A narrow Fellow in the Grass

POEM TEXT

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides -
You may have met him? Did you not
His notice sudden is -

The Grass divides as with a Comb,
A spotted shaft is seen,
And then it closes at your Feet
And opens further on -

He likes a Boggy Acre -
A Floor too cool for Corn -
But when a Boy and Barefoot
I more than once at Noon

Have passed I thought a Whip Lash
Unbraiding in the Sun
When stooping to secure it
It wrinkled And was gone -

Several of Nature's People
I know, and they know me
I feel for them a transport
Of Cordiality

But never met this Fellow
Attended or alone
Without a tighter Breathing
And Zero at the Bone.

SUMMARY

The speaker introduces a skinny gentleman who travels through the grass, and suggests that the reader might have encountered this fellow themselves. He tends to take people by surprise.

His body parts the grass like a comb running through hair, giving away a quick glimpse of a long, spotted shape before the grass closes around him and then is parted again somewhere else.

This fellow likes to live in out-of-the-way places like marshy land and cool barn floors. But when the speaker was a childhood, he also sometimes encountered this fellow out in the broad daylight.

The speaker thought he was walking by an abandoned bit of whip rope lying in the sun. But when the speaker bent down to pick it, it wriggled away and disappeared.

The speaker reflects that he is familiar with many animals and that those same animals are familiar with him in turn. The speaker even feels a sense of friendship with and affection for them.

But he's never had an encounter with this creature, either by himself or with company, without feeling breathless and constrained by fear.

THEMES

FEAR, DECEIT, AND THE UNKNOWN

The poem is essentially an exploration of fear—specifically, the fear of the unknown and the related fear of being tricked or deceived. This notion of deception is present in the form of the poem itself, as it describes the experience of encountering a snake without ever actually saying the word "snake." The snake is unpredictable, appearing and disappearing without warning and sometimes looking like something else altogether. The speaker uses this tricky snake to explore the nature of fear and anxiety—the sense that, in what seems to be a perfectly normal moment, a hidden danger might lurk.

The speaker introduces the snake with strangely polite and euphemistic language. In describing the snake without calling it a snake, he holds it at a fearful arm's length. For example, the speaker calls the snake a "spotted shaft"—a physical description that is at once vague (what on earth is a "spotted shaft?" Well, it's long, and it has spots…) and strange, evoking the feeling of catching only a glimpse of the snake as it passes.

The speaker also personifies the snake, calling it a "fellow"—an everyday term that nonetheless seems to give the snake a weirdly human quality. If it's a "fellow," it has thoughts and intentions of its own. This seemingly bland or even friendly word thus creates a sense of menace.

This snake seems to be an archetypal snake, a snake that sums up all snakiness: it's only ever referred to in the singular, as a specific "fellow," but presumably the speaker is not encountering exactly the *same* snake over and over through the course of his whole life. This generality helps to support the idea that the speaker is dealing with a bigger idea than just "snakes are scary": the snake carries the symbolic weight of the

experience of fear, and especially the fear of deceit. This makes sense, given that snakes are ancient symbols of trickery; the snake in the Garden of Eden is perhaps the most familiar example of the snake as a deceiver.

The speaker goes on to remember his childhood encounters with the snake, when he was "more than once" fooled into almost touching it. The snake's power to disguise itself is a big part of what's frightening about it. For example, the speaker remembers his childhood self believing that the snake was a "Whip Lash," the rope part of a whip, and bending to pick it up—at which the snake would "wrinkle" and disappear.

That the snake never bites the speaker, but merely disguises itself and then vanishes, supports the idea that this is a poem about fear. Fear is all about uneasy anticipation. Thus, it matters here that the snake-surprise happens more than once: the speaker can never be sure if this is going to happen again the next time he tries to pick up a bit of old rope. The speaker's description of himself as "barefoot" and his finding the snake "at noon" further reinforce his sense of vulnerability: barefoot, he's extremely bite-able, and even the bright light of the noonday sun can't keep him safe from making snake-related mistakes. The deceitful snake can strike even in times that seem safe.

The speaker ends by musing on his experience of snakes as part of the natural world: while the speaker feels at home with other creatures, even loves them, he just can't get used to the snake, and always meets it with fear. And even though the speaker is never actually attacked by the snake, he describes the sensation of encountering it as a breathless tightening and a "zero at the bone"—a fearful feeling of constraint that might call to mind the way a snake constricts its prey.

The terror of the snake is thus always to do with uncertainty. Menacing and disguised, the snake stands not just for danger but for concealed, deceiving danger: a fear that can constrict you even before it physically strikes. In the end, the speaker's fear of the snake is the fear of all bad fortune, but especially of the dangers of deceit—which, like the snake, is unpredictable and uncomfortably common.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

NATURE AND HUMANITY

In this poem, nature has a double nature. It can be both friendly and menacing, familiar and strange, welcoming and violent. And in his reaction to the snake, the speaker shows that he is not separate from the natural world. Humans are just as much a part of this world as animals are, the poem implies, and thus are subject to the same hard facts of life and death.

In the first stanza, the personification of the snake sets the animal on the same footing (if you will) as the speaker. The snake is a "Fellow," and one that "you may have met": human terms for a distinctly non-human creature. By treating the snake as a member of civilization, the speaker opens up a connection between the animal and the human world.

The speaker's descriptions of his encounters with the snake then show his own bodily vulnerability to the snake's power—that is, to the natural world. The speaker describes meeting the snake while he's "a boy, and barefoot": that is, he's vulnerable both in his youth and his lack of shoes. Being "barefoot," here, is being without some of the defenses that humans put up between themselves and the natural world. This again implies a close connection between people and nature, but also that such a connection comes with its own dangers.

The last stanzas specifically mark the snake out as the unknown threat that lurks within an otherwise peaceful kingdom. The speaker describes feeling a "transport / Of Cordiality" for "Several of Nature's People," meaning he shares a friendship or kinship with other kinds of animals. This strongly-flavored language (especially juxtaposed with the image of the treacherous snake) might even suggest the natural harmony of the garden of Eden; at the very least, it's a powerful image of the human speaker's close connection with nature.

The snake is the exception to this rule, however: forever separate from these friendly relationships in its menace, it has immediate bodily power over the speaker, separating him from the natural world where his other animal relationships connect him. But both the peaceful and the violent creatures *are* "Nature's People"—and, the poem implies, so is the speaker. Humans are not separate from the animal world—and that also means they are not immune to its perils.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides -

The seemingly simple first lines of the poem, like the snake they describe, are deceptively slippery. The speaker introduces "A narrow Fellow," and already the reader gets a sense that some strangeness is afoot.

"Fellow" is an everyday, comfortable sort of word—one that you'd use to describe a guy you met in the street. But what does it mean to call a fellow "narrow"? It's an odd word to choose; if you were describing a thin person, you might call them—well—thin! Or you might call them slim, or slender, or

skinny; not "narrow," though. The word has uncomfortable connotations of constriction and tightness; it gives the reader a claustrophobic sense of strangeness.

This strangeness compounds when readers learn that this narrow fellow is "in the Grass." This turn of phrase, in conjunction with the "narrow Fellow," might raise the reader's hackles: it seems readers must be dealing with a snake here.

This might be an allusion to the phrase "a snake in the grass," meaning a traitor, which goes back as far as the ancient Roman poet Virgil. The speaker's mention of the grass here thus isn't neutral: not only are readers meeting a snake, they're meeting a concealed, sinister, and likely deceitful snake.

There's a further hint of this danger in the subtle internal sibilance of "Grass," "occasionally," and "rides"—sibilance that will continue through the rest of the stanza. That quiet hiss and buzz—hidden within the words, not boldly out in front—contributes to the feeling of hidden snakiness.

Even more subtly, the form of these lines gives the reader a sense of unease through their grammar:

> A narrow Fellow in the Grass
> Occasionally *rides* -

These lines quietly disorient the reader by running subject-object-*verb*, rather than the more usual subject-*verb*-object. This is a delicate effect; it's not so unusual to find writers playing with grammar this way in poetry. But it does help to contribute to the overall effect that, with this narrow fellow, readers are on shifty ground.

LINES 3-4

> *You may have met him? Did you not*
> *His notice sudden is -*

After this uneasy introduction, the speaker becomes suddenly and strangely casual. In a moment of apostrophe, the speaker addresses the reader directly, noting that the reader "may have met" this narrow fellow somewhere before, as if the snake were a guy you might have chatted with at the grocery store.

Here, the snake is being personified, discussed as if he's a human. The speaker talks about him matter-of-factly. But this nonchalance only makes the snake feel scarier. The reader may have encountered the idea of the "uncanny"—a way to describe the creepy feeling you get when an everyday thing and an alien thing are combined. (One good example is the trope of the evil doll: an innocent children's toy possessed by something malicious.) Describing the snake as a "fellow" whom "You may have met" helps to create a shivery sense of the ways in which this fellow is decidedly *not* human, especially next to the less-normal ways the speaker also describes him.

Consider the way he arrives:

> His notice sudden is -

That sinister sibilance from the first stanza carries on here, but now that the snake is about to show himself, the /s/ sound begins to dart out into the front of the words with "sudden." There's also another disorienting poetic word-order reversal in "notice sudden is" (where in everyday speech one would say his "notice is sudden").

That word "sudden" adds to the feeling of unbearably mounting tension: this snake, which seems to have some kind of human-ish intent (and maybe malice) within an inhuman body, appears with almost no warning.

The poem's overall shiftiness is further underlined by the poem's use of slant rhyme, where "rides" is rhymed with "is." This pattern of almost-but-not-quite rhyme continues almost until the end of the poem, adding to the feeling of unease and mismatch: things are not always as they appear in this narrow fellow's world.

LINES 5-8

> *The Grass divides as with a Comb,*
> *A spotted shaft is seen,*
> *And then it closes at your Feet*
> *And opens further on -*

At last, the narrow fellow puts in a real appearance. But it's not a clear one. The first sign of the snake is the grass dividing "as with a Comb." This vivid simile evokes the way a small unseen creature parts tall grass, and helps to create a sense of the snake without allowing the reader to clearly see him yet. The line a comb makes is arrow-straight and, yes, narrow, suggesting again an inhuman kind of body down in the grass. But a comb is also an ordinary everyday object, and a very human one at that—a thing that humans use to put their bodies in order. Again, the collision of what is familiar and what is strange, what is wild and what is civilized, creates a feeling of unease.

When the snake actually appears, "a spotted shaft is seen." In these words, a few important things happen at once. The sibilance that has been mostly buried inside words so far comes right out to the front: here's the snake for real! But the speaker also doesn't get quite enough of a look at the snake to call it anything more than "a spotted shaft"—a rather strange and abstract way to describe the creature. But then, maybe that's a big part of what's uncomfortable about a snake's body. It's hard to read a snake the way one reads any other animal: in its leglessness, it's unlike much of the rest of the natural kingdom.

The gathering sense of just-repressed fear culminates as the grass closes around the snake again "at your Feet." The snake becomes invisible *just* as it gets close to the person watching it:

> And then it closes at your Feet
> And opens further on -

In the gap between these lines, there's room for a panicky moment of uncertainty: where did the darn thing go? A big part of what makes this snake so unsettling is that it could—but doesn't—strike at any moment.

LINES 9-12

He likes a Boggy Acre -
A Floor too cool for Corn -
But when a Boy and Barefoot
I more than once at Noon

Personification takes on a new importance in this stanza, as the reader begins to see that the speaker is talking about not a particular snake, but the whole *idea* of "Snakeness." This becomes clearer as the speaker describes the snake's habits and his past encounters with him.

The speaker continues to describe the snake in the singular, as one "fellow," with tastes and preferences:

He likes a Boggy Acre -
A Floor too cool for Corn -

The snake is described here as preferring murky, shady, squelchy, out-of-the-way places—and places that are "too cool for Corn," not suitable for human plans and intentions like storing food.

But, the speaker goes on, he himself has "more than once" encountered the snake out in the bright sun, back when he was a child. That "more than once," next to the recall of the speaker's childhood, lets the reader know that this isn't just the one snake that this guy has been having a long uneasy relationship with. The snake addressed as "he" here is a sort of over-snake, the symbol of all things snaky.

Introducing the idea of the past here also underlines the speaker's feeling of vulnerability near the snake. As a "Boy and Barefoot," the speaker is painfully exposed to snaky dangers. "Barefoot" here recalls the grass closing "at your Feet" in the previous stanza: the snake's threat to humans is greatest at the place where the human body meets the ground, where the speaker is connected to the earth.

The meter in this stanza changes with this gathering sense of menace. Where the previous stanzas have used common meter, with alternating lines of three and four beats, here the poem moves into iambic trimeter: a tighter rhythm, with less room to breathe. There are three iambs, feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern, per line:

He likes a Boggy Acre -
A Floor too cool for Corn -
But when a Boy and Barefoot
I more than once at Noon

It's as if the speaker's heart is beating harder as he encounters the snake. The unstressed syllables at the ends of lines 9 and 11, known as feminine endings, make it seem as though the speaker trails off in fright, unable to finish the line. The poem stays in iambic trimeter from here on out.

Take a closer look at the vowel sounds in this stanza as well. There's plenty of standard-issue assonance here—for instance, in the pattern of different /o/ sounds in "A Floor too cool for Corn," which itself creates a feeling of a cool smooth surface. But there's also something tricky going on in the way the poem *sounds* versus the way it *looks*. There are many words that contain a double "oo" in this stanza; but how many of those actually make the same sound as each other? (See the "Poetic Devices" entry on assonance for more on this point.) The distinction between the way words look and sound here reflects the snake's deceitfulness—as readers will see in the next stanza.

LINES 13-16

Have passed I thought a Whip Lash
Unbraiding in the Sun
When stooping to secure it
It wrinkled And was gone -

In this stanza, the speaker recalls his encounters with the snake as a boy. The snake, "more than once," appeared to him as a "Whip Lash / Unbraiding in the Sun"—like a bit of old rope that, when the speaker approached it, suddenly wriggled away. This is a telling disguise in a number of ways.

Firstly, the "Whip Lash" is itself a menacing object. A whip is an object with connotations of pain and punishment, and especially pain and punishment delivered at speed. (Take a look at the "Symbols" section for more on this point.) This "Whip Lash," which seemed to lie abandoned and useless without the handle that one would use to wield it, in fact has the power to crack on its own. There's a curious backwards menace in the fact that the "Whip Lash" never actually hits the speaker as a boy—that is, that the snake never bites him. What's frightening here is always the *threat* of danger. The speaker, through the snake, fears fear itself.

Secondly, the "Whip Lash" is lying in the sun—in fact, as the previous stanza has informed the reader, in the bright light of noon. The fearful snake is disguised in plain sight; even and especially at the times one would expect to be safe from snaky danger are full of menace.

Once more, the reader may notice a lot of initial sibilance here. So far readers have seen sibilant sounds moving from concealment within the words in the first stanza to sitting boldly out in front of words that directly describe the snake in the second stanza. Here, something complex happens: the sibilance is again out in the front of the words, but none of the sibilant words *directly* describe the snake:

Have passed I thought a Whip Lash
Unbraiding in the Sun
When stooping to secure it

As in the third stanza, the form of the words here reflects the experience the speaker describes. Innocent words, like an innocent bit of old rope, turn out to be snaky after all.

LINES 17-20

Several of Nature's People
I know, and they know me
I feel for them a transport
Of Cordiality

In this stanza, the speaker pulls back from his dramatic and specific childhood memories of the snake to a more general consideration of his relationship with nature. Here, his personification becomes even more direct: animals, in this stanza, are "Nature's People." He has a relationship with these "People," not just as an animal-lover, but as an animal among animals.

Take a look at the caesura in the middle of line 18:

Several of Nature's People
I know, and they know me

There aren't too many mid-line breaks in this poem, so it's worth paying attention when they do show up. Here, the reader might look at that comma almost as a mirror. The word "know" reflects back over the comma, so the speaker and the animals seem to see themselves in each other. This repetition (technically diacope) emphasizes that both the speaker and the animals are "Nature's People."

This is apparently a moving experience. The speaker feels "for them a transport / Of Cordiality," a powerful surge of friendly emotion. The word "cordiality" might point readers back to the casual personification of the first stanza; a "cordial" greeting is the kind you might offer to an acquaintance in the street. But there seems to be something even stronger going on here. A "transport" is a powerful feeling indeed—to be transported is, of course, to be moved. And the roots of the word "cordial" are from the French "cord-" (or "heart"). In meeting the animal kingdom, then, the speaker feels an intense overflow of feeling in his heart. This feeling of harmony is also reflected in the rhyme scheme: this is the first place in the poem that uses straightforward rhyme as opposed to slant rhyme.

And that's partly because the speaker is one of the animals, a person of nature just like them. This might remind the reader of the earlier stanzas' mention of feet and going barefoot. The speaker's close connection to the earth, represented by the contact of his feet with the ground, is a lovely thing. But it also means he's exposed to the same dangers as any other member of the animal kingdom. If you're one of "Nature's People," you're part of the laws of life and death.

The images of recognition and sameness in this stanza stand in contrast to the way the speaker has described the snake. The friendly, open similarity of the speaker and much of the animal kingdom is unlike the snake's fearful deceitfulness.

LINES 21-22

But never met this Fellow
Attended or alone

The last stanza opens with a simple, important word: "But." The reader has just learned of the speaker's "cordiality" with much of the rest of the natural world, his feeling of oneness and connection with animals. But! There's an exception, and the reader may already have a guess as to whom that is.

The assonance of this first line reintroduces the "fellow" (a word that by now the reader knows to encounter with unease):

But never met this Fellow

The repeated /eh/ sound brings the "fellow" creeping back into the peaceful kingdom the speaker has just described. In traditional snaky fashion (just think of the story of the treacherous snake in the Garden of Eden), this fellow breaks into and spoils a friendly and peaceful relationship with nature.

The return of the word "fellow" also returns the reader to memories of the first stanza, when the snake was first introduced under that name. Now that the reader knows more of this fellow, the innocuous word takes on an even more uncanny and sinister feeling.

There's also something disturbing about the speaker's mention of company here. It doesn't matter whether he's "Attended or alone" when the snake turns up, it's still terrifying. Perhaps this is partly to do with the fears the snake represents. If the snake is an image of deceit, able to disguise its true dangerous nature even in the bright light of noon, maybe having other people around isn't always as completely comforting or helpful as one might hope?

LINES 23-24

Without a tighter Breathing
And Zero at the Bone.

The famous last lines of the poem bring the speaker's fears of the snake to a queasy, claustrophobic culmination. In these lines, the reader can see that it really doesn't matter that the snake never actually strikes the speaker. The very *fear* of the snake is an attack in itself.

The speaker vividly describes the feeling of encountering the snake in terms that are both physical and strange:

... a tighter Breathing
And Zero at the Bone.

Even seeing the snake makes the speaker feel a constriction, as if the snake were winding around him and cutting off his breath without needing to touch him at all. Fear, here, is its own kind of danger. The alliteration of "Breathing" and "Bone" and the assonance of "Breathing" and "Zero" helps to create this sense, drawing these words tightly together.

The speaker's final description of this feeling, "Zero at the Bone," is a completely original turn of phrase. The reader has certainly heard of a "snake in the grass" before, but what might "Zero at the Bone" mean? There's a sense in it of the speaker's flesh shrinking with fear, tightening on his bones—"zeroing in," maybe. But those two nouns are also chillingly resonant in other ways. "Zero" has connotations of negation and nothingness—perhaps the negation the speaker fears in death. "Bone" certainly adds to this effect, reminding the reader of the waiting skeleton inside everyone's flesh.

If the speaker is a part of the animal kingdom, he's subject to death—and the snake reminds him of that. But there's more than just the fear of death going on here. There's the fear that danger comes in disguise: as an innocent-seeming "fellow," as deceit and trickery. The trouble with the "narrow Fellow" is that one just never knows where and how he might appear.

SYMBOLS

SNAKES

The snake is a powerful and ancient symbol. Over time, it's carried many meanings, from wisdom to death to life to trickery. But it's in its most familiar role as a dangerous deceiver, as it appears here.

The reader probably knows the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, in which a serpent persuades Eve to eat the fruit from the forbidden Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In this ancient story, the trickster snake is the original enemy of humanity. That snake's presence can be felt in this poem, where the dangerous "narrow fellow" disguises himself as something as innocuous as a bit of old rope.

In both its stealth and its dangers, then, the snake represents deceit itself—as well as the fear of being deceived.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "A narrow Fellow in the Grass"
- **Line 6:** "A spotted shaft is seen,"
- **Lines 13-16:** "Have passed I thought a Whip Lash / Unbraiding in the Sun / When stooping to secure it / It wrinkled And was gone -"
- **Lines 21-24:** "But never met this Fellow / Attended or alone / Without a tighter Breathing / And Zero at the Bone."

WHIPS

When the snake appears to the speaker to be a bit of old rope, he's not just any bit of old rope. He's disguised as a "Whip Lash"—the rope part of a whip (as opposed to the handle).

Whips have symbolic connotations of speed, pain, punishment, and violence. As a living "Whip Lash," the snake has the potential to inflict all of these on the unwary wanderer.

Whips are also used to drive animals, making the poem's connection between the speaker and the animal world even clearer. He, as much a part of nature as any of "Nature's People," is in no way immune from the blow of this whip.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "Whip Lash"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration in poetry often creates a feeling of continuity, smoothness, similarity, or evenness. In this poem, alliterative smoothness covers over the much more jagged and frightening emotions just beneath the surface. At the same time, alliterative emphasis helps to evoke those scarier emotions.

The poem begins with subtle alliteration in the first stanza, where /n/ and /m/ sounds gently interweave with each other. But the alliteration becomes more pronounced as soon as the snake appears and "A spotted shaft is seen" in line 6. At this first appearance of the "fellow," readers get not just alliteration but a dose of sibilance appropriate to the hissing sinuous snake. (For more on how sibilance in particular works in this poem, check out the dedicated "Poetic Devices" entry.)

The alliteration gets more emphatic with hard /k/ and /b/ sounds in the third stanza as the speaker works up to his repeated childhood encounters with the snake. Here, there's less a sense of smoothness or continuity than of thumping: "But when a Boy and Barefoot" gives the reader the feeling of a heart pounding harder at the approach of a terrifying thing. That thing, encountered in the fourth stanza, is accompanied by another sibilant run of /s/ sounds ("Sun," "stooping," "secure")—though, appropriately, none of these /s/ sounds actually describes the disguised snake, but the things around it and the actions of the speaker. The "hiss" is hidden.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "narrow"
- **Line 3:** "may," "met," "not"
- **Line 4:** "notice"

- **Line 6:** "spotted," "seen"
- **Line 7:** "Feet"
- **Line 8:** "further"
- **Line 9:** "Boggy"
- **Line 10:** "cool," "Corn"
- **Line 11:** "But," "Boy," "Barefoot"
- **Line 14:** "Sun"
- **Line 15:** "stooping," "secure"
- **Line 17:** "Nature's"
- **Line 18:** "know," "know"
- **Line 22:** "Attended," "alone"
- **Line 23:** "Breathing"
- **Line 24:** "Bone"

APOSTROPHE

The apostrophe to the reader in the first stanza works alongside the speaker's personification of the snake, building a mood of social normalcy that's undercut by the sinister concealment of something slithery.

The address to the reader here is framed casually, as if the speaker is talking about a shared acquaintance the reader might have run into around town: "You may have met him?" This both aligns with the speaker's use of the word "Fellow" to describe the snake, and is undermined by the fact that that "Fellow" is "narrow" and "in the grass"—not qualities one might expect to find in, say, the guy who runs the laundromat. There's a creepy mismatch here between the normal feeling of talking about a shared acquaintance and the out-of-the-ordinary description of that shared acquaintance.

A useful word for this kind of feeling is "uncanny." An "uncanny" thing unnerves you by combining elements of the familiar or unthreatening with elements of the alien and scary (think evil dolls). This is exactly the mood that apostrophe helps to create here.

Bringing the reader directly into the poem also underlines the feeling that the encounter the speaker is talking about is a common one—common in the sense of "frequent" and in the sense of "shared." The mood of anxiety, fear, and deceit that the speaker creates here is all too familiar: an uncomfortably relatable part of human experience.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "You may have met him? Did you not"

ASSONANCE

There's plenty of assonance on display in "A narrow Fellow in the Grass," and it's doing something unusual. Assonance, in poetry, often helps to create a pleasingly unified texture of sound—and indeed, it does often serve that role here, making a smooth surface under which the menace of the snake can slither. But examined more closely, the assonant *sounds* of this poem often play uneasily against the way the words *look*.

Consider the very first instance of assonance in the poem:

A narrow Fellow in the Grass

"Narrow" and "fellow" are an oddly matched pair of words. They're at very much alike, with the same number of letters and a double letter in the middle. Then they've got that identical shared long /o/ sound at the end. This back-loaded assonance, with the matched vowels falling right at the end of the two words, creates an odd sense of tension: the resolution into perfectly matched sounds makes one feel the almost-but-not-quite of the imperfectly matched sounds. The assonance here helps the description of the deceitful snake to resemble that snake: these two words feel like they mirror each other, but the mirror is distorted.

The assonance on different kinds of /o/ and /oo/ sounds in the third stanza are another instance of this kind of uneasy almost-matching. There's some regular old assonance in here in "too"/"cool"/"Noon" and "Floor"/"Corn." But even in looking at those examples, the reader might notice something interesting is going on with the way words sound versus the way they look. There are five words with the letters "oo" in their middles here: "Floor," "too," "cool," "Barefoot," and "Noon." Notice how the appearances of these words conceal their sonic difference from each other?

Assonance in this poem can indeed serve the traditional purposes of creating a smooth and even surface. But the soothing effects of assonance play interestingly against the poem as a piece of *writing*—a physical object. Here, Dickinson is doing something very clever: she plays the sounds of the poem, the felt experience of the words, against the way the words look. Just like the snake: language is not always as it appears.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "narrow," "Fellow"
- **Line 4:** "notice," "is"
- **Line 5:** "Comb"
- **Line 6:** "seen"
- **Line 7:** "closes," "Feet"
- **Line 8:** "opens"
- **Line 10:** "Floor," "too," "cool," "Corn"
- **Line 12:** "more," "Noon"
- **Line 13:** "passed," "Lash"
- **Line 17:** "People"
- **Line 18:** "me"
- **Line 19:** "feel," "transport"
- **Line 20:** "Cordiality"
- **Line 21:** "never," "met," "Fellow"
- **Line 22:** "Attended," "alone"

- **Line 23:** “Breathing”
- **Line 24:** “Zero,” “Bone”

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment plays a notable role in this poem right from the start. Modern readers are likely to have encountered this poem titled with its first line, "A narrow Fellow in the Grass." This line on its own could serve as a plain description: there's a narrow fellow, and he's in some grass—done.

But the enjambment of this line reveals a more complex sentence structure than first meets the eye. The complete thought of this clause, without the enjambment, is "A narrow Fellow in the Grass / Occasionally rides." If one were trying to communicate this idea in day-to-day speech, one would be more likely to say, "A narrow fellow occasionally rides in the grass," no? The poem's enjambment flips the usual position of object and verb. This makes the line turn back on itself, snake-like, establishing a feeling of uneasy disorientation right from the start.

This verb-object flip across an enjambment happens again in the poem at lines 17-18, where the speaker does not tell us that he knows several of Nature's people, but that "Several of Nature's People / I know." Again, the enjambment and the flip help to create a sense of surprise: here, they underline the unexpected and striking thought of animals as "nature's people," there to be known on an even footing with humans.

Other instances of enjambment in the poem are also surprising, even when they don't play any tricks with grammatical order. For instance, the break between "a transport / Of Cordiality" in lines 19-20 helps readers to observe the oddity of this turn of phrase. "Transport" is an intense word, with an almost religious sense of rapture; "cordiality" is much milder (you might say a "cordial" hello to someone you didn't know that well). The break in the middle of this odd idea helps to keep the reader a little off-balance, even as the speaker describes a friendlier feeling than the fear the snake inspires.

Rather like the snake the poem describes, enjambment here startles the reader by disguising and confusing meaning.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “Grass / Occasionally”
- **Lines 11-12:** “Barefoot / I”
- **Lines 12-13:** “ Noon / Have”
- **Lines 13-14:** “Lash / Unbraiding”
- **Lines 17-18:** “People / I”
- **Lines 19-20:** “transport / Of”
- **Lines 21-22:** “Fellow / Attended”
- **Lines 22-23:** “alone / Without”
- **Lines 23-24:** “Breathing / And”

CAESURA

Dickinson's poetry is often riddled with caesura; it's one of her most characteristic poetic techniques. "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" is notable for its relatively light use of these mid-line breaks. The speaker interrupts his lines in the middle only twice: once in line 3, with "You may have **met him? Did you** not" and once in line 18, with "I **know, and they** know me".

The caesurae in these lines alter the rhythm of the poem. Where most of the lines here have a steady, pacing iambic beat, these lines introduce a little hiccup. Both of those hiccups occur in moments when the speaker is thinking in social terms.

In line 3, the caesura appears alongside the poem's apostrophe to the reader and his personification of the snake. As discussed elsewhere in this guide, apostrophe and personification here help to create a sense of uncanny menace. The speaker is talking in mild polite terms about a creature that frightens him, describing it the same way you'd describe an acquaintance. The caesura supports these other devices by introducing a casual mood. Where the rest of the lines plow on without stopping, the caesura here gives the speaker a moment to check his nails, if you will. Again, there's an uncomfortable feeling that under that lightness and casualness, something sinister is going on.

Similarly, in line 18, the caesura enters during a moment of social contact:

> Several of Nature's People
> I **know, and they** know me

Here, the caesura gives a feeling of shared contact. "Nature's People" and the speaker can look at each other across that caesura: the little pause allows for a moment of reflection.

It's worth taking a moment here to note that the punctuation of Dickinson's poetry varies wildly depending on which edition you're working with. In the version we're using here, for instance, "You may have met him" is punctuated with a question mark, while in the manuscript copy you can find linked in the "Resources" section, it's given a characteristically Dickinsonian dash instead. Because Dickinson's poems were only collected and printed after her death, editors and publishers have made a variety of choices about what they want to do with her unusual and distinctive punctuation and language. Reading Dickinson is a good opportunity to ask yourself: how does this poem change if we alter the punctuation? How do seemingly small differences affect the flavor of the complete piece of art?

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “You may have met him? Did you not”
- **Line 18:** “I know, and they know me”

PERSONIFICATION

Personification serves a few subtle and important roles in this poem. First, it helps to create a sense of the uncanny (that feeling of creepiness you get when the familiar meets the unfamiliar. See this guide's entry on "Apostrophe" for more on the uncanny). When the speaker calls the snake a "fellow"—a casual, friendly term you might use for a guy you met in the street—it creates a sense of the snake as a person. And a person has all sorts of things the reader doesn't tend to imagine a snake has: an inner life, thoughts, plans. That this "fellow" is also apparently slithering through the grass makes his first appearance feel especially creepy. He's neither a person nor an animal, neither here nor there—and humans don't tend to like the feeling that gives them.

But calling the snake a "fellow" doesn't just raise the snake to a human level: it puts the speaker on a level with the snake. The speaker makes no bones about this leveling. He places himself very much in the family of the animals when he calls them "Nature's People" and says that he and these "People" know each other. This poem's use of personification blurs the boundaries between the animal world and the human world. In this world, humans can't look away from the hard truths of life and death: they are ruled by the same laws of nature as any animal.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "A narrow Fellow in the Grass"
- **Line 3:** "met him"
- **Line 9:** "He likes a Boggy Acre"
- **Line 17:** "Nature's People"
- **Line 21:** "this Fellow"

SIBILANCE

One would expect a poem about a snake to contain a lot of hissing sibilance, and "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" doesn't disappoint. What's notable about this poem in particular is how elegantly the use of sibilance reflects the poem's theme of deceit. (Hear that /s/ in "deceit"?)

Much of the sibilance (primarily on pure /s/ sounds, but often with some /sh/ and /z/ thrown in as well) here isn't initial sibilance—that is, a bunch of words that start with /s/ sounds in a row—but internal sibilance. In the first stanza, "Grass" and "notice" keep their /s/ sounds inside them; so do "closes" and "opens" in the second stanza and "likes" and "once" in the third. Like the snake, these hisses are concealed and stealthy, helping to create the poem's sinister mood. (Hear those /s/s in "concealed," "stealthy," and "sinister"? It's hard to avoid sibilance even in discussing the themes of this poem.)

When sibilance appears at the beginnings of words in this poem, it's in conjunction with one of the snake's appearances. When "a spotted shaft is seen" in line 6, the hiss is right out in the open. Notice especially the extra hiss as the "is" slides snakelike into the "seen."

The same goes for the fourth stanza, where the speaker, "stooping to secure" the "Whip Lash / Unbraiding in the Sun," finds it to be something else altogether. Here, there's something especially clever going on: the sibilance moves to the front of the words, but those words (unlike the initially-sibilant words in the second stanza) don't directly describe the snake itself. This is a doubly subtle evocation of the moment of horrible revelation as the "Whip Lash" reveals its true nature.

The use of sibilance in this poem doesn't just evoke a snaky slither and hiss, but the concealment of that slither and hiss.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Grass"
- **Line 2:** "Occasionally"
- **Line 4:** "notice," "sudden"
- **Line 5:** "Grass"
- **Line 6:** "spotted," "shaft," "is," "seen"
- **Line 7:** "closes"
- **Line 8:** "opens"
- **Line 9:** "likes"
- **Line 12:** "once"
- **Line 13:** "passed," "Lash"
- **Line 14:** "Sun"
- **Line 15:** "stooping," "secure"
- **Line 17:** "Several," "Nature's"
- **Line 19:** "transport"
- **Line 21:** "this"

SIMILE

Within the poem's big overarching metaphor of the snake as fearful deceiver (for more information on that, see the "Themes" and "Symbols" sections of this guide), one little simile raises its head. (Note: according to some definitions, all similes are metaphors, but not all metaphors are similes.) The seeming innocence of this simile is all part of what makes the poem's snake so frightening.

In line 5, when the snake puts in his first appearance, "The Grass divides as with a Comb". Aside from being a precise and vivid evocation of the way it looks when a small animal travels unseen through tall grass, this description helps to support the quiet menace of the snake. A comb is both a totally harmless object and a civilized one: a grooming tool, something that creates order. The neatness of the snake's division of the grass is all part of its fearfulness: it brings deceit and even death, but appears in an innocuous, unthreatening disguise. It's an agent of chaos that presents itself like a tool that makes things neat and orderly. (This feeling might be familiar to readers of The Little Prince, whose snake is similarly bland and dangerous.)

The comb might link to the speaker's later misreading of the

snake as a "Whip Lash" in line 13. While a whip might have felt a little less alarming to the rural speaker, who would be familiar with a whip as a tool for managing farm animals, it's still a loaded object. In both the simile of the comb and the symbol of the whip (see the "Symbols" section of this guide for more), there's a sense of menace concealed in everyday things.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "as with a Comb"
- **Line 13:** "Whip Lash"

VOCABULARY

Fellow (Line 1, Line 21) - An informal, friendly word for a man.

Boggy (Line 9) - Swampy or marshy.

Acre (Line 9) - A unit of land, often used to describe farmland.

Whip Lash (Line 13) - The rope part of a whip, as opposed to the handle.

Secure (Line 15) - In this instance, to pick up or take—but it can also mean "to attach" or "to make safe," and the reader might feel these other senses here too.

Transport (Line 19) - An overwhelming feeling.

Cordiality (Line 20) - Warmth and friendliness.

Zero (Line 24) - Here, the speaker is using the word "zero" impressionistically; alongside the "tighter Breathing" of the previous line, it gives the reader the feeling of the speaker's flesh shrinking. Think about "zeroing in."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A narrow Fellow in the Grass" consists of 24 lines. It doesn't use any particular form. But it does use a number of Dickinson's characteristic moves, like a predominantly iambic rhythm and quatrains.

The poem's six stanzas (each of which has four lines) have a deceptive regularity. On a first reading, the verses might seem similar. But if the reader looks more closely, they'll find that the rhythm of the poem stealthily changes as it goes along, moving from common meter to iambic trimeter. (See the "Meter" section for more on this.) As readers see more and more of this snake, the poem's pulse gets quicker.

As with all of Dickinson's poems, it's important to note that some of her wishes for capitalization and punctuation aren't totally clear: her choices vary across copies, and the few poems that were published in her lifetime were often altered substantially by newspaper editors. (When this poem was first published, it was given a title, "The Snake," which rather undermines the poem's sense of unseen menace.)

METER

This poem starts out in one of Dickinson's favorite meters: common meter, known as such because, well, it's pretty common. It may be familiar to you from any number of poems, but it's sometimes suggested that Dickinson might have taken to it because of its frequent use in hymns.

Common meter uses an iambic rhythm (da DUM) in lines that alternate between eight and six beats, like this:

> A narrow Fellow in the Grass
> Occasionally rides -

Line 1 here has four iambs, making it a line of iambic tetrameter. Line 2 has three iambs, making it a line of iambic trimeter. This poem uses textbook common meter for the first two stanzas. But in the third stanza, it breaks into a punchier iambic trimeter:

> He likes a Boggy Acre -
> A Floor too cool for Corn -

The rest of the poem stays in iambic trimeter: a harder, more insistent rhythm, and one that allows less room to breathe. As you can see above, many of these lines also end with an extra unstressed syllable—something called a "feminine ending" (as in "Acre"). This perhaps creates the sensation of the speaker running out of breath, unable to complete the full line of iambic tetrameter. You may observe that this fits right in with what's happening in the images at the end of the poem. Encounters with the snake produce "a tighter breathing," and the meter follows along.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme that the reader can chart in this poem is as follows:

ABCB

This should come with a caveat, however: while there's certainly a traditional *pattern* here, it's almost all slant rhyme, not pure rhyme. So when one says this poem rhymes in an ABCB pattern, one also needs to note that the B rhyme might be between "rides" and "is," "seen" and "on," "Sun" and "gone." The only pure rhymes in the poem come in the last two stanzas, with "me"/"Cordiality" and "alone"/"Bone."

The initial mismatch between rhymes fits in perfectly with the poem's themes. The snake itself might be said to "rhyme" with the "Whip Lash" it resembles—but it definitely isn't a perfect rhyme. The slippery matches between the words here echo the poem's theme of deceit and disguise. Something, in these rhymes, just doesn't quite add up.

The poem's final return to pure rhyme, then, brings readers back to some kind of certainty: when the speaker feels ease and friendliness in the natural world, rhyme returns. There's also something complete and final in the speaker's fear. The terror of the snake's deceit, at least, is not slippery: it's a fact. If the snake is marked by its deceptions and its treachery, the speaker's response to it is also marked by a simple bodily terror.

SPEAKER

The speaker here tells readers little about himself: only that he was once "a boy." Readers can infer, then, that the speaker is now a grown man.

Though the poem doesn't say much about the speaker directly, the way he tells his snake stories suggest that he's a sensitive, thoughtful fellow. He's a nature-lover, and apparently spent a lot of time outdoors as a child. He feels intense, even rapturous affection for much of the natural world. Even his personification of the terrifying snake suggests that he has a powerful imagination.

And perhaps it's partly the power of that imagination that makes the snake so terrifying. The speaker reads in the normal behavior of snakes an intent and a malice that suggests a bigger archetypal evil. To this speaker, a snake is not just a legless reptile.

SETTING

In a very few words, the speaker creates a vivid setting: a rural farm.

There are a few hints here that readers are dealing specifically with the countryside, where humans and animals come into uneasy contact. The "Boggy Acre" puts a human measurement on a wild area of land; the "Floor too cool for Corn" suggests a shaded barn. When the snake is in disguise, it masquerades as a common human tool: a "Whip Lash" that one might use to drive horses or cattle.

This isn't just the wilderness, then: this is a sort of border territory, where the boundary between what's nature and what's civilization is not totally clear.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was an utterly original writer, and stands out from her literary world as much as she fits into it. Some see her as prefiguring Modernism, a 20th-century literary movement noted for its interest in psychology and its experimental forms. But she was also clearly a part of contemporary 19th-century American Romanticism, a visionary cousin to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman.

The American Romantic interest in the human connection to nature (and the spiritual experiences to be found there) is clear in "A narrow Fellow in the Grass." One can also see the marks of the earlier English Romantics here, especially Wordsworth, whose poetry had a big influence on Dickinson both stylistically and thematically; he and Samuel Taylor Coleridge prefigured Dickinson in their reclamation of folk forms of poetry like ballads.

This is one of the few poems of Dickinson's that was published in her lifetime. She wrote it around 1865, and it was printed anonymously (and with a number of grammatical changes) in the Springfield Republican, a local newspaper. Notably, the editor published the poem under an unauthorized title, calling it "The Snake." Takes away a little from the sense of nameless menace, doesn't it?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson was famously distant from the outside world. When she was 35, she became a recluse, and for the rest of her short life she only rarely left her house.

But she lived in a chaotic time, and was far from indifferent to what was happening outside the walls of her family home. The horrific, bloody, and interminable American Civil War raged all through Dickinson's most productive writing years. (Dickinson was from Amherst, Massachusetts, and as a Northerner her political loyalties were very much with the Union forces.)

"A narrow Fellow in the Grass" was written in the year that the Civil War finally ended. The reader can speculate that a poem about the terrors of deceit and double-crossing might well have been influenced by a conflict that infamously pitted "brother against brother." Even harmonious nature, this poem seems to suggest, has in it the potential for such conflicts and such betrayals.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Julie Harris delivers a nicely sinister reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/ikI68EtsJKg)
- The Emily Dickinson Museum — The website for the museum in Dickinson's former home, with much more information on her life and works. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/)
- The Poem in Dickinson's Own Handwriting — View a copy of the poem from the Morgan Library. (https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/online/emily-dickinson/19)
- The Poetry Foundation on Dickinson — A short biography

of Dickinson, including links to some of her poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)

- The Meaning of Snakes and Serpents — A breakdown of the historical and symbolic significance of snakes in myth and literature. (https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/serpents-and-snakes)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- As imperceptibly as grief
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- Success is counted sweetest
- There's a certain Slant of light
- This is my letter to the world
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

HOW TO CITE

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