

Hope is the thing with feathers



POEM TEXT

- 1 "Hope" is the thing with feathers -
- 2 That perches in the soul -
- 3 And sings the tune without the words -
- 4 And never stops - at all -
- 5 And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
- 6 And sore must be the storm -
- 7 That could abash the little Bird
- 8 That kept so many warm -
- 9 I've heard it in the coldest land -
- 10 And on the strangest Sea -
- 11 Yet - never - in Extremity,
- 12 It asked a crumb - of me.



SUMMARY

The speaker defines "Hope" as a feathered creature that dwells inside the human spirit. This feathery thing sings a wordless tune, not stopping under any circumstances.

Its tune sounds best when heard in fierce winds. Only an incredibly severe storm could stop this bird from singing. The "Hope" bird has made many people feel warm.

The speaker has heard the bird's singing in the coldest places, and on the weirdest seas. But in the speaker's experiences, even the most extreme ones, the bird has never asked for anything in return.



THEMES



HOPE

"Hope is the thing with feathers" is a kind of hymn of praise, written to honor the human capacity for hope.

Using [extended metaphor](#), the poem portrays hope as a bird that lives within the human soul; this bird sings come rain or shine, gale or storm, good times or bad. The poem argues that hope is miraculous and almost impossible to defeat.

Furthermore, hope never asks for anything in return—it costs nothing for people to maintain hope. By extension, then, "Hope is the thing with feathers" implores its readers to make good use of hope—and to see it as an essential, deeply valuable part

of themselves.

The poem begins by establishing its key metaphor—that hope is a bird. It then tells the reader more about this bird, adding detail, before showing it in different situations. The poem concludes by stating that, despite all it does, hope never asks for anything from the speaker. Overall, then, the poem turns hope into a vivid imagined character in order to show how important it is, both to individuals and to humanity as a whole.

The poem initially defines hope as "the thing with feathers." Though it's obvious that this is a bird (as confirmed in line 7), the unusualness of this first description shows that the poem wants the reader to look afresh at hope—to see hope with clear eyes and not take it for granted. Starting with "hope is a bird" would have the same literal meaning but would feel much less surprising, and the surprise element helps establish the poem's purpose of redefining hope.

This "Hope" bird "perches" in the soul, showing that the soul itself is hope's home. Hope is thus directly linked with the human spirit, where it sings without ever stopping. This perseverance, then, is a representation of humanity's infinite capacity for hope. Even in the depths of despair, the poem seems to say, people can still have hope—and this hope will sustain them. Indeed, the bird sings "sweetest" in the storm. In other words, hope shows its importance in times of adversity and seems to guide people through that adversity. This point could apply to humanity's challenges in a general sense, or it could relate to more personal experiences like individual grief and loss. In either case, hope gives people the strength to carry on, and it's at its most useful when circumstances are at their worst.

Of course, there might be times when people do seem to lose their strength—but, the poem argues, hope still plays an important role in these situations. The poem demonstrates this by gesturing towards the sheer number of people ("so many") who have been sustained by hope, saying that it would have to be a truly "sore" "storm" that could diminish the strength of "the little Bird." Hope, it seems, can keep people "warm" even in the worst situations.

And though hope is so essential to human life, the beauty of it—according to the poem—is that it requires practically nothing of people. Hope costs nothing, not a "crumb"—yet it can literally and figuratively keep people alive. With hope, people can make it through the hardest of times—they just have to listen to "the little Bird" singing its tune. Overall, then, "Hope is the thing with feathers" implores its readers to value their capacity for hope—and to recognize that it's never really gone. Without becoming overly specific, the poem argues that hope can be especially helpful in the most extreme situations and

that people should therefore rely on it as a precious resource.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

*"Hope" is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -*

This poem is one of a number of works by Dickinson which work as a kind of extended definition, taking a particular word and casting it in a new, surprising light. Often, Dickinson does this through taking abstract concepts and applying concrete ideas or images to them—which happens in this poem by making "hope" into a bird. Of all Dickinson's "definition" poems, this is probably the most well-known. The opening line makes the poem's intentions clear—it will aim to explain how hope is like a bird, and why that connection is important in the first place.

This said, it's important to note that the poem doesn't start by stating its [metaphor](#) directly; it doesn't say that "hope is a bird." Aside from being much less interesting, a line like that would require less imaginative engagement on the reader's part. Instead, hope is "the thing with feathers." The reader might well think of a bird immediately, but the phrase allows for a certain conceptual distance that justifies the rest of the poem—the following lines will *explain* what this "thing" is, and in what way it represents hope. This slightly mysterious beginning implies that people might not always recognize their own capacity for hope. The delicate [consonance](#) of /th/ in "thing," "feathers," and "that" also helps the poem get off to a gentle start, as though it is feeling its way into this new definition of hope. The meter of the line adds to this gentleness too. It's the only one in the poem to end with an unstressed syllable (apart from possibly line 11):

"Hope" is | the thing | with fea- | -thers -

The [trochaic](#) first foot also places strong emphasis on the word "hope," which is, of course, the whole point of the poem: to argue for the importance of hope.

The second word of line 2, for most readers, probably confirms that this "Hope" thing is indeed a bird. "Perch" is a verb used almost exclusively for birds, and as a noun, the word has a connotation of signifying the bird's home or the place where it is at rest (think of how a bird in a cage rests on its perch). This "Hope" bird, the reader now knows, rests within "the soul," which is the poem's way of saying that hope is a fundamental part of being a human. The image also suggests that hope is

always present—it's something that people can always return to, just as a bird returns to its perch.

LINES 3-4

*And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -*

In lines 3 and 4, the poem begins to develop its [extended metaphor](#)—that "Hope" is a bird that "perches in the soul." Here, the bird is depicted singing its "tune," which is, of course, wordless. Most significantly, this is a song without end. In other words, no matter what comes its way, the "Hope" bird *always* keeps on singing.

The act of singing functions as a symbol. To sing is to create and to respond to the world emotionally—in other words, it's a way of engaging with life. This "tune," perhaps, relates to the kind of singing that humans do. But birdsong specifically also has its own symbolic meaning. It represents the whole of nature and its immense beauty, which are often sources of comfort and inspiration to humans. What's more, nature also has connotations of being endless and constant; its cycles continue despite the challenges of individual humans' lives. The poem, then, starts to build the sense of something precious, eternal, and inspiring.

This tuneful song is played out by the [consonance](#) of the two lines, with the /n/ sound featuring like a musical note that chimes throughout:

*And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -*

The [slant rhyme](#) between "all" and "soul" in line 2 also has a pleasing musical effect, mirroring the ideas of pattern and variation that underlie most music.

If the bird's song is an expression of hopefulness, then the fact that it never stops suggests that there is no situation which is beyond hope. Indeed, the use of [polysyndeton](#) here through the repeated "ands" is suggestive of perseverance—and this sense of unstoppable strength continues in the first half of the following stanza. "And" is also a connective word that helps the poem hint at the way hope connects one moment in time—which might be a moment of great difficulty—with an imagined future moment in which things are better.

LINES 5-8

*And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -*

The second stanza expands on lines 3 and 4. These lines make it clear that not only does the "Hope" bird's song never stop, it is actually sweetest "in the Gale"—that is, in the middle of the storm. In other words, the song of hope *increases* in power and

beauty when it is faced with difficult circumstances. Here the poem uses [pathetic fallacy](#), with the mention of gales and storms clearly meant to gesture towards the times when life gets tough. But these are precisely the times when hope is most powerful—when it can carry people through difficulty by helping them hold on to their visions of the future. It's almost as if the song *has* to be more beautiful and strong in these storms, because that's when it's most needed.

In fact, the bird called "Hope" is presented as practically impossible to defeat. The speaker can barely imagine a time when the spirit of "the little Bird" could be "abashed," which essentially means diminished and/or beaten. Put simply, Hope acts as a comfort even at the worst of times. The [polysyndeton](#) of the repeated "ands," which was established in lines 3 and 4, once again creates a sense of perseverance or strength. Meanwhile, the [consonance](#) of /b/ sounds in "abash" and "Bird" sounds like a kind of sonic bombardment, bringing to life the kind of violent storm that the speaker is trying to imagine.

That /b/ consonance also forms part of a playful music throughout the stanza, foregrounding the ability of the bird to keep singing—and people to keep hoping—in the face of adversity. The [sibilant](#) /s/ sounds in "sweetest," "is," "sore," "storm," and "so" are part of this effect too. No matter what happens, the bird of Hope keeps singing, and the /s/ sound creates a whistling effect that helps readers hear a kind of song in the poem itself.

Line 8 gestures towards the importance of hope for all of humanity. Hope has kept "so many warm" because it is a universal feeling, one which has pulled people through some of the most horrible experiences imaginable. Warmth is often associated with both emotions and physical survival, so it seems that hope can both literally and metaphorically keep people alive—which is why the speaker wants the reader to value and cherish it.

LINES 9-10

*I've heard it in the chilliest land -
And on the strangest Sea -*

In lines 9 and 10, the speaker speaks of themselves in the first person for the first time. This shift starts to put what's come before into context, shifting from the previous stanza's broad focus ("so many") to a more individual examination of hope's power.

Here, the reader learns that the speaker isn't preaching about hope from up on high—they have *personal* experience of hope. The speaker knows how vital hope is to human life, and how important it is to be reminded of hope's power (which is, after all, one of the main purposes of the poem). This part of the poem emphasizes the extremes of hope or, more specifically, the widely varying places in which hope can be found. As part of the [extended metaphor](#), the speaker characterizes these extremes as the "chillest land" and the "strangest sea."

"Chillest," of course, doesn't mean chill in the sense of being relaxed—it means coldest, with connotations of fear too (as in the phrase "that gives me the chills"). This location comes in the context of the speaker's own experience, signaled by the first person pronoun and the use of the past tense. At a time of greatest fear, the speaker heard the song of hope—and this sustained them. Likewise, when the speaker was "on the strangest Sea"—perhaps a coded way of talking about times when life is at its most confusing—they heard hope then, too. The [alliterative](#) /s/ sound of "strangest Sea" calls back to that same musical /s/ in the previous two stanzas, reinforcing the idea that hope's song is present anywhere and everywhere.

In other words, hope has gotten the speaker through some of life's most challenging experiences—and by offering this description of the speaker's very personal, individual experience, the poem aims to remind readers that hope can do the same for them.

LINES 11-12

*Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.*

Having established the importance of "Hope" by giving it a new, surprising definition ("the thing with feathers"), the poem concludes by adding one more fact in praise of hope. Even in the speaker's time of greatest need ("in Extremity"), the reader learns, hope never required anything of the speaker—not "a crumb." Part of hope's appeal, then, is that it costs very little and yet can help people through great difficulty. In a way, the speaker is praising the very fact that hope exists by pointing out how little it needs to thrive. The poem is trying to make the reader see the miracle of hope and appreciate how amazing it is that humans are equipped with it.

The "Yet" in line 11 functions as a kind of turn, steering the poem into its conclusion. The following [caesurae](#) that enclose "never" add extra emphasis to that word, foregrounding the simple but beautiful fact that hope *never* asks for anything in exchange for all its benefits. Essentially, the speaker is asking the reader to look once more at all the good that hope does—and how little hope itself needs. This is, of course, part of hope's effectiveness: it is able to help people in dire need precisely because it requires very little, and so it still has a place in situations where resources (even basic necessities like "crumbs" of bread) are scarce.

With this final point, the poem emphasizes that there is no downside to relying on hope. The only thing that hope needs in order to work its magic is for people to listen to its eternal song—which, the speaker seems to hope, readers will begin to do through reading this poem itself.



SYMBOLS



BIRDSONG

Through [extended metaphor](#), hope is transformed into a bird that rests within the human soul. As part of this metaphor, the poem draws a symbolic link between birdsong and the indomitable (undefeatable) power of hope. The song is the musical expression of hope, a small signal of joy that can be heard even in the worst of times. It is also a wordless "tune," which indicates that is something deeply felt and innate in humans; that is, hope is almost beyond language itself.

In fact, the song sounds "sweetest" when it is heard "in the Gale." That is, hope is most effective in times of trouble. Its song links difficult times in the present with better times to come.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "sings the tune"
- **Line 5:** "And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -"



POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

The poem uses [anaphora](#) in lines 7 and 8, though the [polysyndeton](#) (the "ands") of lines 3 through 6 is a type of anaphora too.

The anaphora works (along with the polysyndeton) to create an atmosphere of intense perseverance throughout the entire poem. One of the poem's main points is that hope is almost impossible to defeat, which is why it is so important to humanity—indeed, hope is *most* useful when times are hardest. The repetitive line beginnings, then, evoke strength—the ability to push on one from moment to the next without losing any momentum. Indeed, lines 5 through 8 have to literally weather the storm that they describe, with the "ands" and "thats" working like anchors steadying a ship.

In fact, "ands" and "thats" form the beginnings of eight out of the poem's twelve lines—two thirds of the entire poem. Apart from the first line, which works as an introduction, and the lines in the final stanza that deal with the speaker's personal experience, *every* line is anaphoric. In other words, anaphora is everywhere—just like hope.

There is another way of looking at this anaphora, too. Part of the "Hope" bird's power is in its song, which is a symbol of joy, beauty, and strength. Since one way of defining music is by thinking of it as the patterned organization and variation of sound, then the anaphora can be read as part of the bird's melody too. That is, it helps the lines combine repetition and

variation in much the same way that real birdsong might.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "That"
- **Line 3:** "And"
- **Line 4:** "And"
- **Line 5:** "And"
- **Line 6:** "And"
- **Line 7:** "That"
- **Line 8:** "That"
- **Line 10:** "And"

CONSONANCE

"Hope is the thing with feathers" uses gentle [consonance](#) to create a sense of music and melody. This is important because a key part of the hope-as-a-bird [metaphor](#) is the bird's song. The "Hope" bird seems to sing as a celebration of life and as a kind of ritual that anticipates better things to come—and, of course, this song "never stops." Accordingly, it makes sense that the poem itself contains some musical effects that bring this metaphorical song to life.

The most notable moments of consonance are in lines 3 and 4, with their repeated /n/, /w/, and /s/ sounds:

And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

It makes sense that the poem's sound becomes more obviously patterned here, because that's exactly what it's discussing: patterns of sound that form the bird's music.

This isn't the only example of playful musicality: there are also the whistling /s/ sounds in words such as "sweetest," "sore," "must," and "storm" (an effect also known as [sibilance](#)). Also note how the percussive /b/ sounds in lines 6 and 7 ("be," "abash," and "bird") have a subtly violent effect, bringing to life the storms that the "little Bird" of hope has to bear. Similar instances throughout underscore the poem's meaning while also reinforcing its musical feel.

One other example of consonance worth noting in particular is in line 1:

"Hope" is the thing with feathers -

Here the consonance works a little differently from above, creating a sound of gentleness and delicateness with the soft /th/. This subtle effect introduces the "thing with feathers" as something sweet and gentle, even before the reader learns much about what this "thing" really is.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "s," "th," "th," "th," "th," "s"
- **Line 2:** "Th," "s," "th," "s"
- **Line 3:** "n," "s," "s," "n," "w," "w," "s"
- **Line 4:** "n," "n," "s," "s"
- **Line 5:** "n," "s," "s," "n," "s," "d"
- **Line 6:** "n," "d," "s," "m," "b," "s," "m"
- **Line 7:** "Th," "b," "B"
- **Line 9:** "d," "ll," "s," "l," "d"
- **Line 10:** "d," "s," "s," "S"
- **Line 12:** "s," "m," "m"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

This poem is a popular example of one of Dickinson's most famous techniques—the "definition poem." In such poems, Dickinson describes something abstract—in this case "hope"—using concrete terms and images. These poems have a wonderful way of making their readers look at a familiar concept in a fresh light.

In order to make this poetic form work, Dickinson employs [metaphor](#) that extends all the way from line 1 to line 12—making it [extended metaphor](#). In this poem, "hope" is transformed into a kind of bird. And not just any bird—one that lives within the human soul. The poem then has to justify this connection, which it does so mostly by linking "hope" and birdsong. Essentially, hope takes the shape of the bird's song, and this singing is representative of both hope's perseverance and its sweetness. That is, the bird sings even in the worst of storms, mainly because hope is actually most useful when people are going through tough times.

The use of extended metaphor also works beautifully because it reveals its connections between "hope" and the bird gradually over the course of the poem. This slow build gently guides the reader toward a deeper understanding of hope, just as the bird's song guides people toward strength in times of trouble. That's why the first line doesn't just say "hope is a bird." Instead, it draws readers in with a bit of surprise and mystery, helping them make the same connections in real time that the speaker describes having figured out through personal experience.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

PATHETIC FALLACY

[Pathetic fallacy](#) is used in the second stanza. The "gales" and "storms" represent difficult times in life, perhaps the times when hope is most needed. Indeed, it is in these moments that the song of the "Hope" bird sounds sweetest, presumably because it sings of better times to come and reminds those who listen to it that the world isn't all bad. The poem is a celebration

of this aspect of being human: the ability to look forward as a way of coping with the present.

The pathetic fallacy also supports the poem's [extended metaphor](#) because it is difficult for sound (in this case, birdsong) to travel effectively in strong winds. The idea of storms makes it vividly clear why it's at these times that the song of hope is "sweetest"—it's because more difficult circumstances call for even more strength and determination than usual.

In line 8, the pathetic fallacy extends by equating happiness with warmth, which, in the context of discussing weather, suggests sunshine and summer—traditionally times when people feel calm and contented.

Lines 9 and 10 pick up on this relationship between weather and mood, relating it to geographical locations. Here, the "chillest land" represents moments of fear, while the "strangest Sea" is perhaps a reference to those times when life seems most confusing. But in all of these challenging situations, the song of the "Hope" bird can still be heard, again showing that circumstances don't matter when it comes to hope; hope is always present.

Where Pathetic Fallacy appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard - / And sore must be the storm - / That could abash the little Bird / That kept so many warm -"
- **Lines 9-10:** "I've heard it in the chillest land - / And on the strangest Sea -"

POLYSYNDETON

[Polysyndeton](#) is used in lines 3 to 6 with the repeated "ands" at the start of the lines. This is part of the overall [anaphora](#) that runs from lines 2 to 8.

In lines 3 to 6, the poem talks about the pretty much unbreakable spirit of the bird—which is itself, of course, an [extended metaphor](#) for hope. As the poem suggests, hope is most important in times of greatest need. When life is especially tough, sometimes hope is all people have to pull them through. In its way, hope is a kind of connection between two moments: the challenging present and the hoped-for future, in which things improve. The use of "and" in these lines subtly gestures towards this aspect of hope, the way it joins the present and the future. "And" is itself a connecting word, here linking one line to the next as the speaker discusses the bravery and determination of the little "Hope" bird.

The repeated "ands" also create a sense of perseverance. If hope is about refusing to let the bad things in life get the better of you, then the "ands" sound like the poem's way of portraying people's ability to keep moving.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "And"
- **Line 4:** "And"
- **Line 5:** "And"
- **Line 6:** "And"
- **Line 10:** "And"

ALLITERATION

"Hope is the Thing with Feathers" is relatively light on alliteration compared with some of Dickinson's other poems. It is used in line 3 in the two /w/ sounds: "without the words." This is perhaps to signal the start of the poem's "tunefulness," the same line having already made mention of the "Hope" bird's song. It also foregrounds the idea that this is a song without language by briefly emphasizing the artifice of language. That is, the obvious alliteration draws the reader's attention to the way that language is constructed—and that some feelings and emotions perhaps go beyond language itself (as is claimed of hope).

The other main alliteration is in the /s/ sound, which is also known as [sibilance](#). This combines with other [consonance](#) to create a playful sense of music running through the poem, in keeping with the introduction of the "Hope" bird's song. This song represents the bold spirit of the "Hope" bird. The sibilance also creates a kind of whistling sound, which is often associated with birdsong (indeed, some birdsongs are categorized as sibilant). The bird's song is sung through the gentle manipulation of sound throughout the poem, helping the poem to create a kind of musical performance of the thing that it is describing.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "th," "th"
- **Line 2:** "s"
- **Line 3:** "s," "w," "w"
- **Line 4:** "s"
- **Line 5:** "s"
- **Line 6:** "s," "s"
- **Line 10:** "s," "S"
- **Line 12:** "a," "a"

ASSONANCE

The [assonance](#) in "Hope is the Thing with Feathers" is quite subtle, less obvious than in other Dickinson poems. The first line makes gentle use of /i/ sounds:

"Hope" is the thing with feathers -

If the line is about defining "Hope," then the precision of the assonance helps it feel like the speaker is honing in on this

definition. It's also quite a delicate sound, which helps conjure the image of this "Hope" bird as a small creature with the human soul.

The other evocative use of assonance is in line 6, with the shared /o/ sound between "sore" and "storm." Here, the speaker is trying to imagine a storm so violent that it would stop the bird from singing. Of course, this is part of poem's [extended metaphor](#)—so the speaker is also trying to imagine times in life when all hope is gone. The long vowel sounds help conjure this sense of pain, almost sounding like the cries of a wounded animal. This effect is short-lived because the poem argues overwhelmingly in favor of the power of hope, and leaves little room for the possibility of genuine hopelessness.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 6:** "o," "o"
- **Line 9:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 11:** "e," "e," "e"

**VOCABULARY**

Perches (Line 2) - To perch is to alight or come to rest on something, as a bird might do on a branch. A perch can also be a noun, denoting the object being landed on.

Gale (Line 5) - A strong wind.

Sore (Line 6) - This is an archaic use of the word that means "severe." The suggestion of pain is also at play, given that this relates to people's experiences rather than actual storms.

Abash (Line 7) - To abash someone is to make them feel embarrassed or ashamed (as suggested by the word "bashful").

Chillest (Line 9) - This is nothing to do with the modern sense of "chill" meaning "relaxed." It means "chilliest"—the most cold. It also relates to chills of fear, as in the phrase "so and so gives me the chills."

Extremity (Line 11) - This relates to the speaker's personal experiences—the times in life that they have found the most difficult (the most extreme).

Crumb (Line 12) - A very small bit or piece of something. As in: hope, for all the good that it does, has never asked for a single little bit of anything in return.

**FORM, METER, & RHYME****FORM**

"Hope is the thing with feathers" is one of a number by Dickinson which can perhaps be called her "definition poems." These are poems that start with an abstract concept (here,

"hope"), followed by an "is," which is in turn followed by the main body of the poem that explains and justifies the comparison. This isn't done to show off the poet's skill of comparison and imagery, but to cast fresh light on the concept itself. Here, of course, hope is redefined as a bird, specifically one that dwells within the human soul. There are a number of poems that work in a similar way—there are even two others that also define "hope:" "Hope is a strange invention" and "Hope is a subtle glutton."

Put broadly, the poem is one long [extended metaphor](#), written in three [quatrain](#) stanzas. The first stanza introduces the metaphor and the bird's song; the second demonstrates the bird's resilience; and the third brings the poem into the more personal experience of the speaker.

METER

"Hope is the thing with feathers" has a fairly regular meter that alternates between lines. Each stanza begins with a line of [iambic tetrameter](#) (four poetic feet, each with a da DUM syllable pattern) followed by a line of iambic trimeter (three feet of the same unstressed-stressed pattern). This pattern then repeats in the second half of each stanza too, making the entire poem conform to this alternating pattern. In fact, all lines follow this scheme except for the first. To take the second [quatrain](#) as an example, the pattern is as follows:

And sweet- | est - in | the Gale - | is heard - |
 And sore | must be | the storm - |
 That could | a-bash | the litt- | le Bird |
 That kept | so man-| y warm - |

The regularity of the meter makes the poem sound musical, like a song. This makes sense, as much of it is about the "Hope" bird's singing. Indeed, this metrical scheme is often called "hymn meter" precisely because it lends itself well to being sung. A number of church hymns follow this pattern—as do many Dickinson poems (e.g. "[Because I Could not Stop for Death](#)"). This meter is also known as "[common meter](#)."

The first line notably stands out in this otherwise metrically stable poem, and has two variations in the meter. The first foot opens with a [trochee](#) (stressed-unstressed), which places strong emphasis on the word "hope"—which is, after all, the poem's main subject. The other difference is that the final foot is catalectic, which means that it is missing a syllable. In this case, there would be a final stressed syllable after "feathers"—but the fact that there isn't makes the line sound much more gentle and, indeed, feather-like:

"Hope" is | the thing | with fea-| thers -

RHYME SCHEME

"Hope is the thing with feathers" has a fairly regular rhyme

scheme. The first two stanzas are rhymed:

ABAB

The final stanza is a little different:

ABBB

The rhymes combine with other poetic elements to create a musical-sounding poem, which is in keeping with the discussion of birdsong.

The first stanza also uses [slant rhymes](#), which is characteristic of Dickinson's poetry: feathers/words, soul/all. Perhaps this is because the poem is still feeling its way into its redefinition of "Hope"; or perhaps it evokes the preciousness of the small, feathery bird.

In the second stanza, the rhymes are more solid: heard/bird and storm/warm. Seeing as this stanza discusses the bird singing through storms, it makes sense that the "volume" of the rhymes here is louder. The bird has to sing louder to be heard in such strong winds—just as hope is at its most useful in times of distress.

The triple rhyme in the poem's last three lines—Sea/Extremity/me—is suggestive of the speaker's personal experiences. That is, the increase in rhymes hints at the "extremity" of the times that the speaker is describing—those moments when life is at its toughest.



SPEAKER

The speaker in "Hope is the thing with feathers" is unspecified. Critics do draw parallels between the speaker of Dickinson's poems and the poet herself, but it would do a disservice to the power of her poetry by limiting its interpretation to autobiography. As with a number of Dickinson's poems, the speaker here seeks to offer up a new definition of an abstract concept: in this case, hope. This is a kind of imaginative challenge to both the speaker and the reader—the former must justify the [metaphor](#) (hope as a bird) and the latter must go on that journey with them in order to see the abstract concept afresh.

In the first two stanzas, the speaker talks in universal terms about the "Hope" bird. It's in the final stanza that the speaker's authority to speak on the subject becomes clear. Here, the speaker relates how the metaphorical bird of hope helped the speaker through tough times—yet never asked a "crumb" in return. The poem generally has a confident and happy tone which is felt to be partly based on the way in which hope has helped the speaker through these difficult times. In other words, this person is talking from experience—and wants to gently remind the reader of the power of hope.



SETTING

"Hope is the thing with feathers" is one of a number of Dickinson poems that takes an abstract concept and refreshes it with concrete language and images. Here, there is one [extended metaphor](#) throughout: hope is a bird. The setting of the poem plays out as metaphor grows, and subtly changes from stanza to stanza. Thought of in the broadest terms, the whole poem takes place in the speaker's mind—or, perhaps, in the space between the speaker and the reader. That is, the speaker asks the reader to follow along on an imaginative journey that justifies the idea that hope can be thought of as a bird.

More specifically, the first stanza introduces the human soul as a kind of location in which the "Hope" bird lives. The second stanza conjures up storms and gales, through which the song of hope can still be heard (and, in fact, sounds sweeter). The final stanza brings the poem more into the realm of personal experience, with the speaker showing how hope has helped them. The setting at the end, then, is the speaker's world.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), one of the world's most influential and beloved poets, might never have been known at all. During her lifetime, she published only a handful of the nearly 1,800 poems she composed, preferring to keep much of her writing private. If Dickinson's sister Lavinia hadn't discovered a trunkful of poetry hidden in Dickinson's bedroom after her death, that poetry could have been lost.

Perhaps it's partly because of her separation from the literary mainstream that Dickinson's poetry is so idiosyncratic and distinctive. While her interest in the power of nature and the workings of the soul mark her as a voice of the American Romantic movement, her work didn't sound like anyone else's. Combining the [common meter](#) rhythms of hymns with strange, spiky, dash-riddled [diction](#), Dickinson's poems often plumbed eerie psychological depths over the course of only a few lines.

Dickinson was inspired both by contemporary American Transcendentalists—like Emerson, whose essays on [self-reliance](#) she deeply admired—and by the work of earlier English writers like [Charlotte Brontë](#) and [William Wordsworth](#). All these writers shared an interest in the lives of ordinary people and struggled for inner freedom in a 19th-century world that often demanded conformity.

"Hope is the thing with Feathers" belongs to the category of Dickinson's work that might be called "definition poems." In these, the speaker sets out an abstract noun which is then discussed in concrete terms and images; this refreshes the

abstract concept and casts it in a new light. Other famous poems that follow a similar setup are "[Grief is a Mouse](#)" and "[Fame is a Bee](#)." Indeed, there are two other similar poems on hope specifically: "[Hope is a strange invention](#)" and "[Hope is a subtle glutton](#)."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson lived in small-town Amherst, Massachusetts all her life. She grew up in a strict Protestant environment that placed great emphasis on religious rules and social codes; in fact, her family line can be traced back to the 16th-century Puritan settler John Winthrop. Though she ultimately rejected organized religion, her poems remain preoccupied with theological concerns (including the existence of an afterlife and competing ideas about the ways in which people ought to serve God). Dickinson's religious upbringing also shows itself in the hymn-like tones and rhythms of her poetry.

Dickinson wrote most of her poetry during the American Civil war, which ran from 1861 to 1865. She was firmly on the Union side of that bloody conflict; in one of her letters, she writes with delight about the ignominious defeat of Confederate president Jefferson Davis, who was reportedly trying to make his escape disguised in a woman's skirt when he was finally captured. She even contributed three anonymous poems—some of only a handful she published during her lifetime—to a fundraising magazine in support of the Union army.

However, Dickinson rarely addressed the political world around her directly in her poetry, preferring either to write about her [immediate surroundings](#) or to take [a much wider philosophical perspective](#). And by all accounts, Dickinson's life was extremely unusual for the time. Most women were expected to marry and have children, but she never did; in fact, towards the end of her life, she barely spoke to anyone but a small circle of close friends and family. She spent most of her time shut up in her room, relatively immune to what was taking place outside in the wider world.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Further Educational Resources](#) — Resources for students about Emily Dickinson provided by the Dickinson museum (situated in her old house). (<https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/education/resources-for-students-and-teachers/>)
- [The Poem Out Loud](#) — A reading of the poem by Mairin O'Hagan. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5wEqF7Ntcl>)
- [The Original Poem](#) — An image of the poem in Dickinson's own handwriting. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/4/image_sets/80358)

- [Other Dickinson Poems](#) – A link to numerous other Emily Dickinson poems. (<https://poets.org/poems/emily-dickinson>)
- [More About the History of Hope](#) – A BBC radio documentary in which experts discuss the concept of hope and its history. (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00017vl>)

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](#)
- [An awful Tempest mashed the air –](#)
- [As imperceptibly as grief](#)
- [Because I could not stop for Death –](#)
- [Before I got my eye put out](#)
- [I dwell in Possibility –](#)
- [I felt a Funeral, in my Brain](#)
- [I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -](#)
- [I like a look of Agony](#)
- [I like to see it lap the Miles](#)
- [I measure every Grief I meet](#)
- [I'm Nobody! Who are you?](#)
- [I started Early – Took my Dog –](#)
- [I taste a liquor never brewed](#)
- [It was not Death, for I stood up](#)
- [I – Years – had been – from Home –](#)
- [Much Madness is divinest Sense -](#)
- [My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun](#)
- [One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted](#)
- [Publication – is the Auction](#)

- [Safe in their Alabaster Chambers](#)
- [Success is counted sweetest](#)
- [Tell all the truth but tell it slant –](#)
- [The Brain – is wider than the Sky –](#)
- [There came a Wind like a Bugle](#)
- [There is no Frigate like a Book](#)
- [There's a certain Slant of light](#)
- [There's been a Death, in the Opposite House](#)
- [The saddest noise, the sweetest noise](#)
- [The Sky is low – the Clouds are mean](#)
- [The Soul has bandaged moments](#)
- [The Soul selects her own Society](#)
- [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

MLA

Howard, James. "Hope is the thing with feathers." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 8 May 2019. Web. 28 Feb 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "Hope is the thing with feathers." LitCharts LLC, May 8, 2019. Retrieved February 28, 2022. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/emily-dickinson/hope-is-the-thing-with-feathers>.