I like to see it lap the Miles

POEM TEXT

I like to see it lap the Miles —
And lick the Valleys up —
And stop to feed itself at Tanks —
And then — prodigious step

Around a Pile of Mountains —
And supercilious peer
In Shanties — by the sides of Roads —
And then a Quarry pare

To fit its sides
And crawl between
Complaining all the while
In horrid — hooting stanza —
Then chase itself down Hill —

And neigh like Boanerges —
Then — prompter than a Star
Stop — docile and omnipotent
At its own stable door —

SUMMARY

I like to watch a steam train traveling great distances in a loop. It zooms through valleys as if consuming them, and stops to refuel at fuel tanks. Then, with an almighty stride, it goes around a group of mountains.

It looks down on small, impoverished towns built up by the sides of roads.

Then it goes through a quarry, seeming to carve the land to fit around it, and making a lot of noise as it does so. With abrasive cries, the train-horse rushes downhill.

It calls with all the volume and passion of biblical apostles. Finally, like a star appearing reliably in the sky, it comes to a rest. Passive yet powerful, the train-horse sits in its stable.

THEMES

THE WONDER OF TECHNOLOGY

In "I like to see it lap the Miles," the speaker marvels at the sight of a steam train making its way through the landscape. Likening the train (a relatively new invention at the time) to a peculiar horse, the poem conveys the power and novelty of this technological innovation. As the speaker sees it, technology's ability to tame and dominate nature—and its sheer strangeness—is mind-boggling, awe-inspiring, and a little threatening.

At the time, steam trains were known colloquially as *iron horses*. The speaker takes this image and runs with it, evoking an atmosphere of excitement and mystery. The speaker *never* calls the train a train. Instead, the train is metaphorically transformed into a horse (albeit one unlike any real horse that has come before). It eats, drinks, plays, and rests—just as an animal does. Before railroads came along, horses were the main mode of transport for long distances, so the comparison of the train to a horse-like creature suggests just how hard it is to fit this new beast into an existing understanding of the world. Whereas horses are familiar to the speaker, this train-horse is anything but!

Part of the train's strangeness comes from its sheer power. As it speeds across the countryside, it's equal parts captivating and intimidating. It seems to have an appetite for the landscape itself, gobbling up "Miles" and drinking up "the Valleys." And there's some literal truth in this idea—the landscape *has* been transformed to suit the needs of the train. The train has its own "Tanks" and man-made tunnels, and tracks allow it to "step / Around a Pile of Mountains" with ease. New technology, then, exerts its strength and will on the world around it. The poem captures this power by comparing the train-horse's "neigh" (that is, the shriek of its whistle) to the intense and electrifying words of a biblical preacher ("like Boanerges"). The train is loud, but also weirdly compelling, like a leader or visionary—a prophet of a new world to come.

Overall, then, the speaker doesn't quite know yet what to think about the train. It certainly inspires awe, even pleasure, but it's subtly threatening, too. The speaker knows that the invention of the steam train reflects a larger societal change, stemming from technological innovation and industrialization, but the exact nature of this change remains to be seen. That may be why the train-horse seems to sneer—"supercilious"—at the "Shanties" (impoverished little towns) along the roadsides. It's as though the train senses that it heralds a new, mechanized way of life. Similar overtones surround the closing image of the train-horse at rest in its "stable" (station). Here, it appears both "docile"—because it's peacefully still, and because it obeys human commands—*and* "omnipotent," because it signals the arrival of an era of machine-based, superhuman strength.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-17

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

I like to see it lap the Miles —
And lick the Valleys up —

Spoiler alert: this is a riddle-like poem about a steam train! Dickinson wrote a number of poems that conceal their main subject, like fun language puzzles. But, of course, there's more to the poem than just figuring out its subject.

The first line begins the extended metaphor, which treats the train kind of like a horse—albeit a weird kind of super-horse. ("Iron horse" was once a common nickname for a steam locomotive.) As though watching the train/horse from a window, the speaker marvels at how it covers great distances quickly and with little effort. It seems to consume the landscape with an insatiable appetite. The word "lap" can mean both traveling around a circuit (which is how trains work) *and* lapping up a drink (like a kitten enjoying a bowl of milk). Note how the many slippery, slurping /l/ sounds, in the form of both alliteration and consonance, seem to evoke that hunger itself:

I like to see it lap the Miles —
And lick the Valleys up —

The steady common measure, typical of Dickinson's poetry, gives the poem a strong forward momentum. Common measure just means that the lines alternate between iambic tetramer and iambic trimeter. An iamb is a poetic foot with an unstressed-stressed beat pattern; tetrameter means there are four of these iambs in a line (for eight beats total) while trimeter means there are three (six beats total):

I like | to see | it lap | the Miles —
And lick | the Val- | leys up —

Once again, the poem's sound matches its imagery: it's as if the poem itself takes on the speed and power of the train-horse, racing towards its conclusion (with a few brief train-like stops along the way).

LINES 3-5

And stop to feed itself at Tanks —
And then — prodigious step
Around a Pile of Mountains —

These lines describe more of the train's journey (though readers might not have realized the speaker is talking about a train yet).

Here and throughout the poem, anaphora helps capture the way the train goes through distinct stages (like stops along a train line), with each "And" introducing the next part of the trip:

And stop to feed itself at Tanks —
And then — prodigious step
Around a Pile of Mountains —

These "and[s]" give the poem a reliable, almost mechanical rhythm, which subtly hints to the reader that "it" is, in fact, a train. The caesura, or pause, after "then" also adds to this division of the poem into different stages.

Within the poem's extended metaphor, this section compares train stops to horse troughs ("Tanks"). These tanks could relate to the train's need to refuel, or, perhaps, to the way it picks up passengers. Without coal to consume ("feed" on), this train will quickly run out of energy.

Lines 4 and 5 also evoke the speaker's awe at the sheer scale of the train's movements. Normally, a "Pile of Mountains" would take someone (or something) a long time to travel around. The capitalization of the phrase (part of Dickinson's habit of unusual capitalization) makes the mountains seem that much bigger. Here, the train-horse only needs to take one "prodigious step" around them! In other words, the mountains aren't much of an obstacle. "Prodigious" here can mean great/large or, in the word's more archaic definition, unnatural and abnormal. The word perfectly captures the train's combination of impressive might and strangeness.

Notice, too, how enjambment captures the ease with which the train traverses the mountains:

[...] prodigious step
Around a Pile of Mountains —

This is a break not just between lines but between stanzas, making the "step" that spans it seem all the more gigantic.

LINES 6-7

And supercilious peer
In Shanties — by the sides of Roads —

These lines describe the train as it passes by small towns. The word choice here—"Shanties"—indicates that the towns the train passes are really just rows of flimsy shacks. And since they're "by the sides of Roads," they might be communities left behind by the advent of the railway.

Whatever the exact nature of these towns, the train seems to "peer" into them in a "supercilious" way. That is, it seems to look on them with an air of superiority, as if from a higher vantage point. (Notice how even the sibilant /s/ sounds in the word "supercilious" have a sneering quality.)

This higher vantage point could be literal—maybe the train is just higher up the mountain slope than the towns—or it could suggest that the train represents a new era of superior technology. By overhauling the way one part of America connects with another, perhaps the train signals the slow death of old ways of life.

The caesura after "Shanties" continues the poem's rhythmic trick by suggesting another stage in the train's journey. The iambic (da-DUM) momentum is still there, but the pause makes it seem as though the poem has to wait at a rail crossing before continuing on its way.

LINES 8-12

And then a Quarry pare
To fit its sides
And crawl between
Complaining all the while
In horrid — hooting stanza —

In these lines, the train travels through a quarry (and possibly a tunnel). It seems to "pare" (trim) the earth to "fit its sides," demonstrating its wondrous and terrifying power. It transforms the landscape in a visual sense—it looks like it's burrowing directly through the rock—but also in a more profound way. The advent of the train brought the construction of rail networks, and in turn, the technological, economic, and cultural transformation of the entire U.S.

The poem's lines briefly become shorter here, mimicking the way the train crawls through a narrow gap:

> And then a Quarry pare
> To fit its sides
> And crawl between

The tetrameter lines shrink down to iambic dimeter (just two da-DUM feet per line). Notice how it's the environment that adapts to the train-horse, *not* the other way around. This small detail speaks to the power of this new technology to force change.

As the train-horse "crawl[s]" through a tight space, it "Complain[s] all the while." Here, "Complaining" means "loudly crying out" (as a train does when it clatters and whistles, but with the humorous suggestion that the train is unhappy). The poem captures the train's abrasive noise through its sound patterning:

> Complaining all the while
> In horrid — hooting stanza —

The /l/ consonance, like the train's "complain[t]," is hard to ignore, while the /h/ alliteration requires a breathy sound that mimics the engine's rising steam.

The train's whistle is compared to a "stanza," a unit of poetry. This word choice links the poem's speaker with its subject, reinforcing a sense of kinship between them (remember, the speaker "like[s]" to watch the train). More subtly, it compares the train's journey across the land to the progression of words and lines in a poem.

Some publications combine lines 9 and 10 into a single line of iambic tetrameter:

> To fit | its sides | and crawl | between

In Dickinson's handwritten original, however, these are broken into two separate lines, as recreated in this guide. Read with respect to that version of the poem, the stanza in which this word appears is deliberately *off* compared with the others: it contains five lines instead of four, and one of those lines is written in iambic diameter (meaning it has just two iambs; "To fit | its sides"). Combined with intentionally ugly /h/ alliteration, all of these features suggest the train's power to change its environment, possibly for the worse.

LINES 13-14

Then chase itself down Hill —
And neigh like Boanerges —

These lines show the train at its wildest, as the speaker watches it "chase itself down Hill." The poem still refers to the train as a nameless "it," maintaining the riddle-like quality.

These two lines say a lot about the character of the train. Of course, it's a real train, so it can only go where people send it. And yet, the speaker also detects something primal and dangerous about it. The way it chases itself looks playful, but this is a big hunk of metal barreling downhill—it could literally go off the rails! There's a slight unease below the comic surface here.

This unease is intensified by line 14, which is both an allusion and a simile. The train "neigh[s]," meaning it blows its whistle. Here, the poem mixes metaphorical ideas: the train is still being compared to a horse, but it makes a noise like an impassioned biblical preacher ("Boanerges"). In the Bible, Jesus gives this name to two of his ardent supporters. It's not too much of a stretch to suggest that the train is part of an overall effort to *convert* people to a new, more industrialized way of life—though whether the speaker supports this effort is unclear. The literal meaning of "Boanerges" is "sons of thunder," which here conveys the train's fearsome power and noise.

LINES 15-17

Then — prompter than a Star
Stop — docile and omnipotent
At its own stable door —

Finally, the train comes to rest, and the journey is over. The caesuras in lines 15 and 16 (those dashes after "Then" and

Stop") mark this deceleration, slowing the pace of the verse as well.

The speaker uses another curious image to describe the train halting: it stops "prompter than a Star." In a few lines, the train (which is still a metaphorical horse, don't forget!) has been compared to bad poetry, passionate preachers, and a star in the night sky. Dickinson's language has taken the reader on a pretty wild ride—like the wild train/horse itself.

Stars might be considered "prompt" because they appear reliably in the sky. Because their position is measurable, they've historically played an important role in navigation. If you know your way around the stars, you know your way around the earth. (This image could also be a reference to the Star of Bethlehem, which guides the three wise men to the *stable* housing the infant Jesus.)

The alliteration of "Star" and "Stop" gives the verse a halting rhythm, emphasized by the caesura in line 16. The jarring suddenness of this effect suggests the sudden braking of the train and adds to the sense that there's something wild about this train/horse.

The speaker has shown the train's impressive sound and motion, so the sudden stillness as it rests in its "stable" (terminal station) is a little unsettling. The train-horse waits there both "docile and omnipotent"—"docile" because it's sitting quietly, but "omnipotent" (all-powerful, godlike) because it contains so much latent strength and speed. In fact, these words could be a broader comment on the power of technology. Though it's created by humans, who treat it like the *docile* pets we own, technology can seem "omnipotent" in its ability to reshape our world. Like the internet in the 21st century, railroads overhauled society in the 19th century—a change that the speaker seems to subtly anticipate here.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration helps bring the poem's extended metaphor—which imagines a steam train as a surreal horse-like creature—to life on the page. In the first stanza, the speaker marvels at how the train seems to gobble and drink up the landscape:

> I like to see it lap the Miles —
> And lick the Valleys up —

Here, alliteration imposes itself on the poetic line as powerfully as the train imposes itself on its environment. The /l/ sound also makes the reader perform a lapping/licking motion with the tongue. (Try saying these lines out loud to hear this effect.)

The train-horse is as noisy as it is fast. As it travels, it makes a noise described in line 12 as a "horrid — hooting stanza." This refers to the train's whistle, which echoes across the landscape. Again, the alliteration is intentionally brash and emphatic, capturing the train's startling sound. The /h/ sound is breathy, too, making the reader exhale air, just like the train blowing off steam. (Other repeated consonants in the poem—such as the /p/ in words like "prodigious," "Pile," and "peer" and the hard /c/ sound in "crawl" and "Complaining"—are hard plosives that also help capture the racket the train is making.)

In lines 15-16, alliteration signals the end of the train's journey:

> Then — prompter than a Star
> Stop — docile and omnipotent
> At its own stable door —

Even coming to a stop, the train makes a lot of noise. The repeated /st/ sound evokes the halting of the train as it brakes. Also, /t/ is a "stop" consonant: when you pronounce it, your tongue blocks your airflow. Another example, then, of the poem's sound matching its imagery!

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "like," "lap"
- **Line 2:** "lick"
- **Line 4:** "prodigious"
- **Line 5:** "Pile"
- **Line 6:** "peer"
- **Line 10:** "crawl"
- **Line 11:** "Complaining"
- **Line 12:** "horrid — hooting"
- **Lines 15-16:** "Star / Stop"
- **Line 17:** "stable"

ALLUSION

The poem makes one definite allusion, which appears in line 14. It compares the steam train—which is still, in metaphorical terms, a horse—to a passionate preacher:

> [the train] neigh[s] like Boanerges —

The biblical name Boanerges translates as "sons of thunder." Jesus used it to describe two of his most ardent supporters, the disciples John and James. Here, it features in the poem's one simile.

The allusion portrays the train (or train-horse) as a loud creature that disturbs the surrounding atmosphere, just as a thunderstorm does. Comparing the train to a preacher might also suggest that it has the power to convert people to a new way of life—a life of industrialization and mass transit. In a sense, this is true: railways changed the terrain of 19th-century America, linking distant cities and offering a revolutionary mode of travel.

Lines 15-17 may also allude to the biblical Star of Bethlehem, which guides the three wise men to the stable where Jesus was born. If so, the allusion suggests that the train's journey is fated, pre-determined—an idea that holds some truth, since trains can only travel on their tracks.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "And neigh ," "like Boanerges"
- **Lines 15-17:** "prompter than a Star / Stop — docile and omnipotent / At its own stable door —"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora appears often throughout the poem. Seven lines begin with "And," and two begin with "Then." Both words serve to connect and mark off the stages of the train's journey, echoing the way the train starts and stops, accelerates and slows. Here's how this effect looks in the first two stanzas:

I like to see it lap the Miles —
And lick the Valleys up —
And stop to feed itself at Tanks —
And then — prodigious step
Around a Pile of Mountains —
And supercilious peer
In Shanties — by the sides of Roads —
And then a Quarry pare

It's almost as if the speaker is a guide listing off, through anaphora, the sights along this railway line: the valleys, "Tanks" (probably stations), mountains, shanties, and so on. This tightly compressed list gives the reader a sense of scale: the train travels vast distances in a short time (and within the space of a short poem!). That speed and power are what excite the speaker. The rush of anaphora helps capture this excitement, too: picture a railway enthusiast breathlessly telling you, "And then the train goes here, and then here..."

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "And"
- **Line 3:** "And"
- **Line 4:** "And"
- **Line 6:** "And"
- **Line 8:** "And"
- **Line 10:** "And"
- **Line 13:** "Then"
- **Line 14:** "And"
- **Line 15:** "Then"

CAESURA

Caesura gives the poem a lurching, stop-start rhythm that mimics the movement of the steam train (or, in the poem's imagery, the train/horse). The reader can almost feel the poem "accelerating" and "halting," with the dashes seeming to add momentum or leave the reader hanging in suspense. (Think of the feeling when a train brakes and makes its passengers lean forward.)

This effect is especially strong because the caesuras tend to break phrases in odd, jarring ways. In general, Dickinson's caesuras don't always serve a typical grammatical function. She often used unorthodox punctuation—especially her signature dashes—to create unorthodox pauses.

Notice, for example, how the caesura in line 4 seems to lengthen the train's "step" around the mountains:

And then — prodigious step

Imagine removing this little dash, and you'll understand its importance. Without it, the line seems more compressed and the movement of the train less impressive.

Caesura can also add emphasis. In line 12, the train's "horrid — hooting" noise seems all the more loud and emphatic thanks to the dash between the two words. In lines 15 and 16, when the train finally comes to rest, dashes make the stop seem more jarring and abrupt.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "then — prodigious"
- **Line 7:** "Shanties — by"
- **Line 12:** "horrid — hooting"
- **Line 15:** "Then — prompter"
- **Line 16:** "Stop — docile"

CONSONANCE

As in many Dickinson poems, consonance appears throughout "I like to see it lap the Miles." Some of this is also alliteration (e.g., the /st/ sound in lines 15 and 16). Generally, consonance helps align the poem's sound with its imagery, making its extended metaphor (comparing a train to a horse) more convincing and unsettling.

In the first stanza, /l/ sounds capture the train/horse's "lapping" and "licking" actions—the way it seems to consume the landscape. Here, consonance works together with alliteration:

I like to see it lap the Miles —
And lick the Valleys up —

Reading these lines out loud makes the tongue perform a similar movement (think of a horse drinking from a trough).

In the same stanza, a repetitive /t/ sound—a "stop" consonant, as in one whose pronunciation requires stopping the vocal tract—occurs in the line: "And stop to feed itself at Tanks."

Notice that this same sound repeats in another image of stopping (lines 15-17):

> [...] prompter than a Star
> Stop — docile and omnipotent
> At its own stable door —

These passages also contain several /d/ and /p/ sounds, which are stop consonants as well.

Another key moment of consonance (specifically, sibilance) comes in the second stanza, which uses a number of voiced and unvoiced /s/ sounds (/s/ and /z/):

> And supercilious peer
> In Shanties — by the sides of Roads —

These have a subtle sneering quality that ties in with the use of "supercilious." To be supercilious is to act in a superior manner, so the word, and the sneering /s/ sounds, gesture towards the superiority of steam train technology. In other words, the train heralds a new way of life and seems to look down—literally and metaphorically—on the old ways.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "like," "lap," "Miles"
- **Line 2:** "lick," "Valleys"
- **Line 3:** "stop to," "itself at Tanks"
- **Line 5:** "Around," "Mountains"
- **Line 6:** "supercilious"
- **Line 7:** "Shanties," "sides," "Roads"
- **Line 9:** "fit its sides"
- **Line 10:** "crawl"
- **Line 11:** "Complaining all," "while"
- **Line 12:** "horrid — hooting stanza"
- **Line 14:** "neigh," "Boanerges"
- **Line 15:** "prompter"
- **Lines 15-16:** "Star / Stop"
- **Lines 16-17:** "omnipotent / At its"
- **Line 17:** "stable"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment helps control the poem's rhythmic flow, providing a sense of gathering momentum that is sometimes undercut by caesuras. This tension evokes the stop-start movements of the train itself, which can both travel at fearsome speed and stop on a dime.

This effect is most notable in lines 8 to 12, all of which contain enjambment. (However, if Dickinson used traditional punctuation, line 10 would be end-stopped with a comma or dash.) Here, enjambment also causes the poem to narrow on the page, evoking the train's passage through a narrow tunnel.

The enjambment in lines 6-7 has another interesting effect. Here, the train-horse "peer[s]" down into impoverished little towns ("Shanties"). The line break after the verb also breaks the sense of the sentence, meaning the reader has to *look down* to the next line to understand what's being said.

The most startling enjambment in the poem comes in lines 15-16. The lack of punctuation adds emphasis to the stressed syllable after the line break—"Stop"—and in doing so underscores just how abruptly the train halts.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** " peer / In"
- **Lines 8-9:** "pare / To"
- **Lines 9-10:** "sides / And"
- **Lines 10-11:** "between / Complaining"
- **Lines 11-12:** "while / In"
- **Lines 15-16:** "Star / Stop"
- **Lines 16-17:** "omnipotent / At"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

This poem is one long extended metaphor! Dickinson was a playful poet who enjoyed the transformative possibilities of language. Here, a steam train, colloquially known at the time as an *iron horse*, transforms into an actual horse (or a strange horse-like creature).

The train "lap[s]" and "lick[s]" the landscape like a thirsty beast and demonstrates incredible power and speed. The speaker marvels at how it dominates its environment, sidestepping around mountains as if they were nothing. The train-horse has a wildness to it, captured by the poem's lurching rhythms, and it makes a "horrid" noise, "hooting" and "neigh[ing]" along its journey. All of these details portray the train-horse as both captivating and unsettling. When the train-horse finally comes to rest, "docile and omnipotent / At its own stable door," the silence is a little eerie.

The extended metaphor has two main purposes:

1. It's poetically exciting. Notice how the words "train" and "horse" never appear in the poem. This roundabout approach heightens the poem's riddle-like quality. Dickinson has a number of poems that use a similar approach, deliberately refusing to name their subject.
2. It paints the train-horse as powerful and mysterious. It's as if the speaker senses that the train's arrival signals a new era, but can't yet grasp the magnitude of that change directly. Horse-drawn carriages were the main mode of long-distance transportation before steam trains, so by comparing the train to a horse, the speaker is trying to connect it with something familiar. But the train is so much louder, faster, and mightier than a horse that the

comparison only highlights how extraordinary it is.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-17

SIMILE

The poem uses one simile, which appears in line 14. Here, the train, which is still metaphorically described as a horse, makes a neighing sound "like Boanerges." In other words, it makes a big noise, like a biblical preacher. (The simile wittily combines two comparisons in one, as if the train were so strange that the poet couldn't just compare it to *either* a horse or a preacher and had to invoke *both*.)

This simile is also an allusion, which is discussed in full in that section of the guide.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "And neigh like Boanerges"

VOCABULARY

Lap (Line 1) - To travel in a circuit. Also, to drink (like a cat from a bowl).

Tanks (Line 3) - Water storage units. Here the "Tanks" are a metaphor for train stations, where trains pick up passengers and/or refuel.

Prodigious (Line 4) - Extremely largeand abnormal.

Supercilious (Line 6) - In a condescending, superior fashion.

Peer (Line 6) - Look down on and/or into.

Shanties (Line 7) - Small, flimsy buildings—often improvised dwellings with impoverished tenants.

Quarry (Line 8) - A large pit dug in order to extract materials from the earth.

Pare (Line 8) - Cut down to size.

Boanerges (Line 14) - A name given by Jesus to two of his disciples, meaning "sons of thunder." Now it refers to a loud, passionate preacher.

Prompter (Line 15) - More punctual.

Docile (Line 16) - Gentle and submissive.

Omnipotent (Line 16) - All-powerful, like a god.

Stable (Line 17) - A building in which horses are kept. (Here, a metaphor for a train station.)

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"I like to see it lap the Miles" has three quatrains and one quintet. The quatrains are typical of Dickinson's poetry. Combined with the iambic meter (the poem's steady da-DUM rhythm), they give the poem a formal regularity that mimics the mechanistic motion of the train itself.

The third stanza, though, effectively splits its first line in half, turning the quatrain into a quintet (a five-line stanza). Formally, this fits with the image of the train "par[ing]" down the quarry to "fit its sides" (in other words, going through a tunnel). The lines get narrower as the train squeezes through a narrow passage. This variation also introduces a touch of unpredictability, suggesting that the train—though a force tamed by humans, like a powerful horse—has a bit of wildness to it. (Note that some printed versions of the poem combine lines 9 and 10 into a single line, thus maintaining the poem's quatrain form throughout. Dickinson spaces them apart in her handwritten original, however.)

The poem uses a loose version of the common meter (quatrains of alternating iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter lines) typically found in ballads. Besides being a modified ballad, the poem resembles a riddle. It employs the "What am I?" technique, describing its main subject without ever naming it explicitly.

METER

The poem uses a loose version of Dickinson's typical ballad meter (a.k.a. common meter): quatrains of alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter lines. This means that lines switch between four iambs (eight beats total) and three iambs (six beats total).

Consistent iambs (metrical units that follow a da-DUM pattern) give the poem a regular rhythm, mimicking the mechanistic regularity of the train itself. Consider the first two lines:

I like | to see | it lap | the Miles —
And lick | the Val- | leys up —

However, only the first stanza is set in perfect common meter; the others all contain three trimeter lines rather than two. Again the poem's regularity, like the train's, contains a hint of wildness.

In the third stanza, the poem "pare[s]" itself down—that is, makes itself narrower—to match the image of the train passing through a narrow tunnel. Line 9 effectively splits into lines 9 and 10, dividing the iambic tetrameter into two lines of iambic diameter (meaning they have just two iambs, two da-DUMs).

Another notable variation is the stressed "Stop" at the start of line 16 (normally this syllable would be unstressed). For a

moment, it brings the poem to an abrupt and surprising halt.

RHYME SCHEME

For the most part, the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme. This means that the poem's rhyme scheme look like this:

ABCB

This scheme gives the poem a steady, dependable sense of momentum that perhaps evokes the steady, dependable momentum of a train. (The pattern changes slightly in the third stanza, however, simply because line 9 is broken into two lines.)

The rhyme pairs—"up"/"step," "peer"/"pare," "while"/"Hill," "Star"/"door"—are not perfect rhymes but slant rhymes (another typical feature of Dickinson's poetry). These slant rhymes help evoke the train's combination of predictability and wildness. On the one hand, a rhyme scheme needs a certain regularity in order to work, much as a train needs tracks and a schedule in order to run. (Also, tracks often come in pairs, just like the rhymes here.) On the other hand, slant rhyme opens up a wider set of possible word choices than perfect rhyme, much as this steam train seems wild and powerful enough to open up new horizons.

SPEAKER

The reader doesn't learn much about the speaker, because the poem isn't about the speaker: it's about the train!

That said, everything is filtered through the speaker's first-person perspective. The poem's central metaphor—the train as a horse—thus comes from the speaker's own feelings towards the train. The speaker finds it exciting, mysterious, and even a little intimidating. As the speaker says in line 1, they "like" watching the train. At the same time, they see that it has some negative elements: it looks "supercilious" next to the humble "Shanties," and its whistle is "horrid."

The speaker also avoids naming the train explicitly, creating a sort of riddle by concealing the poem's main subject. This makes the poem itself exciting and mysterious.

SETTING

"I like to see it lap the Miles" is a very visual poem: the speaker watches the steam train from afar—possibly from a window—and can follow its entire course as it makes a circuit of the tracks. Mountains, valleys, rail stations ("Tanks"), roadside shanties, and a quarry are all visible. This setting helps demonstrate how the train (or railroad) imposes its presence on its surroundings, seeming to shape the land to its needs rather than tailoring its course to the land.

In lines 4 and 5, for example, the train goes around a "Pile of Mountains" with a mere "step." For most travelers at the time, mountains would have seemed like a serious obstacle! On the one hand, this effect is a kind of optical illusion created by the speaker's distant perspective. On the other hand, it contains a great deal of truth: with the widespread adoption of train travel in the 19th century, tracks were laid all over America, changing the landscape and making even the largest obstacles seem smaller.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson is one of the most significant poets in the English language, but she published very little during her lifetime. She lived a famously reclusive life in Amherst, Massachusetts from 1830 to 1886. This poem was probably written between 1858 and 1862 and was first published in the 1890s. The publishers, Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, rather gave the game away by assigning the poem a title: "The Railway Train."

Of course, the poem (which Dickinson did not title) intentionally hides its main subject, never mentioning the train or the tracks explicitly. It has a riddle-like quality, challenging the reader to decipher what it's talking about. Dickinson wrote a number of poems in a similar mode and often sent them to her younger cousins, Frances and Louisa Norcross. Other Dickinson riddle-poems include "His Bill an Augur," "A Route of Evanescence," and "A narrow Fellow in the Grass."

This riddle-poem plays on the expression "iron horse," a slang term for steam trains that was popular in 19th-century America and Britain. In its focus on modern technology, "I like to see it lap the Miles" is a rarity in Dickinson's poetry. Her poems (which number nearly 1800) tend to act as an escape from or rejection of the modern world, employing more timeless settings and universal themes. This partly explains their enduring quality.

Trains—and the new era they represented—were a popular subject for writers at the time. Another example from American poetry is "What's the railroad to me?" by Henry David Thoreau. One of Dickinson's major influences, the essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote that "Railroad iron is a magician's rod, in its power to evoke the sleeping energies of land and water." This poem similarly observes technology's ability to transform the American landscape.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Coincidentally, Dickinson was born in the same year (1830) as the most famous test run of an American-built steam engine. This engine, Tom Thumb, was pitted against a horse-drawn carriage in a race. Although it lost, trains soon outpaced horses and became a significant mode of travel. The American landscape was already crosshatched with railroads, used to aid

the transportation of horse-drawn wagons, so travel by steam train grew out of this existing infrastructure. In the 19th century, steam engines were colloquially known as "iron horses"—most likely the inspiration behind Dickinson's choice of metaphor in this poem.

Dickinson's hometown of Amherst, Massachusetts acquired its first railway station in 1853. Dickinson's father, Edward—who variously served as a state legislator, Congressman, and treasurer of Amherst College—was instrumental in the effort to bring the railroad to Amherst. From her window, Dickinson could see the station and the passage of the trains. In fact, the "Pile of Mountains" in line 5 might well be the Holyoke Range she would have seen on the horizon.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- In Our Time Podcast — Experts talk about Emily Dickinson's life and work on the BBC's In Our Time podcast/radio show. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDBADIHwchQ)
- Dickinson's Biography — A valuable Dickinson resource from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)
- A History of the Steam Train — A look at the story behind this much-loved mode of transport. (https://railroad.lindahall.org/essays/locomotives.html)
- The Dickinson Museum — The Emily Dickinson Museum, situated in the poet's old house, offers many resources for students. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org)
- A Dickinson Documentary — Watch a short educational film on Dickinson's life and poetry. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N65cHinI0ko)

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 —
- 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!

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