Publication — is the Auction

POEM TEXT

Publication – is the Auction
Of the Mind of Man –
Poverty – be justifying
For so foul a thing

Possibly – but We – would rather
From Our Garret go
White – unto the White Creator –
Than invest – Our Snow –

Thought belong to Him who gave it –
Then – to Him Who bear
Its Corporeal illustration – sell
The Royal Air –

In the Parcel – Be the Merchant
Of the Heavenly Grace –
But reduce no Human Spirit
To Disgrace of Price –

SUMMARY

Publishing one's work is like selling one's own mind to the highest bidder. Facing poverty *might* be a reasonable excuse to do something so revolting.

But it's better to be pure when we die—and leave our cramped attic rooms to meet our pure, perfect creator—than to profit off the pure white "snow" that is our writing.

God gave us thought, and all thought thus belongs to him. Human beings are the physical manifestation of that thought, and selling it would be like trying to sell the very air we all breathe.

A writer's job is to deliver God's heavenly blessings and wisdom through their work, and it would be utterly degrading to the human spirit to put a price on God's grace.

THEMES

WRITING AS SACRED AND PUBLICATION AS DEGRADING

In "Publication is the Auction," the speaker argues in no uncertain terms that selling one's writing is degrading. To do so is akin to putting a price tag on one's own thoughts (and perhaps even tailoring them to suit public appetites). Even worse, the speaker argues, these thoughts aren't people's to sell in the first place: all thought comes from God, and human beings are simply vessels that God's love and wisdom pass through. Writing, then, is sacred, and profiting off of this process is akin to selling the very "[a]ir" one breathes—nonsensical and immoral, defiling both the work and its author.

The speaker compares publication to auctioning off one's mind to the highest bidder. The only possible justification for doing something so "foul" would be to stave off poverty, but the speaker insists that it's much better to "go / White — unto the White Creator"—that is, to remain unpublished throughout life, so that one can be pure ("White") upon meeting God in heaven.

To sell one's work is to tarnish it and oneself, the speaker believes, because creative inspiration is a gift from God. "Thought belong to Him who gave it," the speaker argues, adding that human beings only carry the "[c]orporeal"—that is, bodily or worldly—"illustration" of these divine thoughts. People don't actually own anything, and writers are mere "[m]erchant[s]" of God's "Heavenly Grace." That is, they're simply delivering a "Parcel" (or package) that has been entrusted to them by God. God puts the thoughts in their minds, and they then write them down.

Selling one's writing is thus like "invest[ing]" one's "Snow," or trying to profit off of the very thing that connects people to divinity. Publication, to this speaker, is practically sacrilege. One might as well try to "sell / The Royal Air"—something that belongs to no one yet benefits everyone, passing in and out of lungs and sustaining life. As such, the speaker concludes, one must "reduce no Human Spirit / To Disgrace of Price"—that is, people mustn't insult the human spirit, which comes from God, but putting a price tag on it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Publication – is the Auction

Of the Mind of Man –

The speaker wastes no time in saying exactly how they feel about publication: the poem's opening metaphor compares selling one's work to holding an "Auction," a public sale in which people try to outbid each other for goods, services, or property. But instead of selling *things*, this "Auction" involves selling the "Mind" itself; publication, to this speaker, is like putting a price on one's very thoughts. What's more, this metaphor implies that the desire to publish encourages writers to cater to public opinions and tastes (so that people will make higher "bids") rather than stick to whatever they themselves find meaningful.

Note how the use of alliteration and capitalization draw attention to the phrase "Mind of Man," suggesting that the speaker isn't just referring to the thoughts and perceptions of an *individual* writer, but to the entire idea of the "Mind" in general. In other words, when writers sell their work, the speaker believes they're actually insulting the human capacity to think and observe.

Note, too, the passionate and persuasive tone of the poem: the speaker's strong opening statement is underlined by a forceful, trochaic meter (meaning the main poetic unit here is the trochee, a foot that moves from a stressed syllable to an unstressed syllable—like the word "trochee" itself!). The first line of the poem more specifically uses trochaic tetrameter, meaning that it consists of *four* trochees—four DA-dums—in a row:

Publi- | cation — | is the | Auction

The second line is then written in trochaic *trimeter*, meaning it has three trochees instead of four. It's also catalectic, which simply means that it's missing its final syllable:

Of the | Mind of | Man —

Trochees lend the poem a driving, pounding rhythm, which that catalexis intensifies by ending the line on a stressed syllable. This pattern will continue throughout the poem.

LINES 3-4

Poverty – be justifying
For so foul a thing

The speaker goes on to say that the only thing that might "justify[]"—or reasonably explain/excuse—"Publication" is "Poverty." In other words, though the speaker is opposed to the idea of selling one's work, they understand that in cases of dire financial need, a person may have no other choice.

Notice the way that /p/ alliteration and caesura (that dash) after the words "Poverty" in line 3 and "Publication" in the first line create a bit of a parallel. This parallel, in turn, might suggest that the speaker finds *both* publication and poverty morally repugnant. In a way, the poem isn't *just* arguing against selling one's work; it's arguing against the circumstances that might drive someone to do so. In an ideal world, it seems the speaker is saying, people could write purely for the sake of writing; there would be no need to bend one's thoughts to try to please some invisible buyer or the general reading public.

The mixture of /f/ consonance and sibilance here seems to evoke the speaker's distaste for publication:

Poverty — be justifying
For so foul a thing.

Thanks to these fricative, hissing sounds, the speaker's scorn practically leaps off the page.

While the poem generally follows a very simple ABCB rhyme scheme (the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme with each other), the rhyme between "Man" and "thing" is very, *very* slant—perhaps suggesting how utterly degrading the act of publishing is. The speaker finds it "foul"—that is, offensive and wicked—most likely because it diminishes something innately and beautifully human to a mere "thing" that can be bought and sold.

LINES 5-8

Possibly – but We – would rather
From Our Garret go
White – unto the White Creator –
Than invest – Our Snow –

While "Poverty" may be a valid "justif[ication]" for selling one's work, the speaker says that it is better to

From Our Garret go
White — unto the White Creator —

The use of diacope here emphasizes the word "White," a color that symbolizes the purity and perfection of God. The diacope also emphasizes the fact that human beings should seek to *emulate* that purity and perfection—to be *like* God. In the speaker's mind, people should be pure when they die and leave this world to meet their pure "Creator." And in order to *remain* pure, the speaker believes that one must not profit off one's creative thoughts and inspiration.

The speaker compares these things to "Snow," a metaphor that evokes creative inspiration falling down on humanity from God above just as snow falls to the ground. To "invest" (or make money off of) this gift—a pure, miraculous bounty—would not only diminish the writer; it would also dirty the work itself, making it less perfectly "White."

The alliteration in line 6 ("Garret go") adds intensity to the line and also calls readers' attention to the idea that the material conditions of one's life—such as living and writing in a "Garret"

(a small attic space)—are temporary and not worth tarnishing one's soul over; every person will one day have the opportunity to leave this world and be reunited with their "Creator." The speaker thus believes it's more important to use writing as a genuine means of connecting with the divine rather than as a resource for acquiring worldly comfort.

Notice the continued use of caesura in this passage as well. The dashes in lines 5, 7, and 8 add a kind of halting tension to the poem. Rather than the more traditional pauses indicated by periods, semi-colons, or commas, these dashes seem to encourage the reader to pause *and* leap forward at the same time. The reader can perhaps *feel* the speaker physically wrestling with big, philosophical ideas; the speaker seems to be genuinely tortured by the thought of humanity's beautiful connection with God being corrupted by the desire for money or praise.

LINES 9-12

Thought belong to Him who gave it –
Then – to Him Who bear
Its Corporeal illustration – sell
The Royal Air –

The speaker declares that "Thought belong to Him who gave it." In other words, God created consciousness, and therefore it is the property of God and God alone; human beings may have the wonderful gift of being able to receive and express God's goodness and truth, but none of it is theirs to keep.

Notice the use of diacope in lines 9-10:

> Thought belong to Him who gave it –
> Then – to Him Who bear

That second capitalized "Him" suggests that people are a *reflection* of God, whose thought they "bear" (or carry). This human-carried thought is just the "Corporeal" (or worldly/bodily) "illustration[]" (or impression) of *God's* thought. These thoughts thus aren't human beings' to sell.

Liquid /l/ and growling /r/ consonance in lines 10-12 seem to evoke the absurdity of trying to profit off of something that was given to one as a gift:

> Then to Him who bear
> Its Corporeal illustration — sell
> The Royal Air —

The metaphor of publication being akin to "sell[ing] / The Royal Air" suggests that profiting off God's gift of contemplation/creative inspiration is like profiting off the very "Air" one breathes. Like the air, thinking and writing come free of charge; the ability to express oneself is innately human and connects people to everyone else, just as air passes in and out of one person's lungs and then another's. It's meant to be freely shared, especially since it's impossible to live without! (Note that the word "Royal" here might simply be an adjective reflecting just how wonderful air is. Alternatively, the speaker is being literal, saying that it's ridiculous to sell air that's passed through "Royal" lungs—the lungs of a kind or queen, perhaps—because those royals didn't create that air, nor do they own it.)

To profit off of this life-sustaining, invisible, and connective substance would be unconscionable. For the same reason, the speaker believes that the publication of one's writing is reprehensible.

LINES 13-16

In the Parcel – Be the Merchant
Of the Heavenly Grace –
But reduce no Human Spirit
To Disgrace of Price –

In the final stanza, the speaker says that writers are only "Merchant[s]" (or traders) of the "Parcel" (or package) they "bear." Again, the speaker emphasizes the idea that writers don't actually *own* the thoughts they express; they simply *deliver* them on behalf of God. Their writings are like packages that God has sent to humanity.

Notice all the sibilance in these final lines as well:

> In the Parcel — Be the Merchant
> Of the Heavenly Grace —
> But reduce no Human Spirit
> To Disgrace of Price —

Sibilance creates a hushed, maybe even humble tone as the speaker discusses things that are difficult to speak about—God's "Grace" and the "Human Spirit." All these /s/ sounds might reflect the speaker's reverence for God. At the same time, however, perhaps all this sibilance evokes a hissing, almost spitting disdain for publication. After all, the speaker has said plainly that they find the practice "foul."

In addition to this sibilance, rough /r/ consonance carries over from the third stanza into these final lines. These /r/ sounds add a certain harshness in the speaker's voice as they argue against the "Disgrace," or shamefulness, of publishing. Ultimately, the speaker contends, the "Human Spirit"—which is a reflection of God's "Heavenly Grace"—is too valuable, too precious, to be besmirched by "Price."

SYMBOLS

SNOW/WHITENESS

In the poem, the color white symbolizes purity. When the speaker calls God "the White Creator," they're

emphasizing God's holiness and perfection. And when the speaker says that they'd rather "go / White — unto the White Creator," this means that they hope to be pure *themselves* when they die and meet God.

Part of remaining pure throughout one's life, the speaker continues, is refusing to profit off one's "Snow"—a metaphor for the thought/creative inspiration that sprinkles down on writers from God above. Selling this "Snow" would symbolically dirty it, and profiting off the pure connection they have with God would tarnish the *writer* as well.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "Possibly – but We – would rather / From Our Garret go / White – unto the White Creator – / Than invest – Our Snow –"

POETIC DEVICES

CAESURA

The poem's frequent caesurae create moments of drama and anticipation, and they also emphasize certain words or ideas. Take a look at the first stanza, for example:

> Publication — is the Auction
> Of the Mind of Man —
> Poverty — be justifying
> For so foul a thing

The dashes after "Publication" and "Poverty" push readers to linger on these words, calling attention to their importance in the poem. In creating a bit of a parallel between "Publication" and "Poverty," the caesurae here might also suggest that the speaker finds *both* things abhorrent. That is, the speaker thinks that people shouldn't sell the thoughts given to them by God, but they also think that people shouldn't be put into a position where they have no other choice than to do so.

Because the caesurae here always take the form of dashes rather than more traditional periods or commas, they tend to feel less like grammatical *pauses* and more like evidence of the mind in *motion*. Through the use of caesura, the reader can perhaps *feel* the visceral way in which this speaker is wrestling with their convictions around publication. This isn't merely an intellectual argument; their disgust for the way publication degrades the "Human Spirit" is something they feel deep in their core.

For instance, the caesura in line 8 ("Than invest — Our Snow") seems to evoke a grimace or a contorting of the spirit as the speaker thinks about what it means for someone to profit off of the very thing that connects them to their "Creator." It's as if the thought of such a thing brings the speaker physical discomfort; the speaker repeatedly struggles to articulate themselves, so flummoxed are they by the idea of publishing one's work.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Publication – is"
- **Line 3:** "Poverty – be"
- **Line 5:** "Possibly – but," "We – would"
- **Line 7:** "White – unto"
- **Line 8:** "invest – Our"
- **Line 10:** "Then – to"
- **Line 11:** "illustration – sell"
- **Line 13:** "Parcel – Be"

ENJAMBMENT

Much like its caesurae, the poem's frequent enjambments create drama and anticipation.

Take the first line, for example: the speaker introduces the idea of publication as a metaphorical "Auction" here, but the reader doesn't know what's actually being auctioned *off* until they continue to the second line:

> Publication – is the Auction
> Of the Mind of Man –

In this way, the poem pulls the reader from one line to the next. But because the poem also contains a good deal of end-stopped lines (including in the quotation above, with the dash after "Man"), it never feels like the speaker is getting totally carried away by their emotions. After all, they believe they're presenting a fairly logical argument!

The poem's use of enjambment is also often in tension with all its caesurae. As a result, the poem never gains a huge amount of momentum. Take a look at lines 5-7, for example:

> Possibly — but We — would rather
> From our Garret go
> White — unto the White Creator —

Lines 5 and 6 are both enjambed, subtly evoking the movement the speaker describes from "our Garret" (that is, a little room in an attic) "unto the White Creator" (that is, to God in heaven). At the same time, the caesurae *within* these lines slow the poem down. This push and pull between enjambment and caesura might make it sound as though the speaker is working out their thoughts in real-time.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Auction / Of"
- **Lines 3-4:** "justifying / For"

- **Lines 5-6:** "rather / From"
- **Lines 6-7:** "go / White"
- **Lines 10-11:** "bear / Its"
- **Lines 11-12:** "sell / The"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Merchant / Of"
- **Lines 15-16:** "Spirit / To"

METAPHOR

The poem uses several metaphors to illustrate the speaker's belief that selling one's writing devalues both a writer and their work.

First, the speaker compares publication to auctioning off the human mind. An auction is a public sale where potential buyers make bids on a product or service. Calling publication an auction thus suggests that it requires writers to tweak their thoughts to suit public tastes (i.e., in order to earn higher bids). This, in turn, would perhaps result in writing that's less truthful or meaningful.

Because this poem was written only two years before slavery was abolished in the United States, it's also possible (though certainly not definite) that Dickinson was thinking about slave auctions: the horrific practice of putting Black men, women, and children on display and selling them like animals to the highest bidder. In any case, it's clear that the speaker sees the process of selling one's writing as utterly degrading and base, something that should be far below the lofty "Mind of Man."

The speaker also metaphorically calls writers' work/creative inspiration "Snow." This builds off the symbolic connotations of the color white, which is typically associated with purity and innocence. The speaker believes that thought comes from God, the "White Creator"; all thought, it follows, is pure. It's the earthly world that can *dirty* this thought, and the speaker wants to keep their "Snow," the worldly manifestation of God's thought, pristine. To metaphorically "invest" this snow would be to debase something divine, beyond price.

The speaker goes on to say that human consciousness is simply the "Corporeal" (or bodily) "illustration[]" of *God's* thought. In other words, human beings are like a vessel through which God's thought flows, and what writers manage to get down on paper is simply an *impression* of God's grace.

Finally, the speaker refers to writers as the "Merchant" (or trader) of God's thought; their writing is a "Parcel," or package, containing this thought. In other words, the writer is only an *intermediary* between God and other people—they don't own the contents of the package they deliver.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Publication – is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man –"
- **Line 8:** "Than invest – Our Snow –"
- **Lines 10-12:** "Then – to Him Who bear / Its Corporeal illustration – sell / The Royal Air –"
- **Line 13:** "In the Parcel – Be the Merchant"

DIACOPE

The poem uses diacope twice to highlight the relationship between God and human beings.

First, in line 7, the speaker says that it's better to return "White — unto the White Creator" than it is to allow oneself to be tarnished by the act of publication. The color white is typically associated with goodness, purity, innocence, and cleanliness. In calling God "the White Creator," the speaker is thus saying that God is perfect and pure, utterly untarnished. The repetition of the word "white" here implies that people should want to be *like* God—to remain unsullied by earthly life so that they're as pure as God made them when they die.

The speaker also uses diacope in lines 9-10, with the repetition of "Him":

> Thought belong to Him who gave it –
> Then – to Him Who bear

Again, the repetition here calls attention to the relationship between people and God. Human beings are a reflection of God, as that double "Him" suggests. The speaker is saying that all thought comes from God, and thus God is the *owner* of thought. People may "bear," or carry, that thought in the mortal world, but it doesn't "belong" to them.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "White," "White"
- **Line 9:** "Him"
- **Line 10:** "Him"

ALLITERATION

The poem uses alliteration to add touches of musicality to the poem and also to emphasize the relationship between certain words.

In the first stanza, for example, note the shared /m/ sound of "Mind of Man." On one level, this alliteration simply intensifies the speaker's language; it makes the phrase ring out more clearly to the reader's ear, signaling that the speaker is talking about something important. (The alliteration also goes hand-in-hand with Dickinson's use of capitalization, so that the phrase stands out even more.) The alliteration also might suggest that "Man[kind]" and the "Mind" are inseparable—and that trying to sell one's thoughts is like trying to sell off something deeply integral to being *human*. It seems to suggest the speaker's not just referring to a singular "Mind" or a singular "Man," but

rather the collective thoughts of humanity.

Similarly, the /g/ alliteration in line 6 ("From our Garret go") adds emphasis to the idea that someday people will leave this earth with its cramped living spaces and return to God's embrace. This would seem to suggest that the material conditions of this life aren't particularly important—even if one is living and writing in a little tiny space, that won't be one's reality forever. Better to focus on the connection human beings share with the divine than to get sidetracked by desire for material comfort.

Also listen to the way the plosive /p/ sound trickles down the first chunk of the poem, appearing in "Publication," "Poverty," and "Possibly." This sharp, clear sound at the start of three lines adds to the poem's forcefulness and passion.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Publication"
- **Line 2:** "Mind," "Man"
- **Line 3:** "Poverty"
- **Line 4:** "For," "foul"
- **Line 5:** "Possibly," "We," "would"
- **Line 6:** "Garret," "go"
- **Line 10:** "Him," "Who"

SIBILANCE

The poem's final stanza is filled with sibilance:

> In the Parcel — Be the Merchant
> Of the Heavenly Grace —
> But reduce no Human Spirit
> To Disgrace of Price —

All this sibilance casts a hush over the stanza (one can't exactly shout an /s/!). On one level, this hush might evoke the ethereal, otherworldly qualities the speaker is referring to—things like "Heavenly Grace" and the "Human Spirit."

At the same time, however, readers might take the sibilance here as sounding more like a disdainful hissing. After all, the speaker has said in no uncertain terms that publication is a "foul" practice! As such, all this sibilance might evoke the speaker's passionate repulsion. They don't dare speak above a whisper, it seems; the whole idea of publication is too distasteful to talk about loudly.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "Parcel"
- **Line 14:** "Grace"
- **Line 15:** "reduce," "Spirit"
- **Line 16:** "Disgrace," "Price"

CONSONANCE

Like alliteration and sibilance, consonance adds musicality, rhythm, and intensity to the poem. For example, the /f/ sounds in lines 3 and 4 seem to emphasize the speaker's revulsion at the idea of someone having to sell their thoughts in order to scrape by:

> Poverty — be justifying
> For so foul a thing

The fricative /f/ sounds make the poem more visceral and forceful.

Later, the combination of liquid /l/ and growling /r/ sounds lends an almost over-the-top feel to lines 10-12, as if to draw attention to the hubris of selling one's passing thoughts:

> Then to Him who bear
> Its Corporeal illustration — sell
> The Royal Air —

Consonance of the gruff /r/ sound continues throughout the final stanza as well. Combined with hissing sibilance, it lends a harshness to the speaker's tone as they argue their point that publication is a degrading act. Here are lines 15-16, for example:

> But reduce no Human Spirit
> To Disgrace of Price –

It sounds, perhaps, as though the speaker is spitting out these words in revulsion.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Publication," "Auction"
- **Line 2:** "Mind," "Man"
- **Line 3:** "Poverty," "justifying"
- **Line 4:** "For," "foul"
- **Line 5:** "Possibly," "We," "would," "rather"
- **Line 6:** "From Our Garret go"
- **Line 8:** "invest," "Snow"
- **Line 10:** "Him Who," "bear"
- **Line 11:** "Its," "Corporeal," "illustration," "sell"
- **Line 12:** "Royal Air"
- **Line 14:** "Heavenly," "Grace"
- **Line 15:** "reduce," "Human Spirit"
- **Line 16:** "Disgrace," "Price"

VOCABULARY

Auction (Line 1) - A sales event where people bid on things; the highest bid (that is, the largest amount of money offered) wins

the item or service.

Foul (Lines 3-4) - Revolting; morally wrong.

Justifying (Line 3) - To "justify" something is to explain or rationalize it. The speaker is saying that poverty is the only reasonable explanation or excuse for selling one's writing.

Garret (Line 6) - A small room in an attic.

Corporeal illustration (Line 11) - "Corporeal" has to do with the body or material objects, so a "corporeal illustration" of divine thought is a worldly or human expression of that thought.

Parcel (Line 13) - A package.

Merchant (Line 13) - Someone who trades goods made by other people.

Disgrace (Line 16) - A state of shame or dishonor.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem's 16 lines are divided into four quatrains (a.k.a four-line stanzas). These *look* a lot like ballad stanzas that Dickinson was so fond of: they follow an ABCB rhyme scheme and alternate between lines of tetrameter and trimeter (lines with four vs. three poetic feet—more on that in the Meter section of this guide).

The poem's alternating lines and rhymed quatrains call to mind the church hymns that informed much of Dickinson's poetry, which makes sense: this poem is, after all, arguing for the sacredness of human thought and writing.

That said, these stanzas don't use the typical iambic (da-DUM) rhythm of a ballad. Instead, the poem's forceful trochaic rhythms (its falling DA-dum beats) evoke the passionate conviction of this speaker, who believes that publishing one's work is not only wrong but an insult to the "Human Spirit" itself.

METER

"Publication — is the Auction" alternates between lines of trochaic tetrameter and trochaic trimeter. Odd-numbered lines are made up of four trochees, metrical feet consisting of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. Take a look at line 9 for an example of perfect trochaic tetrameter:

> Thought be- | long to | Him who | gave it

Even-numbered lines are then more or less in trochaic trimeter: they still follow that stressed-unstressed rhythm, but they have just three feet (three DA-dums) instead of four. However, most of the even-numbered lines in this poem are catalectic, which means that they're missing their final beat—the last unstressed syllable is simply absent. For example, here's line 10:

> Then — to | Him who | bear

The poem's trochaic rhythm feels forceful and insistent, which is fitting for a poem that's trying to persuade the reader of something. It evokes the speaker's passionate feelings about publication. The use of catalexis adds to the poem's forcefulness as well, in that it allows those trimeter lines to end on the firmness of a stressed beat.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows a simple ABCB rhyme scheme, meaning the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme.

This rhyme scheme is common not only in church hymns and nursery rhymes, but also in a great deal of Romantic poetry. The simplicity of the rhyme scheme adds musicality to the poem without making it feel overly rigid.

As with most of Dickinson's work, however, some of the rhymes here aren't perfect. In the first stanza, for instance, the rhyme between "Man" and "thing" is decidedly slant—there's really only a faint *echo* of rhyme here! "Grace" and "price" in the poem's final stanza is an imperfect rhyme as well. Moments like this add interest, surprise, and excitement to the poem, keeping it from becoming too predictable. The near-lack of rhyme between "Man" and "thing" might even subtly suggest how degrading "[p]ublication" is: it can demote the "Mind of Man" to "thing" that barely resembles (or sounds like) that "Man" at all.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a writer who, clearly, doesn't believe in publishing one's work! While the speaker admits that people grappling with poverty might have some grounds to sell their writing, in an ideal world, no one would have to publish anything. To do so, in this speaker's view, would be to put a price tag on one's own thoughts. And because those thoughts come from a pure and perfect God, publication is downright "foul"—an affront to the "Human Spirit" itself.

The speaker uses collective pronouns throughout the poem ("we," "our"), which indicate that this issue is much bigger than their personal circumstances. In fact, it affects *everyone*; human beings are simply the earthly "bear[ers]" of God's thoughts, the speaker argues, meaning that all thought is ultimately the property of God and God alone.

It is worth noting that Dickinson herself had a rather complicated relationship to publication, a relationship that evolved over the course of her life. This poem may or may not be a direct reflection of how she felt at the time.

SETTING

Like so many of Dickinson's poems, "Publication — is the Auction" doesn't have a specific setting; it's dealing with an abstract idea that's meant to apply everywhere, all the time. The speaker argues that thoughts don't "belong" to the people writing them down, but are rather a gift from God. The writer is merely a go-between, a kind of "merchant" between divinity and humanity. As such, readers can broadly think of the poem as taking place in the mortal world—a place separate from God's realm. The speaker specifically envisions writers working in a little attic room (a "Garret") in life, and urges writers not to sell their work so that they can still be "White," or pure, when they die and go "unto the White Creator" (i.e., when they meet God).

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Dickinson fits into her literary context by standing out from it. Though she wrote in the mid to late 1800s, some critics class her as a proto-Modernist (a 20th-century literary movement) for her psychological subtlety and experimentation with form. She was, certainly, one of the greatest voices of American Romanticism, a school of thought that believed in the importance of the self, nature, and one's individual relationship with God.

Dickinson's thought and work were influenced by the English Romantics of a generation or two before her, including William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge; by contemporary American transcendentalist writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson; by the novels of the Victorian English writer Charlotte Bronte; and by Shakespeare.

Though Dickinson published only a handful of poems during her lifetime, it would be a mistake to view her *only* as a literary recluse or to think that she didn't intend for her poetry to be read in the future. She ordered many of her poems into sequences that she then sewed together into fascicles (or booklets), saving many others as unbound sheets. "Publication — is the Auction" was included in one of these fascicles and dated to 1863.

Her manuscripts were written by hand and are often hard to decipher. They also often contain multiple variants, with three or four possible words for each word in the poem. As a result, there are often considerable differences between different published editions of Dickinson's poems, including their line breaks and punctuation. Serious studies of Dickinson increasingly begin with facsimiles of her manuscripts, as is the case with Jen Bervin and Marta Werner's recent edition of poems that Dickinson wrote on envelopes, *The Gorgeous Nothings*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This poem, like almost all of Dickinson's work, didn't see the light of day until after her death; Dickinson mostly eschewed publication, mistrusting its conformity and commercialism—feelings clearly on display here! Dickinson only became widely known posthumously, when her sister Lavinia discovered a cache of nearly 1,800 secret poems and brought them to publication with the help of a (sometimes combative) group of Dickinson's family and friends. It was a fortunate rescue: Dickinson's poetry would become some of the most influential and beloved in the world.

This poem was written during the American Civil War, a time of great societal uncertainty and darkness. While Dickinson was famously reclusive and didn't get involved in the war directly, she was firmly on the Union side of the conflict. 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.

While this poem makes no direct reference to the historical events of its time, its use of an "Auction" as a metaphor for the evils of "Publication" might be understood in relation to American slavery. At slave auctions, white auctioneers sold Black people to the highest bidder as though they were livestock rather than human beings. Since this poem was written shortly before the abolition of slavery, it's possible that Dickinson had the moral repugnancy of these "Auction[s]" in the back of her mind. (This isn't an explicit nor definite reference in the poem, but it also wouldn't be the only time her work alludes to slavery and race; she also wrote about these things in "The Lamp burns sure — within" and "Color — Caste — Denomination —.")

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Dickinson's Life and Work — Check out a biography of Dickison via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)
- The Poem in Dickinson's Hand — A scan of Dickinson's handwritten poem, from the Emily Dickinson Archive. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/8657)
- Dickinson's Friendship with Thomas Wentworth Higginson — This Atlantic article describes an in-person meeting between Dickinson and her friend and mentor Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who once discouraged her from publishing. (https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/06/

day-emily-dickinson-met-thomas-wentworth-higginson/613357/)

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a recording of Dickinson's poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NaIVJggN450)
- "The Publication Question" — An introduction to Dickinson's fraught relationship with publication, via the Emily Dickinson Museum. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/emily-dickinson/poetry/the-poet-at-work/the-publication-question/)

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
- 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 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
- 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

Mottram, Darla. "*Publication — is the Auction.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 20 Jan 2022. Web. 8 Feb 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mottram, Darla. "*Publication — is the Auction.*" LitCharts LLC, January 20, 2022. Retrieved February 8, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/emily-dickinson/publication-is-the-auction.