, raw,

There is a sense of variety that comes along with this metrical pattern. At the same time, though, the da-DUM da-DUM bounce of the iambs creates a predictable rhythm that reflects the simplicity of the scene—and might also evoke the bird's tentative hops.

LINES 5-8

And then, he drank a Dew
From a convenient Grass—
And then hopped sidewise to the Wall
To let a Beetle pass—

As the speaker watches, the bird moves from its wormy feast to more seemingly civilized endeavors. In the second stanza, the bird becomes polite and even gentlemanly: he sips dew from a blade of grass and then moves courteously out of the way to "let a Beetle pass," just like one might step aside to let another person pass on the street. This courtesy sits oddly next to the earlier image of the bird as a predator, reinforcing the tension between beauty and danger that the speaker senses in the natural world.

The speaker's use of enjambment in this section creates a smooth and easy rhythmic flow:

And then, he drank a Dew
From a convenient Grass—

And then hopped sidewise to the Wall
To let a Beetle pass—

These enjambments lead to a feeling of ease that reflects the bird's unbothered behavior. In other words, the bird does exactly what it's supposed to do as a wild creature in the natural world. Lines 6 and 8 are end-stopped, but the other lines flow uninterrupted, and this helps establish the idea that the bird's actions are natural and graceful—even if the speaker remains somewhat unnerved by the animal's apparent ferocity. All here is in order, the poem's pacing suggests, even if that order sometimes means that a worm gets eaten raw.

LINES 9-12

He glanced with rapid eyes,
That hurried all abroad—
They looked like frightened Beads, I thought,
He stirred his Velvet Head.—

The speaker has seen the bird as both a predator and a gentleman. Now, though, the speaker sees it as prey. Studying the bird more closely, the speaker notices it looking around in fear and uses a simile to compare its eyes to "frightened beads."

At first glance, this seems like a rather odd simile, since it's unclear how, exactly, a bead could be "frightened." But this is also a vivid and tangible image, accentuating the fact that birds' eyes often look like round, marble-like objects that are reminiscent of beads made of dark glass. The speaker also suggests that the bird's head is "velvet," subtly presenting it as a lovely little doll that—despite its own fright—is bright-eyed and soft-feathered.

The speaker's own perspective shines through in this section, since the phrase "I thought" in line 11 reminds readers that all of these observations about the bird are filtered through the speaker's observations. This personal intrusion suggests that the speaker has begun to feel both affection and sympathy for this courtly little creature. The bird may be a ruthless carnivore, but it's also vulnerable and small, and the endearing presentation of the bird as a sort of doll makes it clear that the speaker has picked up on this tenderness.

The end-stopped lines in this stanza also suggest this sympathy. Emily Dickinson loved ending lines with abrupt dashes and often used those dashes for different stylistic purposes. Here, the dashes seem to mimic the bird's abrupt movements as it "stir[s] its Velvet Head" and looks around with its frightened eyes. Fascinated by the bird, the speaker shapes the poem's language to match the creature's "hurried" gestures, cutting off each of the stanza's lines with an abrupt end-stop.

Alliteration also appears in this section, as the speaker alliterates the /l/ sounds in lines 10 and 11:

That hurried all abroad—
They looked like frightened Beads, I thought,

This heightens the sound of the language, making the speaker's words sound musical. Alliteration also strengthens the rhythm in this moment, adding a slight feeling of intensity that matches the bird's sudden fearfulness.

LINES 13-14

Like one in danger, Cautious,
I offered him a Crumb,

The speaker's sympathy for the bird becomes even clearer in these lines, since the speaker seems to fear for the bird's safety. "Like one in danger, Cautious, / I offered him a Crumb," the speaker says, seemingly acknowledging through the speaker's own "cautious" approach that the bird has to be careful in the dangerous, predatory setting of the natural world.

This sense of danger comes through in the speaker's use of consonance, since the hard /c/ sound creates a grating, unnerving effect:

Like one in danger, Cautious,
I offered him a Crumb,

By leaning heavily on this sharp /c/ sound, the speaker unsettles the otherwise smooth language that has, until this point, characterized the poem. The sound of the language thus illustrates a feeling of unease in this tense moment.

In some versions of this poem, different punctuation alters the meaning. Because a fair amount of Dickinson's poetry wasn't discovered until after her death, her readers don't always know exactly which version of a poem she considered the final one. In a handwritten version of "A Bird, came down the Walk," for example, the previous stanza doesn't end with a period, but continues like this:

He stirred his Velvet Head
Like one in danger, Cautious,
I offered him a Crumb,

The lack of punctuation after "Velvet Head" changes the meaning, making it so that the bird is the one who behaves with caution. In the punctuated version, though, the *speaker* is "cautious" while offering the crumb to the bird. There's a short essay about this in the Resources section of this guide—a reminder that punctuation truly does make a difference!

Having said that, the version of the poem used in this guide includes both a period and a dash after "Velvet Head." This makes the speaker the primary subject of the phrase "Like one in danger, Cautious, / I offered him a Crumb." According to this reading, the speaker feels the bird's anxiety and doesn't want to scare the little animal away.

This feels like a moment of connection that links the speaker to the bird despite their many differences. The speaker, like the

bird, is part of nature—just as all human beings are. And while human beings don't have to worry quite so much about being eaten on a daily basis, the speaker seems to have so thoroughly inhabited the bird's perspective that it's impossible not to feel a little tingle of the creature's fear.

LINES 15-18

And he unrolled his feathers,
And rowed him softer Home—
Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam,

No matter how cautiously the speaker offers the crumb, the bird isn't going to stick around to find out if this big animal is a friend or foe. In spite of its frightened eyes and twitchy movements, though, the bird doesn't fly away in a flurry or panic. Instead, it leaves with magical grace, a master of its own element.

As the bird leaps into the air (which is its "home"), the speaker notes that it moves more swiftly and gently than oars that "divide the Ocean." This simile suggests that the bird's wings move through the air more gracefully than an experienced rower, more softly than oars that don't even make a "seam" in the water—that is, oars that dip so delicately into the ocean that they don't even create a splash or a ripple.

These lines illustrate the speaker's complex response to the bird's departure. In watching this normal little bird jump into the air, the speaker is suddenly overcome by visions of ease and beauty. The anxiety of the previous stanzas is washed away, leaving only awe and appreciation.

The sound patterns in this section underscore this feeling of mysterious beauty, making it even more noticeable. For example, take a look at the speaker's use of assonance and sibilance:

> And he unrolled his feathers,
> And rowed him softer Home—
> Than Oars divide the Ocean,
> Too silver for a seam,

Notice the even balance of matching sounds in these lines, as the assonant /o/ sounds found in "unrolled," "rowed," and "Home" reappear in the word "Ocean." There is also the sibilant /s/ in the words "softer," "silver," and "seam," a sound that creates a hissing effect that brings to mind the sound of oars slipping beneath the surface of the water. These devices make the language sound extra poetic and musical, accentuating the momentary feeling of grace and beauty that the speaker experiences while watching the bird take flight.

LINES 19-20

Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon,
Leap, plashless as they swim

The closing lines of the poem continue to explore the speaker's awe. The speaker describes the bird not just as if it's a rower, but as if it's a butterfly. This makes sense, since both butterflies and birds fly. In the last line, however, the speaker offers up the image of butterflies jumping into and out of the water while *swimming*.

There are multiple layers of similes and metaphors in this moment. The speaker begins by comparing the bird's wings to oars moving through the water, and then compares the birds' smooth movement to butterflies that metaphorically "swim" silently through the air ("plash" essentially just means *splash*). The image of a rower moving through the water is much different from the image of a butterfly "leap[ing]" through the air, but they're both connected by the fact that they move gracefully. The speaker, then, seems to identify a sense of unity and harmony in the natural world—a unity that connects birds, humans, and butterflies alike.

The speaker also says that the imagined butterflies "leap" off "Banks of Noon." This is an ambiguous and abstract phrase that is very difficult to analyze—as is often the case in Emily Dickinson's poetry. However, it's possible to interpret the phrase "Banks of Noon" as a way of talking about the limit or edge of time, since a "bank" is a cliff of sorts and "noon" is a time of day. This brings to mind a feeling of timelessness, as if watching the bird has helped the speaker step beyond the immediate circumstances of everyday life to connect more meaningfully with the eternal beauty of nature.

While nature may be dangerous, this poem suggests, it's also a place of balance, beauty, and mystery—a place where human beings can find a seamless connection to the universe. By calling attention to this idea, the speaker reminds readers that the awe-inspiring loveliness of the natural world can be found in seemingly unremarkable places like a small walkway.

SYMBOLS

THE BIRD

The bird in "A Bird, came down the Walk" essentially symbolizes the natural world itself. This is because it is a being that contains in itself both nature's cruelty and its sublime beauty.

The bird, like all creatures, is both predator and prey. First it mercilessly eats the worm, and then it looks around anxiously with its eyes "like frightened Beads," trying to see if anything might be on the way to eat *it*.

When it flies away, though, it gracefully lifts off and moves as though it's at one with the air, moving so easily that it almost seems to be swimming through water. This ease and grace suggests that it is fully united with the surrounding world, even if it remains fearful of its environment. The bird therefore

represents the tension that exists in the natural world between beauty and danger.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5
- Line 7
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 15-16

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The alliteration in "A Bird, came down the Walk" is strongest toward the end of the poem, when the speaker marvels at the bird's smooth, calm progress through the air. The speaker compares the bird's flight to oars dipping into the ocean in a way that is "too silver for a seam," and then goes on to suggest that "Butterflies, off Banks of Noon, / Leap, plashless, as they swim." This sequence of the alliterated /s/ and /b/ sounds mirrors the bird's movements, making the poem sound as balanced and harmonious as the bird's flight.

This alliteration also ties in with the water-related images the speaker uses here. Think of the way a swimmer pulls with one arm and then the other, or the way oars work together to glide a boat forward. The balance of alliterative sounds in the poem mimics the balanced movements of the swimmers and rowboats they describe, and this supports the mood of harmonious ease at the poem's end. This balanced sound also creates a contrast with the edgier feelings of anxiety, caution, and danger in the first part of the poem.

There are a couple of moments of alliteration earlier on, too. For example, there is the hard /c/ of "Cautious" and "Crumb" in lines 13 and 14, as well as the /d/ of "he drank a Dew" in line 5. In both cases, alliteration simply makes the speaker's language simply sound nice. Repeated sounds tend to please the ear, so the speaker's use of alliteration makes the poem sound satisfying and musical—something that helps draw readers through the lines.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "not know"
- **Line 5:** "drank," "Dew"
- **Line 11:** "looked like"
- **Line 13:** "Cautious"
- **Line 14:** "Crumb"
- **Line 17:** "Oars," "Ocean"
- **Line 18:** "silver," "seam"
- **Line 19:** "Butterflies," "Banks"

ASSONANCE

Threads of assonance run through "A Bird, came down the Walk," subtly weaving the poem's sounds together. The speaker's use of assonance strengthens the language and makes it sound pleasant, but it also contributes to the poem's meaning, aligning with its ideas about the strange balance of nature.

Take a look, for instance, at the assonant long /i/ sound in line 11:

> They looked like frightened Beads, I thought,

The repetition of the /i/ sound in "like frightened" is particularly satisfying and musical, making the line feel melodic and cohesive. This assonance also highlights the word "frightened," emphasizing the image of the bird's frantic and fearful eyes.

Similarly, assonance appears in the last lines of the poem in a way that adds both beauty and meaning to the speaker's words:

> And he unrolled his feathers,
> And rowed him softer Home—
> Than Oars divide the Ocean,
> Too silver for a seam,
> Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon,
> Leap, plashless as they swim

In this section, assonance on the long /o/ sound connects the words "unrolled," "rowed," "home," and "ocean." This calls attention to the bird's sudden ascent into the sky, as well as to the speaker's simile comparing the bird to a rower. Meanwhile, the /oo/ and /ee/ sounds run through the final lines. The /ee/ sound appears in "seam" and "leap," while the /oo/ sound appears in "too" and "noon." This leads to a sound that is even and balanced, an effect that matches the description of the bird's graceful movements.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Walk"
- **Line 2:** "saw"
- **Line 7:** "sidewise"
- **Line 10:** "all abroad"
- **Line 11:** "like frightened," "I"
- **Line 12:** "Velvet Head"
- **Line 13:** "Cautious"
- **Line 14:** "offered"
- **Line 15:** "unrolled"
- **Line 16:** "rowed," "Home"
- **Line 17:** "Ocean"
- **Line 18:** "Too," "seam"
- **Line 19:** "Noon"
- **Line 20:** "Leap"

END-STOPPED LINE

Dickinson's poems often use emphatic end-stopped lines, and this one is no exception. The strong dash that ends many lines here—a classic Dickinson move—helps evoke the anxiety and alertness of both the speaker and the bird. Those dashes suggest a little pause, and might remind readers of a bird's hops as it makes its way along the ground on a worm-hunt. One of these end-stopped dashes even coincides with the bird's hop as it lets a beetle pass:

> And then, he drank a Dew
> From a convenient Grass—
> And then hopped sidewise to the Wall

The dash after "grass" marks an end-stop, inserting a short pause that then leads to a change in the bird's movement. This end-stop is particularly noticeable because it comes after an enjambed line, since "And then, he drank a Dew" runs uninterrupted into "From a convenient Grass—." This enjambment creates a momentary feeling of motion, meaning that the speaker carries momentum toward the end-stop after "Grass—." The pause then slows down the overall pace of the poem, making the speaker's tone sound measured and controlled again.

However, end-stops don't just slow down the speaker's language. In lines 9 through 12, the speaker's use of end-stopped lines actually helps illustrate the bird's quick movements:

> He glanced with rapid eyes,
> That hurried all abroad—
> They looked like frightened Beads, I thought,
> He stirred his Velvet Head.—

These end-stops help the verse move just as swiftly and suddenly as the bird's head does, since the dashes make it seem as if the speaker cuts off the line before it's fully finished. It's ambiguous whether "He glanced with rapid eyes" is enjambed or end-stopped, since the phrase could easily continue swiftly into the next line (enjambment) *or* receive a pause after "eyes." Either way, the other three lines in this stanza are all clearly end-stopped, and this creates an abrupt, halting rhythm that not only conveys the feeling of quick, anxious movement, but also breaks up the flow of the poem in a way that keeps it fresh and interesting.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Walk—"
- **Line 2:** "saw—"
- **Line 3:** "halves"
- **Line 4:** "raw,"
- **Line 6:** "Grass—"
- **Line 8:** "pass—"
- **Line 10:** "abroad—"
- **Line 11:** "thought,"
- **Line 12:** "Head.—"
- **Line 13:** "Cautious,"
- **Line 14:** "Crumb,"
- **Line 15:** "feathers,"
- **Line 16:** "Home—"
- **Line 18:** "seam,"

SIMILE

To the poem's speaker, the bird's eyes look "like frightened beads." This is a simile, but it's a slightly strange one, since it's unclear how a bead could ever be "frightened." However, the image of the "frightened beads" is also instantly vivid and evocative, bringing to mind a bird's glossy eyes moving frantically moving back and forth to scan for nearby threats. The simile makes the bird's eye feel solid, real, and perilously small: if a creature has eyes like "frightened beads," this would mean it must be a pretty tiny creature in a big, scary world.

The simile of the bead also suggests that this bird might be a *decorative* creature. Even as the speaker notices the fear in those little eyes, the speaker *also* observes the bird's "Velvet Head." This bead-eyed, velvet bird almost seems like something that has been sewn together—something that has been turned into a pretty and delicate object. This motivates the speaker to reach out to it, offering the animal a "Crumb" after viewing it in light of this simile as a beautiful and frightened little creature.

The speaker also seems to take on some of the bird's fear in another simile: "Like one in danger, Cautious, / I offered him a crumb." Here, the speaker becomes *like* the bird, clearly feeling the sense of "danger" that originally put a look of fear into the small animal's eyes.

The end of the poem is especially packed with similes, but the speaker combines these similes with important metaphors, too. In lines 15 and 16, for instance, the speaker says:

> And he unrolled his feathers,
> And rowed him softer Home—

This is a metaphor, since the speaker suggests that the bird's wings are oars that row his little body home. In lines 17 and 18, though, the speaker builds on this metaphor by offering up a simile, saying that these oars (the bird's wings) row him home *more softly* "Than Oars divide the Ocean, / Too silver for a seam." This is a *comparison* between the movement of the bird's wings and the movement of oars dipping into the ocean without making a splash—it is, therefore, a simile.

Finally, the speaker combines simile and metaphor even more

seamlessly in the final two lines by suggesting that the bird's wings (metaphorical oars) also move him along more gracefully than butterflies jumping off "Banks of Noon" and landing without a splash as they swim through the air. On the one hand, this is a simile because the speaker once again makes a comparison, saying that the movement of the bird's wings is *even more* swift than the movement of these butterflies. On the other hand, though, the image of butterflies in the water metaphorically presents the act of flight as a sort of swim through the air.

This combination of simile and metaphor adds a certain ambiguity to the end of the poem. Although the use of these devices doesn't necessarily make the poem harder to understand, the combination does lead to an abstract and layered feeling, one that makes the poem's images seem both vivid and strange.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "They looked like frightened Beads, I thought,"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Like one in danger, Cautious, / I offered him a Crumb,"
- **Lines 16-20:** "And rowed him softer Home— / Than Oars divide the Ocean, / Too silver for a seam, / Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon, / Leap, plashless as they swim"

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker of "A Bird, came down the Walk" sees a lot of human personality in the bird. Right from the beginning, the speaker refers to the bird as a "he." This little bird behaves with brutal indifference to an angle worm, who is also personified as a "fellow" and therefore seems like the victim of a terrible crime when the bird bites him in half and devours him "raw." But the speaker also portrays the bird as a kindly gentleman: he's the soul of courtesy to a passing beetle, whom he gladly makes way for on the small path.

This personification illustrates both the ways in which the speaker feels close to the bird *and* the ways in which nature can feel shocking and strange to human observers. The personified bird obeys certain rules and customs that seem oddly human, but it also deviates pretty significantly from the codes and customs of human life—after all, devouring another person in the street obviously isn't considered acceptable in human society.

This combination of human and animal traits that the speaker recognizes in the bird suggests that the speaker views the natural world as simultaneously familiar and unnervingly strange. The personification of the bird also makes its sudden flight feel all the more remarkable and beautiful, since it leaps up and gracefully rises through the air—something humans definitely can't do.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "He did not know I saw— / He bit an Angle Worm in halves / And ate the fellow, raw,"
- **Lines 5-8:** "And then, he drank a Dew / From a convenient Grass— / And then hopped sidewise to the Wall / To let a Beetle pass—"

VOCABULARY

Angle Worm (Line 3) - An earthworm. These worms are sometimes called "angle worms" because fishers (also known as "anglers") like to use them as bait!

Abroad (Line 10) - All around or in different directions.

Seam (Line 18) - The place where two pieces of something join together—often used to describe connective stitching in fabric.

Banks of Noon (Line 19) - An abstract phrase that refers to the middle of the day as a ledge or cliff.

Plashless (Line 20) - Without splashing. (A "plash" is a splash.)

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A Bird, came down the Walk" is a 20-line poem divided into five quatrains (four-line stanzas). Like most of Dickinson's work, it invents its own form, following no particular structure other than the general organization of its stanzas. At the same time, its simple iambic rhythms (all its da-DUM beats) and its quatrains both draw on old folk traditions like the ballad and the hymn. This reflects Dickinson's tendency to write poetry reminiscent of church hymns, as well as the inspiration she drew from the work of English Romantic poets like Wordsworth, who often used these traditional forms.

The poem's simple shape reflects the simplicity of a direct encounter with the natural world—an encounter that is, like the poem's form, straightforward but still poetic and beautiful. The speaker doesn't have to go into the wilderness and wrestle a bear in order to reflect on both the danger and the glory of nature: both of these things are right in front of the speaker on an ordinary walkway. The basic structure of the poem helps emphasize this idea.

METER

"A Bird, came down the Walk" uses both iambic trimeter and iambic tetrameter. Iambic trimeter is a line made up of three iambs, or metrical feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). A line of iambic tetrameter, on the other hand, is made up of four iambs (four da-DUMs).

These are both pretty familiar meters in English poetry and song, and even appear in everything from nursery rhymes to jingles in advertisements. Dickinson liked the simplicity and punch of this kind of meter, using some combination of iambic trimeter and iambic tetrameter in the vast majority of her poems.

For an example of what the poem's meter looks like in context, consider lines 9 through 12:

> He glanced | with ra- | pid eyes,
> That hur-| ried all | abroad—
> They looked | like fright- | ened Beads, | I thought,
> He stirred | his Vel- | vet Head.—

This simple pattern of two lines of trimeter, one of tetrameter, and a final line of trimeter is consistent throughout the poem. There are, however, certain deviations that keep the rhythm fresh and interesting. For example, the third line in the fourth stanza is missing a final stress:

> And he | unrolled | his feath- | ers,

Even though it doesn't have eight syllables, this line is still in iambic tetrameter. It is what's known as a catalectic line, meaning that it is missing its final stressed beat. The overall result has a falling, off-kilter quality. There is, then, an odd pause just after the bird "unroll[s] his feathers," infusing the poem with a momentary sense of anticipation and astonishment.

RHYME SCHEME

"A Bird, came down the Walk" uses an old-fashioned rhyme scheme drawn from folk songs and ballads. The stanzas feature the pattern:

> ABCB

Take the first four lines:

> A Bird, came down the Walk—
> He did not know I saw—
> He bit an Angle Worm in halves
> And ate the fellow, raw,

This establishes the rhyme scheme that appears throughout the entire poem. Sometimes, though, there is a twist because the speaker uses slant rhyme. For example, take a look at the third stanza:

> He glanced with rapid eyes,
> That hurried all abroad—
> They looked like frightened Beads, I thought,
> He stirred his Velvet Head.—

The two B rhymes here—"abroad" and "Head"—share some matching sounds, but they don't rhyme perfectly. This is textbook slant rhyme, and one of Dickinson's favorite poetic tricks. A slant rhyme also occurs between the words "abroad" and "thought," both of which feature the assonant /ah/ sound.

Other instances of slant rhyme appear in the fourth and fifth stanzas, with "Crumb" and "Home" in the fourth stanza and "seam" and "swim" in the fifth stanza. This gives the poem an offhand, lilting sound, creating not a precise rhyme pattern, but one that still features words that feel subtly similar to each other. This balance of similarity and difference reflects the speaker's attempted connection with the bird—even though the bird seems oddly human-like, the speaker still marvels at the beautiful ways in which it is different from human beings.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "A Bird, came down the Walk" has a deep fascination with nature—and a healthy respect for it. The speaker focuses intently on the movements and actions of a single bird, even seeming to take on some of the bird's own feelings by sharing its caution and anxiety regarding the potential dangers of the surrounding world.

This absorption in nature means that the speaker feels a certain connection to the bird, indicating that the speaker is especially attuned to nature. Other than these details, the poem doesn't offer much identifying information about the speaker, who is simply a person who has tapped into the beauty and strangeness of the natural world.

SETTING

"A Bird, came down the Walk" takes place on some sort of walkway or path. Despite the ordinary, unremarkable aspect of this setting, the speaker's surrounding environment comes to feel like it's full of potential danger. The speaker conveys this unsettled feeling by focusing on the bird's movements and its murder of an innocent worm. The speaker also describes the bird's sense of fear and jumpiness, infusing the poem with a certain anxiety.

At the same time, though, the poem also sets forth a beautiful scene that most likely takes place in the spring or summer. It is, after all, butterfly season, and the speaker's observations eventually lead to the tranquil and wonderful image of the bird in graceful flight. The setting, then, is both unsettling *and* pleasant—a combination that reflects the natural world's range of danger and beauty.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

While Emily Dickinson 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.

One way that Dickinson fits right in with her fellow American Romantics, though, is in her deep interest in the natural world—and especially in the way it intersects with the spiritual world. The way that transcendent beauty arises from an everyday bird at the end of "A Bird, came down the Walk" also echoes the work of the earlier English Romantics, whose poetry deeply influenced her and her fellow American writers of the period. William Wordsworth had a particularly noticeable impact on both Dickinson's stylistic and thematic approaches. Similar to Dickinson, Wordsworth often wrote about nature and beauty, and he frequently used old poetic forms like the ballad.

Unknown during her lifetime, Dickinson led a very private life but became one of the world's most famous and beloved poets after her death, when her sister discovered and published a secret stash of her poems. Later artists of all stripes claim Dickinson as an influence, and not just writers: artists from the composer Samuel Barber to the director Jane Campion have responded to Dickinson's poetry in their work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dickinson's life coincided with the horrors of the American Civil War, which took place during the early 1860s, a period widely considered to be the poet's most prolific period. However, Dickinson's poetry didn't necessarily reflect the state of the war-torn nation, instead focusing mainly on the beauty of nature. The relatively quiet quality of her poetry aligns with her personal life, since Dickinson led a very independent existence and largely stayed out of the public eye.

Although Dickinson's poetry didn't set forth themes that were all that relevant to the Civil War, it *did* sync up with idealistic new movements aimed at preserving the natural world. As part of the 19th-century effort toward environmental conservation, many people advocated for the development of the country's first national parks (Yellowstone, for example, was opened in 1890, just one year before the publication of Dickinson's *Poems*).

This idea of protecting natural wonders was a novel one in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution—a time when nature was often seen as a source of wealth rather than as a fount of beauty. The Transcendentalist movement followed quickly after the Industrial Revolution, signalling a return to nature and the many benefits of stopping to appreciate the environment. Dickinson's work can be seen as an extension of this tradition, and "A Bird, came down the Walk—" perfectly exemplifies this naturalist approach, since the poem spotlights a simple but transcendent experience in the natural world.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Background on the Poem's Punctuation — Read an excerpt of scholar Helen Vendler's essay on how Dickinson's punctuation works in this poem. The choice between a comma and a period makes a big difference! (https://books.google.com/books?id=UJn05d-LWwsC&newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&lpg=PP1&dq=Dickinson
- The Emily Dickinson Museum — Visit the website of the Emily Dickinson museum for more information about her life and work. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/)
- A Manuscript of the Poem — See "A Bird, came down the Walk" in Dickinson's own handwriting. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/79722)
- The Poetry Foundation's Dickinson Page — Read a short biography of Dickinson, and find links to more of her poetry. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)
- A Song Inspired by the Poem — Listen to a piece of instrumental music based on this poem. (https://youtu.be/YhI93aygqXU)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- A narrow Fellow in the Grass
- As imperceptibly as grief
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- I started Early — Took my Dog —
- I taste a liquor never brewed
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- Success is counted sweetest
- Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
- There's a certain Slant of light
- This is my letter to the world
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

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