The saddest noise, the sweetest noise

POEM TEXT

The saddest noise, the sweetest noise,
The maddest noise that grows,—
The birds, they make it in the spring,
At night's delicious close,

Between the March and April line—
That magical frontier
Beyond which summer hesitates,
Almost too heavenly near.

It makes us think of all the dead
That sauntered with us here,
By separation's sorcery
Made cruelly more dear.

It makes us think of what we had,
And what we now deplore.
We almost wish those siren throats
Would go and sing no more.

An ear can break a human heart
As quickly as a spear.
We wish the ear had not a heart
So dangerously near.

SUMMARY

The most heartbreaking, lovely, maddening sound in the world is the sound the birds make at dawn in the springtime.

They sing like this in the border between March and April, that enchanted time when it seems as if summer is blissfully (and almost overwhelmingly) close.

The birdsong makes us think of our dead loved ones who once strolled with us on days like these. The cruel magic of death makes us love them all the more now that we can't be with them.

And the birdsong reminds us of what we once had, and of what we're so sad and angry to have lost. The bittersweet emotion is so intense that we nearly wish the birds would stop singing that lovely, dangerous tune.

Certain sounds can break people's hearts just as easily as a stab from a spear. We all wish that our ears weren't such a quick path to our feelings.

THEMES

THE BITTERSWEET NATURE OF GRIEF AND MEMORY

In "The saddest noise, the sweetest noise," grief transforms beauty into pain. To this poem's speaker, the sound of dawn birdsong in spring is no longer just "sweet," but sad and even maddening; it reminds them of all their dead loved ones who once relished the springtime, too. But though the speaker feels their heart breaking as they listen to the birds sing, they can't quite bring themselves to wish the music would stop. The poem suggests that, while grief is agonizing, it's also bittersweet: a painful longing for the beloved dead can feel like a precious thread of connection to the people one has lost.

Grief, the speaker observes, has the power to transform the "sweetest noise" into the "saddest" and "maddest" one, infecting beautiful experiences with the pain of loss. The speaker can't simply enjoy the lovely sounds of birds singing on a spring morning because it reminds them of times when their now-dead loved ones were alive and sharing their delight. Deep in mourning, the speaker thus feels as if birdsong (and the memories it inspires) can stab them through the heart "as quickly as a spear." This beauty has become agony to them; they "deplore" what was once lovely because it reminds them that their "dear" ones are gone and they're all alone.

But even if the birdsong breaks their heart, the speaker can only "**almost** wish" that the birds would stop singing. They can't *completely* wish the music, and the memories it conjures, would go away. Death has made their loved ones feel "cruelly more dear" to them, and if listening to the birdsong brings their memories of those dear ones closer, maybe it's worth the suffering. Perhaps the pain is even what makes this "noise" the "sweetest"! This bittersweet predicament leaves the speaker feeling dismayed that their "ear" is so "dangerously near" to their heart (in other words, that birdsong can hurt them so deeply), but also moved by the "delicious" beauty of this sad springtime.

Grief, the poem thus suggests, leaves the speaker stranded on a strange "frontier" between the land of the living and the land of the dead: longing to escape their pain, the speaker still can't quite wish away the memories that evoke it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

THE POWER OF MUSIC AND SOUND

Stabbed with grief by the "saddest" and "sweetest" sound they know—dawn birdsong in the springtime—the speaker of this poem reflects that the "ear" has a direct path to the "human heart." Music and sound, the poem suggests, have a "dangerous" power over people's emotions: they can slice right through people's defenses, plunging them into deep feeling before they know what hit them.

Sound, in this poem, isn't just "noise," but a gateway to memory. Listening to spring birdsong, the speaker feels assailed by poignant memories of their lost loved ones who once "sauntered with [them] here," enjoying this lovely music alongside them. What was once a purely delightful sound has now become a reminder of happier times—and thus a source of terrible pain. Because music connects so strongly with memory, the speaker suggests, it can fling people straight into the past.

And this isn't just the speaker's problem, the poem says, but a universal one. "An ear," the speaker reflects, "can break a human heart" as surely and swiftly as a stab from a "spear"—and the right sound inevitably "makes us think" about things we'd rather not. Being deeply affected by music is a shared human predicament, for better and for worse.

The poem thus suggests that music and sound have a terrifying power. Precisely because music works so effectively on people's emotions (and connects so deeply to people's memories), the loveliest sound in the world can also become the "saddest" and "maddest" one—and crush a person's heart before they know it. Perhaps the speaker's thoughts on the power of sound are also a subtle reflection on the power of poetry: this poem itself, after all, is a kind of sweet, sad song.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 13-16
- Lines 17-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

The saddest noise, the sweetest noise,
The maddest noise that grows,—
The birds, they make it in the spring,
At night's delicious close,

The poem begins with a complicated sound:

> The saddest noise, the sweetest noise,
> The maddest noise that grows,—

The parallel structure in these lines makes it clear that this "noise" is all of these things at exactly the same time: heartbreaking, lovely, and liable to drive a person crazy (or a little crazy-sounding itself). Perhaps all these qualities even cause each other: the noise might be sad *because* it's sweet, sweet *because* it's maddening, maddening *because* it's sad.

What's more, this noise "grows." That might mean it starts quietly and gets louder. But it might also metaphorically suggest that this sound feels *alive*, like a flower shooting up from underground.

In the next two lines, the speaker reveals where this powerful, poignant, mysterious sound comes from:

> The birds, they make it in the spring,
> At night's delicious close,

This noise, in other words, is the dawn chorus—the sound of birds welcoming a spring sunrise.

The speaker has framed this poem so that the "noise" of birdsong comes before the birds themselves appear—and it "grows" on its own, like an independent being. Readers who think of their own experiences of early-morning birdsong might see the truth in that: since one can't see all the singing birds, the sound does seem to grow straight out of the landscape.

Similarly, describing dawn not as the beginning of morning but as "night's delicious close," the speaker evokes the in-between feeling of the very edge of dawn, when it's neither quite morning nor quite night. And if it's "delicious," perhaps there's something special to be savored about that in-betweenness.

A "noise" that's at once the "saddest," "sweetest," and "maddest" fits right into this in-between landscape. There's an edge of tension, mystery, complexity here: no sound and no sight is one thing or the other. This bittersweet poem will take place in the borderlands between times and feelings.

LINES 5-8

Between the March and April line—
That magical frontier
Beyond which summer hesitates,
Almost too heavenly near.

The spring birdsong of the first stanza took place in an in-between world: between night and morning, producing at once the "saddest," "sweetest," and "maddest" feelings. The second stanza insists on that idea of between-ness even more firmly:

> Between the March and April line—

Not only is the moment of spring the speaker describes "between" March and April, it's "between the March and April line": in the *middle* of the middle, a point *inside* the "line" that divides these two parts of the spring. And that line is a

metaphorical borderland, a "magical frontier" dividing spring from summer. Just "beyond" it, a personified summer "hesitates," hanging back.

Once more, there's something both agonizing and "delicious" about this in-between-ness. The hesitating summer, "almost too heavenly near," sounds like a lover on their way for a visit: the speaker finds it *overwhelming* to be so close to the season's joy without embracing it just yet.

Or, rather, it's "almost" overwhelming. Here, the poem plays a metrical trick to draw attention to that important word:

- This poem is written in common meter (a Dickinson favorite).
- That means that each stanza is a four-line quatrain of alternating iambic tetrameter (lines of four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm) and iambic trimeter (lines of three iambs).

Here's how that sounds in lines 5-6:

Be**tween** | the **March** | and **A-** | pril **line**—
That **mag-** | **ical** | fron**tier**

Now, listen to how the rhythm changes in lines 7-8:

Be**yond** | which **sum-** | mer **hes-** | i**tates**,
Al**most** | too **heaven-** | ly **near**.

The word "almost" isn't an iamb, but a trochee—the opposite foot, with a DUM-da rhythm. Out there at the beginning of the line, that strong, off-kilter stress feels even stronger. The poem really wants readers to pay attention to that "almost": it paints a picture of a speaker creeping right up to an emotional limit, without *quite* crossing over.

The sad, sweet, maddening sound of birdsong, then, pops up in a sad, sweet, and maddening season: a time when emotions feel "almost" (but not quite) too much, and summer feels "almost" (but not quite) in reach.

Now, the speaker will say *why* this almost-ness touches them so.

LINES 9-12

It makes us think of all the dead
That sauntered with us here,
By separation's sorcery
Made cruelly more dear.

The birdsong of a spring dawn, it transpires, isn't just the "saddest," "sweetest," and "maddest" sound the speaker knows on its own merits. It's a reminder of something else:

It makes us think of all the dead
That sauntered with us here,

The "almost" overwhelming, "delicious" beauty of the dawn chorus, in other words, reminds the speaker of all the people they've lost. Once, the speaker's loved ones "sauntered" (or casually ambled) with them through spring mornings just like this one, enjoying the season as if it would never end; now, the memory of these "dear" people haunts the dawn.

Perhaps this is why the speaker seems so interested in borders, boundaries, and "almost"s. Just as summer is separated from spring by a "magical frontier," the dead and the living are parted by "separation's sorcery"—a metaphor that suggests the speaker feels *persecuted* by death, as if it were a cruel enchanter. The soft /s/ sibilance of those words might at once evoke a whisper of grief and a hiss of pain.

This "sorcery" doesn't just keep the dead and the living apart. It makes the dead feel "cruelly more dear." In other words, separation makes the speaker love and long for the dead even more.

The reader might notice a parallel here with the idea of summer being "almost too heavenly near"; nearness might feel extra-heavenly *because* it isn't right-here-ness! Absence, to use a cliché, makes the heart grow fonder. The word "heavenly" also summons not just visions of delight, but visions of the afterlife.

No wonder, then, that the speaker feels birdsong is the "saddest," "sweetest," and "maddest" noise at once—or that they put those adjectives in that order. Being reminded so poignantly of their loved ones breaks their hearts, fills them with sweet longing, and drives them mad. It *is* a "cruel" situation.

And, as the speaker points out, it's also a universal one. Notice that the speaker doesn't say that the birdsong "makes **me** think of all the dead"; rather, it "makes **us** think of all the dead." Everyone in the world, the poem suggests, has to confront this kind of bittersweet pain, one time or another.

LINES 13-16

It makes us think of what we had,
And what we now deplore.
We almost wish those siren throats
Would go and sing no more.

The speaker begins the next stanza with a pointed repetition:

It makes us think of what we had,
And what we now deplore.

This moment of anaphora, echoing the exact same language that began the third stanza, suggests that the speaker is looking at the same grief from a different angle.

Thinking of "what we had"—the easy, affectionate nearness of lost loved ones—also forces the speaker to confront "what we now deplore" (or despise). These lines suggest that, just as the birdsong is at once sad, sweet, and maddening, the speaker's

memories feel both precious and agonizing. Helplessly reminded of happier springtimes, the speaker is caught in a bittersweet double-bind: the pain of their memories wouldn't be so terrible if those memories weren't so sweet.

And that leads the speaker to another meaningful "almost." Listen to the way the speaker uses assonance here:

> We almost wish those siren throats
> Would go and sing no more.

Threaded through with a mournful /oh/, these words even *sound* like a long moan of pain. And yet, that pain can't *quite* make the speaker wish the birds would stop singing. If the birdsong stopped, they might not suffer so much—but they would also feel further from their beloved dead, losing the sweetness along with the pain.

Still, that pain is serious business. When the poem speaks of the birds' "siren throats," it alludes to dangerous mythological sea-spirits whose enchanting singing lured sailors to their deaths. The speaker might well feel that their grief could drown them. Perhaps they even feel tempted to make a fatal decision: to cross the border between life and death.

LINES 17-20

An ear can break a human heart
As quickly as a spear.
We wish the ear had not a heart
So dangerously near.

The final stanza of the poem begins with a violent simile:

> An ear can break a human heart
> As quickly as a spear.

Death by birdsong or death by stabbing: both, the speaker suggests, are just as speedily destructive. The former pierces the metaphorical heart as mercilessly as the latter pierces the literal one.

But look again at the language here. It's actually the "ear" that stabs here, not the music! And that makes sense when readers consider that it's not the *birdsong itself* that destroys the speaker, but rather the *memories* that they *associate* with that birdsong. Their own ear betrays them.

Once more, the speaker insists that every single "human heart" is vulnerable to such an attack from within. Just as there's no escaping grief, there's no evading the power of memory or the power of sound. Much as "we" might "wish" things were otherwise, the speaker says, they aren't, and never can be: this is a universal human predicament.

Listen to the way the speaker uses repetition (specifically diacope) and rhyme to bring that point home:

> An ear can break a human heart
> As quickly as a spear.
> We wish the ear had not a heart
> So dangerously near.

The densely woven sounds here—the assonant /ear/, the internal rhymes of "ear" with "spear" and "near", the identical rhyme of "heart"/"heart"—feel almost claustrophobic. Perhaps all these inescapable echoes even suggest another rhyme: everywhere the speaker turns, they hear the same bittersweet song and see the same visions of lost happiness.

Grief and memory, this poem has suggested, knot pain and pleasure together. Marooned in the borderlands of memory—between spring and summer, between past and present, between the living and the dead—this speaker can do nothing but sing their own sad, sweet, mad song.

SYMBOLS

SPRINGTIME

Spring, in this poem, symbolizes time passing and life going on—a bittersweet thing for the grieving speaker to come to terms with.

With its new life, its blossoms, its birdsong, and its promise of a warm "summer" to come, the springtime suggests that the world keeps moving on even as the speaker feels trapped in their memories. The natural cycle of the seasons, so often an image of hope, becomes agonizing to the poor speaker: each new spring can only remind them of past, happier springs, when their beloved "dead" were still at their side.

And that, the poem suggests, is a big part of the pain of grief. Sorrow can make even the liveliest part of the year feel deathly.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-8:** "The birds, they make it in the spring, / At night's delicious close, / Between the March and April line— / That magical frontier / Beyond which summer hesitates, / Almost too heavenly near."

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

Metaphors invite readers into this poem's complex emotional world.

In the first stanza, for instance, the speaker imagines the "noise" they describe as a thing that "grows." This could simply suggest the swell of morning birdsong, from a few little cheeps to a whole dawn chorus. But it also suggests that sound is a

living thing. A "growing" noise might have its own power, its own will, and its own intentions; the speaker might feel as if they have a *relationship* with such a sound.

And in earlier times, before birdsong reminded the speaker of loss and grief, that relationship might have been a better one—even a "magical" one:

- As the speaker describes the time of day when this "saddest," "sweetest" sound sprouts, they call it "delicious," taking physical pleasure in the hours when night fades into dawn.
- Similarly, they delight in the "magical frontier" of the "March and April line"—another kind of enchanting in-between time, a border between one thing and another. (In fact, they feel that the birdsong isn't at its most poignant just "between" March and April, but "between the March and April line": in other words, in the in-between of an in-between!)
- All these images of a "delicious," delightful spot between one thing and another—night and day, March and April—culminate in an image of a personified "summer" that "hesitates," not quite ready to come onstage. But it's still so "near" that it feels "almost too heavenly."

This sequence of metaphors suggests that a *close-but-not-quite* feeling is part of what the speaker finds so moving (and "madde[ning]") about this season. Perhaps that's because a feeling that something is *almost* there feels a lot like the speaker's intense memories of their lost loved ones: everpresent but unreachable.

That feeling gets even clearer in yet another metaphor. When the speaker describes "separation's sorcery," which "cruelly" makes the beloved dead feel even "more dear," death becomes a kind of black magic, transforming lost things into the most precious.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "The saddest noise, the sweetest noise, / The maddest noise that grows,—"
- **Line 4:** "night's delicious close"
- **Lines 5-6:** "Between the March and April line— / That magical frontier"
- **Line 7:** "summer hesitates"
- **Line 11:** "separation's sorcery"

SIMILE

In the poem's single simile, the speaker declares:

> An ear can break a human heart
> As quickly as a spear.

This vivid, violent image sums up all the poem's thoughts on the power of sound and the pain of grief.

After the speaker's long, sad reflection on the poignant beauty of birdsong, readers might expect the poem to conclude that a *sound* or a *song* can "break a human heart." Instead, the speaker says something subtly different. It's not the song itself that stabs like a spear, but the speaker's own "ear."

And on reflection, that just makes sense! After all, the same chirping that reminds a mourner of their dreadful loss might just remind someone who *isn't* grieving of springy new life. It's the ear of the receiver that turns a neutral sound into a delight or an agony (or both—a sound as "sweet" as it is "sad").

On the other hand, as the speaker notes, everyone will have to endure something similar at one time or another. It's not just the speaker who wishes their ears didn't turn against their heart so easily: it's "we," everyone in the world, who can be wounded this way. And it doesn't even take a death to make the ear into a weapon. Any reader who's ever had to stop listening to a particular song after a breakup will know what the speaker feels.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-18:** "An ear can break a human heart / As quickly as a spear."

PARALLELISM

Intense parallelism shapes the poem's ideas about memory and grief. Listen to the poem's very first lines:

> The saddest noise, the sweetest noise,
> The maddest noise that grows,—

This parallelism (underlined by the internal rhyme of "saddest" and "maddest") makes it clear that the sound of birdsong floods the speaker with contradictory feelings. Perhaps this sound is the "sweetest" *because* it's the "saddest" and "maddest," and vice versa.

Parallelism (and anaphora in particular) also shapes the speaker's exploration of what spring birdsong does to the helpless listener. Both stanzas 3 and 4 begin with the words "It makes us think of"—and the things that birdsong "makes us think of" are "all the dead" and "what we had," two angles on the same awful loss. This anaphora helps the speaker stress just how painful and powerful their response to the birdsong is: there's no escaping their feelings.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "The saddest noise, the sweetest noise, / The maddest noise"
- **Line 9:** "It makes us think of"

- **Line 13:** "It makes us think of"

ALLUSION

When the poem describes the birds' "siren throats" in line 15, it alludes to a creature from classical mythology. The sirens were dangerous sea spirits, creatures whose unearthly singing lured sailors out of their boats and into watery graves. (The legendary Odysseus had a particularly famous run-in with them!) Sirens have since become a common metaphor for dangerous temptations.

The poem makes it clear that the lovely sound of the birds singing hurts the speaker badly, reminding them of happier times with beloved people, now lost. But if the birdsong feels siren-like, maybe it poses more than emotional danger. The allusion hints that the beauty of the music and the memories it evokes, combined with the agony of grief, might make the speaker long to *join* their beloved "dead"—and might even be moved to contemplate suicide.

The allusion to sirens also touches on the power of sound and music. As the speaker observes in the final stanza, "an ear can break a human heart" as swiftly and surely as a stab from a "spear": the familiar sounds of springtime, in this case, feel "dangerously" painful. Some kinds of singing, the poem suggests, might have more power than is quite comfortable.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "We almost wish those siren throats / Would go and sing no more."

ASSONANCE

Assonance makes this musical poem sound rather like the birdsong it describes. In the very first lines, for example, the assonance (and internal rhyme) of "saddest" and "maddest" start the poem off on a rhythmic, lyrical note.

Later, listen to what happens when the speaker "almost"—but not quite—wishes the birds would stop singing:

> We almost wish those siren throats
> Would go and sing no more.

All those long /o/ sounds make these lines themselves sound like a low, sad song—or a moan of grief.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "saddest"
- **Line 2:** "maddest"
- **Line 3:** "they make," "it in," "spring"
- **Line 7:** "hesitates"
- **Line 8:** "heavenly"
- **Line 15:** "almost," "throats"
- **Line 16:** "go," "no more"
- **Line 17:** "ear"
- **Line 18:** "spear"
- **Line 19:** "ear"
- **Line 20:** "near"

SIBILANCE

Dense sibilance gives the poem a hushed sound, helping to evoke the speaker's quiet grief.

For instance, listen to the sibilant sounds in the first stanza:

> The saddest noise, the sweetest noise,
> The maddest noise that grows,—
> The birds, they make it in the spring,
> At night's delicious close,

Here, the pure /s/ sounds of words like "saddest," "sweetest," and "spring" weaves in and out of the /z/ sounds of words like "noise," "grows," and "birds." All these soft sounds suggest the quiet of dawn—the quiet that the birds begin to pierce with their heartbreaking song.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "saddest," "noise," "sweetest," "noise"
- **Line 2:** "maddest," "noise," "grows"
- **Line 3:** "birds," "spring"
- **Line 4:** "night's delicious close"
- **Line 7:** "summer hesitates"
- **Line 8:** "Almost"
- **Line 9:** "makes us"
- **Line 10:** "sauntered," "us"
- **Line 11:** "separation's sorcery"
- **Line 13:** "makes us"
- **Line 15:** "siren"
- **Line 16:** "sing"
- **Line 20:** "So dangerously"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration, like assonance and sibilance, gives the poem music and power, evoking both the poignantly lovely springtime world and the speaker's pain.

For example, listen to the way mirrored sounds suggest the pleasures of the spring in the second stanza:

> Between the March and April line—
> That magical frontier
> Beyond which summer hesitates,
> Almost too heavenly near.

The weaving pairs of sounds here feel like the rising and falling patterns of birdsong. They're evocative, too: the gentle /m/ of "March" and "magical" and the soft /h/ of "hesitates" and "heavenly" suggest mild warmth and the hush of the dawn.

Later on, a passage of sibilant alliteration evokes more painful feelings:

> It makes us think of all the dead
> That sauntered with us here,
> By separation's sorcery
> Made cruelly more dear.

All those /s/ sounds in a row feel whispery and mysterious, suggesting both the speaker's soft, grief-stricken voice and the strange, cruel "sorcery" of death.

And in lines 15-16, music and sorrow combine:

> We almost wish those siren throats
> Would go and sing no more.

So much pronounced alliteration makes this passage feel ironically musical; even as the speaker "almost wish[es]" the birds would stop singing, the poem sings all the louder.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "saddest," "sweetest"
- **Line 3:** "spring"
- **Line 5:** "Between," "March"
- **Line 6:** "magical"
- **Line 7:** "Beyond," "hesitates"
- **Line 8:** "heavenly"
- **Line 10:** "sauntered"
- **Line 11:** "separation's sorcery"
- **Line 15:** "We," "wish," "siren"
- **Line 16:** "Would," "sing"
- **Line 17:** "human heart"
- **Line 19:** "had," "heart"

REPETITION

In addition to anaphora and parallelism, other forms of repetition in the poem show how conflicted the speaker feels about their sorrow.

Twice in the poem, the speaker remarks that something feels "almost" too much: the summer is "almost too heavenly near" in line 8, and the speaker "almost wish[es]" that the birds would stop singing in line 15. This subtle repetition evokes the speaker's sense that intense pleasure and intense pain can be close to indistinguishable. Both the coming summer and the poignant birdsong are nearly overwhelming, but not so much that the speaker *quite* wants to push them away.

Something similar happens when the speaker repeats the word "near": summer is "almost too heavenly near" in line 8, and the ear is "dangerously near" to the heart in line 20. Once again, there's an *almost-but-not-quite* quality in this repetition: the focus on *nearness* evokes both the ever-present danger of emotional catastrophe and the speaker's longing for memories that seem so "near" one could touch them. But "near" and really *here*, as the poem points out, are two very different things. It's enough to make one desperately long for relief—another point the speaker makes twice, repeating the word "wish" in lines 15 and line 19.

And listen to the intense repetitions in the poem's final stanza:

> An ear can break a human heart
> As quickly as a spear.
> We wish the ear had not a heart
> So dangerously near.

The diacope of "ear" and the identical rhyme on "heart" make these words sound like a sad, simple lament—and one in which repetition forms part of the pain. So long as spring keeps rolling around, the speaker will go through the same old experience of feeling their "ear" stab them in the "heart," over and over.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "Almost," "near"
- **Line 15:** "almost"
- **Line 17:** "ear," "heart"
- **Line 19:** "ear," "heart"
- **Line 20:** "near"

VOCABULARY

Maddest (Line 2) - This word might suggest that the "noise" is maddening—crazy-making—or a little crazy-sounding itself.

Sauntered (Line 10) - Casually strolled.

Sorcery (Line 11) - Magic, witchcraft.

Deplore (Line 14) - Despise, intensely disapprove of.

Siren (Line 15) - Dangerously alluring, like the voice of a mythological siren—a sea spirit whose beautiful singing lured sailors to their deaths.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The saddest noise, the sweetest noise" is written in one of Dickinson's favorite forms: ballad stanzas. That means that each of the poem's five stanzas is a four-line quatrain in common measure with an ABCB rhyme scheme—just like the stanzas of the old ballads this form is named for.

Here as elsewhere, Dickinson uses this simple form to examine a deep subject. Earthy, straightforward ballad stanzas fit in with the speaker's resigned sense that "we"—humanity as a whole—all have to deal with the bittersweet relationship between beauty and grief at one time or another. This poem's form is as ubiquitous as the experience it describes.

METER

"The saddest noise, the sweetest noise" is written in common measure (also known as ballad meter). That means that the poem alternates between lines of iambic tetrameter (lines of four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm) and lines of iambic trimeter (lines of three iambs).

Here's how that sounds in the first two lines:

> The sad- | dest noise, | the sweet- | est noise,
> The mad- | dest noise | that grows,—

This steady, unobtrusive meter provides a blank canvas for Dickinson to paint on. Its swinging rhythm can feel almost hypnotic, helping readers to sink into the poem's images.

The meter's general steadiness also allows for moments of surprise. Listen to how the meter changes in line 8, when the speaker describes the part of the year when summer feels:

> Almost | too heaven- | ly near.

(Note that "heaven," in much 19th-century poetry, would have been pronounced as one syllable: hevn.)

Here, a stress jumps out at the front of the line: the first foot here is a trochee, the opposite of an iamb, with a DUM-da rhythm. That means that the word "almost"—an important one in this poem!—jumps out, too.

RHYME SCHEME

Like a lot of Dickinson's poetry, "The saddest noise, the sweetest noise" uses the rhyme scheme of a ballad:

ABCB

This lilting pattern, familiar from everything from hymns to nursery rhymes, gives the poem the flavor of a simple song. But that simplicity is enriched with a ton of internal rhyme. One of the most striking examples turns up in the last stanza:

> An ear can break a human heart
> As quickly as a spear.
> We wish the ear had not a heart
> So dangerously near.

All those insistent /ear/ rhymes, underscored by the diacope on the word "ear" itself, make this final stanza's image of helpless heartbreak sound quietly intense.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a person all too familiar with grief. They've spent more than one spring morning reflecting on the way that birdsong evokes happier times with lost loved ones. Moved by the beauty of the dawn chorus and speared by pain in the selfsame moment, they almost wish the birds might stop singing—but only almost.

They also feel prepared to speak for everyone: "we" will all one day feel these feelings, they say. The speaker thus becomes something more like a voice for humanity than a particular character, wishing on everyone's behalf that the sound of birdsong (and the hovering threat of grief) couldn't stab people to the "heart" quite so easily.

SETTING

This poem is set in the in-between "frontier[s]" of life: "night's delicious close" (the border between night and dawn), the "March and April line" that separates early spring from late. All these in-between times and places suggest that the speaker also feels caught in an in-between place. Grieving over dead loved ones, the speaker might feel as if they have one foot in the land of the living and one in the land of the dead, able neither to forget their grief and go cheerfully about their life on a fine spring morning nor to be with the people who are gone.

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 this 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. "The saddest noise, the sweetest noise" is a perfect example: in its five short common measure stanzas, it explores not just the pain of grief, but its bittersweet pleasure.

While Dickinson wasn't too publicly 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 wrote most of her poetry during the American Civil war, which ran from 1861 to 1865. She was firmly on the Union side of that bloody conflict; in one of her letters, she writes with delight about the ignominious defeat of Confederate president Jefferson Davis, who was reportedly trying to make his escape disguised in a woman's skirt when he was finally captured.

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. But many of Dickinson's poems about death—"The saddest noise, the sweetest noise" included—might indirectly reflect her feelings about wartime grief. Forced to reckon with many personal losses (like the death of her formidable father), she would also have been surrounded by mourning families grieving their war dead.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Dickinson's Legacy — Listen to three contemporary writers discussing what Emily Dickinson means to them. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000198y)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the poem read out loud. (https://youtu.be/Fa8esi3L90Y)
- A Portrait of Dickinson — See a recently rediscovered photo of Dickinson and learn more about the mysteries around Dickinson's reclusive later years. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/sep/05/emily-dickinson-new-photograph)
- The Dickinson Museum — Visit the website of the Emily Dickinson Museum to learn more about her life and work. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/)
- The Dickinson Society — Visit the Emily Dickinson Society to learn more about Dickinson's continuing influence. (https://www.emilydickinsoninternationalsociety.org/)

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
- 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!

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