Safe in their Alabaster Chambers

POEM TEXT

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers -
Untouched by Morning -
and untouched by noon -
Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection,
Rafter of Satin and Roof of Stone -

Grand go the Years,
In the Crescent above them -
Worlds scoop their Arcs -
and Firmaments - row -
Diadems - drop -
And Doges surrender -
Soundless as Dots,
On a Disk of Snow.

SUMMARY

Safe in their marble tombs, unaffected by either morning or midday, the dead sleep, patiently awaiting their resurrection at Judgment Day, lying beneath "ceilings" of silky coffin-lining and the "roofs" of their stone caskets.

The years sweep above the dead in majestic curves; planets carve out their paths overhead, and the heavens skim past like rowboats. Crowns (and kingdoms) fall to the ground and powerful rulers are defeated—and it all happens as silently as droplets falling onto a circle of snow.

THEMES

THE POWER AND CONSOLATIONS OF DEATH

In “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,” a speaker imagines the dead lying safe in their tombs, utterly undisturbed by anything that’s going on above them. Nothing that happens on earth makes the slightest difference to the dead, the poem suggests—a fact that also serves as a subtle reminder that death will bring an unceremonious end to whatever seems so important to the living now! Death, in this poem, is the strongest force there is, and it makes a mockery of all earthly power. At the same time, however, it’s also peculiarly comforting, protecting the dead from the chaos and uproar of earthly life.

Imagining the dead under the stony “roof[s]” of their tombs, the speaker observes that they lie there undisturbed by the passage of time. “Untouched” by “morning,” “noon,” the dramatic sweep of the “Years,” or the movement of the heavenly “Firmaments” (or skies) themselves, the dead seem to be simply resting peacefully until the “Resurrection”—that is, until the Christian Judgment Day, and the end of time.

What’s more, death makes the dead indifferent to earthly power struggles. No matter how many “doges” (that is, powerful magistrates) supplant each other and how many “diadems” (or crowns) pass from hand to hand, no mortal doings disturb the dead one bit. All the world’s political ruckus, to the dead, is “soundless”: an image that might also suggest that power struggles doesn’t make much difference to *anything*, in the long run, since all the players end up dead, too.

That might all sound a bit grim—but to this poem’s speaker, it’s also comforting. The dead aren’t just undisturbed: they’re “safe” from all the world’s chaos and mess, just waiting peacefully for the “Resurrection” to come. Death’s calm, stony permanence completely insulates the dead from pain or worry.

Death, this poem suggests, is thus both a conqueror and a protector. It makes a mockery of all human power struggles, but it also welcomes everyone into its unbreakable tranquility.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-13

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers -
Untouched by Morning -
and untouched by noon -

"Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" paints a picture of all the world's dead, sound "[a]sleep" under the stony roofs of their tombs. Nothing, this poem observes, can harm or disturb the dead: they're "safe" from everything, waiting peacefully for the "Resurrection," the Christian Judgment Day when they'll wake up again. To the dead, the world of the living is just so much distant, empty ruckus, rattling overhead; soon enough, all the people making such a great big noisy fuss in the living world will join the sleepers, too.

The poem's tone, at the outset, is a curious mixture of eerie and serene. Take a look at the way the speaker phrases the first few lines:

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers -
Untouched by Morning -
and untouched by noon -

The diacope on "untouched" here makes the dead sound securely insulated from the passage of time. But there's something a little creepy about that idea, too. If one is "untouched" by morning or noon, one must be in pitch-black darkness. And the idea of sunlight *touching* people (or not) reminds readers that the dead lie quite *alone* in their "Alabaster Chambers." Those "chambers" themselves, made of translucent white stone, feel pretty ghostly and chilly, too.

Even the poem's shape feels shivery. Dickinson usually wrote in rhythmic common meter, or sometimes iambic tetrameter (lines with four da-DUMs in a row). Here, she breaks from that pattern: the lines here don't use any predictable metrical foot, though they mostly prefer emphatic, front-loaded trochees (feet with a DUM-da rhythm). Not only that, they split in unusual places. Read the poem aloud, and it *sounds* like it's mostly in *accentual* tetrameter: that is, lines of four beats apiece, like this:

Safe in | their Al- | abas- | ter Chambers -

But *look* at the page, and that relatively steady pulse is broken up in all sorts of odd ways. Take these lines, for instance:

Untouched by Morning -
and untouched by noon -

By spreading four beats out over two lines, the poem slows its pace right down. That's fitting for a poem about the inevitability of death: death, confident in its ultimate power, doesn't have to rush in order to catch up with everyone in the end.

LINES 4-5

Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection,
Rafter of Satin and Roof of Stone -

The dead, the speaker goes on, aren't just "safe": they're waiting to wake up again. As "meek members of the Resurrection," they'll spring back to life on the Christian Judgment Day. In this view, it's only fitting that this poem about death never once uses the words "death" or "dead." Death, in a Christian view, might be a mighty and all-conquering force—but it's also not the last word.

Again, the speaker's language here feels both creepy and comforting. Listen to the sounds that hold these lines together:

Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection,
Rafter of Satin and Roof of Stone -

The weaving /ee/, /eh/, and /ah/ assonance here makes these lines musical and dreamy. But dense /r/, /s/, /t/, and /m/ alliteration and consonance also create a formidable wall of sound, making the tombs these lines describe feel rather like impregnable fortresses.

And take another look at the language here. The idea of the dead as "meek"—timid, gentle, and quiet—feels pretty macabre in a certain light: truly, there's no one meeker than a cold, floppy corpse!

The speaker's metaphor of tombs as houses, with satin rafters and stone roofs, is similarly uneasy. That "Satin" is, of course, a coffin's lining, and the "Roof" a coffin's lid. If the tomb is a home, it's a pretty claustrophobic one: those rafters are only a few inches above the corpses' noses.

The first stanza of the poem, then, strikes a delicate balance between comforting and disturbing. Death, here, is "safe," an undisturbed sleep before a "Resurrection." But it's also a queasy physical reality: cold, lonely, and inescapable.

LINES 6-9

Grand go the Years,
In the Crescent above them -
Worlds scoop their Arcs -
and Firmaments - row -

As the second stanza begins, the speaker looks out into the world of the living—a world that has absolutely no effect on the "sleep[ers]," "safe" in their tombs below. Even the heavens themselves, rolling overhead, make not a jot of difference to the dead.

Here, the poem's meter—raggedy and unpredictable in the first stanza—drops into a more regular shape. But that shape is, again, clearer to the ear than the eye! *Listen* to this stanza, and it sounds as if it's written in dactylic tetrameter—lines of four dactyls, metrical feet with a rumbling DUM-da-da rhythm: "Grand go the | Years,
In the Cre- | scent above them." But *look* at this stanza and it looks as if it's in lines of dimeter, with two strong stresses apiece:

Grand go | the Years,
In the Cre- | scent above them -

Again, breaking up the lines this way gives the poem the feeling of a slow, ponderous march—a rhythm that suits both the idea of death inching inexorably closer and the dramatic images of years and planets spinning overhead.

These images work almost like a time-lapse camera pointed at the skies. The "Years," "Worlds" (or planets), and the "Firmaments" (or heavens) themselves all move in their courses, "Arc[ing]" over the earth in graceful "Crescent[s]." As the speaker says, it's a "Grand" procession.

But it doesn't matter how "Grand" the movements of the stars

are, or how many "Years" pass by. The dead aren't touched by any of it. The images of passing stars and planets, in particular, suggest that the dead aren't affected by destiny or fate (for which the stars are ancient symbols): their fates are good and sealed already.

LINES 10-11

Diadems - drop -
And Doges surrender -

If the movements of the stars, planets, and time itself can't touch the dead, then the actions of the living have even less effect. In two succinct lines, the speaker makes short work of all the world's political machinations—the rise and fall of monarchs and empires.

A "diadem" (or crown), here a metonym for a ruler or a country, can "drop" in an instant, bringing an unceremonious end to even the mightiest power. (And the image of a diadem *dropping* might invite readers to consider what might make a crown hit the ground: beheading has always been a popular option for getting rid of inconvenient monarchs...)

The image of surrendering "Doges," meanwhile, gives these lines a bit of Italian flair. Doges were powerful (and power-hungry) Italian Renaissance magistrates, elected officials whose careers were often marked by intrigue and murder. By conjuring up doges here—rather than, say, generals or presidents or prime ministers—the speaker invites readers to imagine a tricksy, dangerous, and darkly glamorous political environment.

The speaker is also asking readers to reflect that political battles have gone on as long as people have had politics. Looking into the past, the poem hints that even the grandest displays of human power eventually fall before Death's sword.

Listen to the fitting sounds of these lines:

Diadems - drop -
And Doges surrender -

The firm, growling alliteration and consonance on /d/ and /r/ sounds here feels grim and final.

LINES 12-13

Soundless as Dots,
On a Disk of Snow.

The movements of stars and kings, the poem concludes, all come to the same fate: the silence and strange security of death. If the dead sleep "safe" from all the ruckus of the living world, they also eventually welcome fallen "doges" and dethroned monarchs to their comfortable, quiet company.

The poem closes with a simile that's at once vivid and disorienting. All worldly concerns, the speaker observes, never reach the dead. Rather, they fall:

Soundless as Dots,
On a Disk of Snow.

On the one hand, this image is perfectly clear: drops of some liquid spotting a pure white circle. On the other hand, these lines feel almost like an abstract painting: that "Disk of Snow," detached from any earthly landscape, seems to float in a big dark emptiness. The hushed sibilance of these lines evokes that void's eerie quiet:

Soundless as Dots,
On a Disk of Snow.

And the "dots" feel sinister, especially after those falling diadems. The reader might well imagine that those "soundless" spots are blood-red. On the other hand, perhaps they're drips falling from melting icicles above—a reminder that *nothing* is permanent, and even death's finality eventually melts at the "Resurrection."

Either way, this surreal image suggests that whatever happens in the world is, ultimately, pretty empty, small, and meaningless. Whatever "doges" and kings might think, death has all the real power—at least until Judgment Day rolls around.

Death, in this poem, is thus both powerful and comforting. It keeps the dead "safe" from the world's turmoil, and also brings all that turmoil to a final, silent end. The speaker's uneasy images of satin rafters and meek corpses suggest that this idea might be consoling and terrifying all at once.

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

Metaphors make the poem feel both sinister and droll.

One of the poem's central metaphors is a pretty well-worn one: the idea that death is only "sleep." Here, the "meek members of the Resurrection"—that is, the dead, waiting for the Christian Judgment Day when they'll be restored to life—are said to be simply drowsing down in their tombs. This one line hints that, while this is a poem about death's all-conquering power, there's a greater power even than death: God. But not until the literal end of the world will God's power overrule death's.

Until then, the dead lie asleep in tombs that are understatedly described as either "chambers" (a word that can mean "bedrooms") or houses, with "Rafter[s]" and "Roof[s]." But the poem is realistic about what these cozy domiciles are built from: chilly white "Alabaster," hard "Stone," and the "Satin" that lines coffins. These metaphors feel more than a little creepy, inviting readers to draw closer to the physical realities of death than they might prefer to.

The poem similarly takes something grand pretty lightly when it

describes the "Firmaments"—that is, the skies—"row[ing]" past. This moment of personification depicts the heavens themselves as nothing more than weekenders messing about in boats. *Nothing* going on in the world of the living, this metaphor implies, not even the grand movement of the stars, makes even the slightest impact on the dead.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "their Alabaster Chambers -"
- **Line 4:** "Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection, "
- **Line 5:** "Rafter of Satin and Roof of Stone - "
- **Line 9:** "and Firmaments - row -"

SIMILE

The poem closes on a single arresting simile—an image that forces the reader's imagination to do a little work.

The speaker has already emphasized that nothing in the world—no coup, no catastrophe, no motion of the stars—makes even a tiny bit of difference to the dead, who remain securely "untouched" by the world of the living. The poem's final simile makes that point concrete in an image. The actions of the stars and the world's rulers, the poem concludes, fall:

> Soundless as Dots,
> On a Disk of Snow.

At a first glance, this image is simultaneously vivid and discombobulating. It paints a clear picture: drips of—well, of *something*—falling onto a pure white circle. But what could be producing those silent "Dots"? And who ever really saw a "Disk" of snow in the wild?

It's by being both easy to picture and difficult to make sense of that this simile creates its effect. The idea of a "Disk" of snow seems to narrow down the poem's vision: all the events of the world, in this simile, could be condensed to a circle of pure white about the size of a plate. And in the context of the fallen crowns and deposed doges of the previous lines, perhaps those "Dots" are drops of blood—blood that lands so silently it's barely noticeable.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** "Soundless as Dots, / On a Disk of Snow."

PARALLELISM

Parallelism in the poem helps to evoke the endless passage of time—a passage that, the poem observes, doesn't disturb the dead one little bit.

For instance, take a look at lines 2-3:

> Untouched by Morning -
> and untouched by noon -

This moment of parallelism (and diacope) underlines the fact that the dead are, well, untouchable: "morning" and "noon" are one and the same to them.

In the second stanza, meanwhile, parallelism suggests the passage of centuries:

> Worlds scoop their Arcs -
> and Firmaments - row -
> Diadems - drop -
> And Doges surrender -

These punchy, one-two lines capture pretty grand sweeps of time and action—but also diminish them a bit:

- In lines 8 and 9, whole "worlds" and "firmaments" (that is, skies or heavens) swoop past overhead. But those firmaments, in the speaker's eyes, are merely "row[ing]," like a guy in a boat out for a pleasant day on the water.
- And in lines 10 and 11, kings, monarchies, and whole nations are metonymically reduced to mere "diadems" (or crowns)—and ranks of self-important "doges" are knocked down by only one word: "surrender."

By lining all these actions up one after the other in only a few words, parallelism makes short work of all humanity's self-important (and bloodthirsty) bustle, and of the motions of the heavens themselves. Death (and the dead) outlast 'em all!

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "Untouched by Morning - / and untouched by noon -"
- **Lines 8-11:** "Worlds scoop their Arcs - / and Firmaments - row - / Diadems - drop - / And Doges surrender -"

METONYMY

The speaker turns to metonymy in line 10 by using the word "diadems" (or crowns) to stand for nations, monarchies, or rulers. This is a pretty common metonym—close to a cliché, even. But that's all part of the speaker's point.

By reducing the rise and fall of whole countries to the mere "drop" of a diadem or two, the speaker suggests just how insignificant such political matters are in the light of eternity. Death is more powerful than any king and any country, and will eventually triumph over all of them. The image of diadems "drop[ping]" suggests just how quickly this happens: from the perspective of the dead, a whole nation's rise and fall might only seem to take as long as a crown takes to fall to the ground.

This understated two-word line might also invite readers to consider just *how* these imagined diadems "drop"—and even to grimly hint that they fall from severed heads.

This moment of metonymy also gives the poem's last lines extra punch. All the world's political machinations seem utterly "soundless" and inconsequential to the dead, these lines observe. And the image of a metal diadem hitting the floor without making a single sound gives that idea some special ghostly power.

Where Metonymy appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "Diadems - drop -"

ALLITERATION

Interweaving moments of alliteration give this poem some forceful music.

For example, take a look at all the alliteration in lines 4-5:

> Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection,
> Rafter of Satin and Roof of Stone -

The strong initial /m/, /s/, and /r/ sounds here—supported by equally intense assonance and consonance—make these lines jump right off the page. And the *particular* sounds the poem chooses here are meaningful, too:

- A gentle /m/—a sound one makes through closed lips—is pretty fitting for the "meek" and quiet dead.
- A rough, rumbling /r/ makes both the tombs and the "Resurrection" itself sound appropriately imposing.
- And a sibilant /s/ suggests the silence of the grave.

And listen to the patterns in the poem's last four lines:

> Diadems - drop -
> And Doges surrender -
> Soundless as Dots,
> On a Disk of Snow.

The /d/ and /s/ sounds here weave in and out of each other as if they were dancing—perhaps performing a danse macabre! And again, there's a musical variation between firm, thudding /d/ sounds and sibilant, whispery /s/ sounds—a contrast that reflects the way all those noisy "doges" get swallowed up by the silence of death sooner or later.

The poem's alliteration is thus both evocative and just plain euphonious.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "meek members," "Resurrection"
- **Line 5:** "Rafter," "Satin," "Roof," "Stone"
- **Line 6:** "Grand go"
- **Line 10:** "Diadems - drop -"
- **Line 11:** "Doges," "surrender"
- **Line 12:** "Soundless," "Dots"
- **Line 13:** "Disk," "Snow"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, gives this poem music and emphasis.

There's some particularly pronounced assonance in the closing lines of the first stanza:

> Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection,
> Rafter of Satin and Roof of Stone -

The balanced /ee/, /eh/, and /a/ sounds here make the "sleep" of the dead feel at once peaceful and grand: the even, harmonious sounds travel in stately pairs.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Safe," "Chambers"
- **Line 4:** "Sleep," "meek," "members," "Resurrection"
- **Line 5:** "Rafter," "Satin"
- **Line 10:** "drop"
- **Line 11:** "Doges"
- **Line 12:** "Dots"
- **Line 13:** "Snow"

CONSONANCE

The poem's thick consonance often echoes its alliteration, creating imposing walls of sound.

For example, listen to the ways that consonant sounds travel through the last four lines:

> Diadems - drop -
> And Doges surrender -
> Soundless as Dots,
> On a Disk of Snow.

The closely woven /d/, /r/, and /s/ consonants here form a dense blanket like that "Disk of Snow"—impenetrable as the "soundless[ness]" of all that political uproar down in the world of the dead.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "meek members," "Resurrection"
- **Line 5:** "Rafter," "Satin," "Roof," "Stone"
- **Line 6:** "Grand," "Years"

- **Line 7:** "Crescent"
- **Line 8:** "Worlds," "Arcs"
- **Line 9:** "Firmaments," "row"
- **Line 10:** "Diadems," "drop"
- **Line 11:** "Doges," "surrender"
- **Line 12:** "Soundless," "Dots"
- **Line 13:** "Disk," "Snow"

VOCABULARY

Alabaster (Line 1) - A kind of translucent white stone often used to build tombs.

Meek (Line 4) - Quiet, timid, unassuming.

Members of the Resurrection (Line 4) - That is, the dead, waiting to be brought back to life on Judgment Day.

Firmaments (Line 9) - The sky, the heavens.

Diadems (Line 10) - Crowns.

Doges (Line 11) - Magistrates. This particular word evokes the Italian Renaissance, when warring doges held a lot of wealth and power.

Dots (Line 12) - That is, falling drops of liquid—in this context, maybe blood!

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" takes a familiar Dickinson form and plays with it in strange and innovative ways.

At first glance, the poem appears to be broken into two peculiar stanzas: one of five lines, and one of eight. But when one reads the poem aloud, one discovers that, for the most part, it sounds an awful lot like quatrains of tetrameter—that is, four-line stanzas with four strong stresses per line. Many of Dickinson's poems used similar quatrains.

This poem, then, does something clever: it breaks up a regular form into off-kilter pieces, creating a slow and unpredictable pace. That unsettled shape perfectly suits an unsettling poem about the absolute power of death.

(It's worth noting that this is only one of several versions of the poem; in other copies, the stanzas are presented as quatrains or two five-line stanzas; see an example here.)

METER

This poem's tricky meter can appear either very complicated or very simple, depending on whether one observes it with one's eyes or one's ears.

At first glance, the poem seems to use an irregular and unpredictable meter. It starts with a four-beat line of tetrameter, with an opening trochee (a foot with a stressed-unstressed syllable pattern) followed by iambs (poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern) and a dangling unstressed beat at the end:

> Safe in | their Al- | abas- | ter Chambers -

Then it moves into two-beat lines of dimeter (two feet per line):

> Untouched | by Morning -
> and untouched | by noon -

Then it launches into a five-beat line of pentameter:

> Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection,

And finally lands on another line of tetrameter:

> Rafter of Satin and Roof of Stone -

But take another look! Dickinson hasn't gone completely off the rails here: she's merely divided what's basically a tetrameter rhythm into more lines than usual. The key to this whole complex pattern is the rhyme scheme, which *behaves* as if this poem were written in quatrains: there are just two major end rhymes here, even though the poem appears to have 13 lines. (See the Rhyme Scheme section for more on that.)

Look what happens when this stanza is rearranged into a four-line quatrain:

> Safe in their Alabaster Chambers -
> Untouched by Morning - and untouched | by noon -
> Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection,
> Rafter of Sat in and Roof of Stone -

Things are still a little funky here: the poem doesn't stick to any one flavor of metrical foot, and there's still that pentameter line sticking out. But the meter doesn't *sound* nearly as strange as the poem *looks* on the page. In fact, it's not so far from the ballad stanzas in which Dickinson often wrote.

This trick is easier to spot in the second stanza, where the speaker consistently splits one line of tetrameter into two lines of dimeter, like this:

> Grand go the | Years, In the | Crescent a- | bove them
> -

The second stanza feels steadier than the first, falling into a roughly dactylic meter—that is, a meter built from dactyls, feet with a DUM-da-da rhythm. This relative steadiness mirrors the rhythmic, cyclical "arcs" of the stars and planets these lines

describe.

Why might Dickinson have chosen to unsettle the poem's meter this way? Perhaps because this poem is dealing with an unsettling subject: the all-conquering power of death. These oddly divided lines slow the pace of the poem down, making it sound like a stumbling funereal march. But they also throw readers off balance, warning them not to get too comfortable.

RHYME SCHEME

This poem's elegant rhyme scheme is clearer to the ear than the eye: because of the poem's unconventional line breaks, the rhymes appear to perform some hop-skips! The overarching pattern, however, runs like this:

ABCB DEFE

Keep in mind that the poem is often printed as quatrain stanzas, with line 3 here actually being part of line 2, line 7 combining with line 6, and so forth. It's easier to see the rhyme scheme when printed this way:

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers -
Untouched by Morning - and untouched by **noon** -
Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection,
Rafter of Satin and Roof of **Stone** -

While it isn't obvious on the page, then, this pattern is actually classic ballad rhyme, one of Dickinson's favorite rhyme schemes. There's also a characteristic Dickinson slant rhyme between "noon" and "stone" here—an off-kilter echo that introduces a note of unease to this fatalistic poem.

In fact, Dickinson's line breaks here introduce opportunities for even more peculiar rhymes. Take another look at lines 8-13:

Worlds scoop their Arcs -
and Firmaments - ***row*** -
Diadems - **drop** -
And Doges surrender -
Soundless as **Dots**,
On a Disk of ***Snow***.

The major rhymes here are "row" and "snow." But by breaking the lines where she does, Dickinson also introduces an assonant slant rhyme between "drop" and "dots"—a rhyme that would be internal if the line breaks were in more standard places!

The poem's rhymes thus dance with the poem's unusual form, creating an effect that's both comforting and unsettling—appropriate for a poem about death's dual role as a protector and an all-powerful conqueror.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is hardly there: they're just an observer, a floating eye watching the world. Their grand view takes in not only all the dead "sleep[ing]" quietly in their "Alabaster Chambers," but the sweep of the heavenly "Firmaments" and the political machinations of "Doges."

This poem's voice thus feels removed and philosophical. All that readers can really gather about the speaker is that they stand a little apart from the world, adopting a god's-eye perspective on life and death.

SETTING

One might well say that this poem's setting is the whole world. The poem's eye visits all the dead at rest in their tombs, watches the heavens spinning past, and casually accounts for generations of war and bloodshed in two brisk lines.

In fact, it's by compressing so much space, time, and event into just a few lines that the poem makes its big point. All human life and all human drama, this poem suggests, seems "soundless" and tiny from the perspective of the "untouch[able]" dead.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) published almost nothing during her lifetime, and after 1865 she rarely even left her family home in Amherst, Massachusetts. But from within her small, circumscribed world, she explored the heights and depths of human experience through her groundbreaking, world-changing poetry.

No one else sounds quite like Dickinson. Her poems use simple, folky forms—ballad stanzas, for instance—to explore profound philosophical questions, passionate loves, and the mysteries of nature. "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" plays some relatively unusual games with its meter and shape, but still uses plenty of characteristic Dickinson em-dashes, which make many of the lines here seem to hold their breath in awe and suspense.

While Dickinson didn't get too involved in the literary world of her time, she was still part of a swell of 19th-century American innovation. Her contemporary Walt Whitman (who became as famous as Dickinson was obscure) was similarly developing an unprecedented and unique poetic voice, and the Transcendentalists (like Emerson and Thoreau) shared her deep belief in the spiritual power of nature.

Dickinson herself was inspired by English writers like William Wordsworth and Charlotte Brontë, whose works similarly

found paths through the everyday world into the sublime, terrifying, and astonishing.

After Dickinson died, her sister Lavinia discovered a trunk of nearly 1,800 secret poems squirreled away in a bedroom. Published at last, Dickinson's poetry became internationally famous and beloved. Dickinson's work and her life story still influence all kinds of artists.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dickinson's most fertile creative period coincided with the American Civil War, which ran from 1861-1865. This bloody conflict began when southern states, fearing that an abolitionist upswelling in the federal government would disrupt their slavery-based economy, seceded to form the Confederacy. Battles between the southern Confederacy and the northern Union would kill hundreds of thousands.

Dickinson, born and raised in Massachusetts, was firmly on the Union side; one of her letters records her amusement at the rumor that the defeated Confederate president Jefferson Davis was ignominiously captured disguised in a woman's skirt. But she didn't directly address the war (or contemporary events generally) in her poetry.

Instead, as in this poem, she tended to take a wider and more philosophical view, reflecting on world events from the heights of eternity. Imagining the fall of all those quaint "Doges"—a word that conjures the Italian Renaissance more than the 19th century—Dickinson seems to put all wars into perspective: even the noisiest, bloodiest conflicts, this poem suggests, can never make a real dent in Death's eternal silence.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the poem read out loud. (https://youtu.be/i_3BRh1wVEI)
- An Earlier Version — Take a look at the first printed version of the poem, which has a completely different second stanza. Compare and contrast! (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/12173716)
- The Dickinson Museum — Visit the Emily Dickinson Museum's website to learn more about Dickinson's life and work. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/)
- Dickinson's Influence — Read novelist Helen Oyeyemi's appreciation of Dickinson. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/04/emily-dickinson-hero-helen-oyeyemi)
- The Harvard Dickinson Collection — Visit the Harvard Dickinson Collection's website to learn more about how Dickinson's poetry was discovered and preserved. (https://library.harvard.edu/collections/emily-dickinson-collection)

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 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
- 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 is no Frigate like a Book
- There's a certain Slant of light
- The Sky is low — the Clouds are mean
- 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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