

# There's been a Death, in the Opposite House



## POEM TEXT

- 1 There's been a Death, in the Opposite House,
- 2 As lately as Today —
- 3 I know it, by the numb look
- 4 Such Houses have — always —
- 5 The Neighbors rustle in and out —
- 6 The Doctor — drives away —
- 7 A Window opens like a Pod —
- 8 Abrupt — mechanically —
- 9 Somebody flings a Mattress out —
- 10 The Children hurry by —
- 11 They wonder if it died — on that —
- 12 I used to — when a Boy —
- 13 The Minister — goes stiffly in —
- 14 As if the House were His —
- 15 And He owned all the Mourners — now —
- 16 And little Boys — besides.
- 17 And then the Milliner — and the Man
- 18 Of the Appalling Trade —
- 19 To take the measure of the House —
- 20 There'll be that Dark Parade —
- 21 Of Tassels — and of Coaches — soon —
- 22 It's easy as a Sign —
- 23 The Intuition of the News —
- 24 In just a Country Town —

The priest walks formally into the house as if he owned the place—and owned all its grieving inhabitants, and owned all the little boys in the street, too.

Then, the hat-maker appears; then, the mortician, with his awful job, to take stock of the house he'll stage the funeral in.

Soon, there'll be that grim procession—

We'll see the usual line of carriages all decked out in fancy braid. It's perfectly easy to predict all this, judging by what I can see of the house from here: in a small town, we all guess the news before anyone tells us.



## THEMES



### THE INEVITABILITY OF DEATH

Death, in this poem, is both ordinary and eerie—and perhaps it's all the more eerie because it's so ordinary. As the poem's speaker watches the people in the house across the road deal with the aftermath of a death, he's able to predict all the rituals that are about to take place, from the doctor's departure to the final "Dark Parade" of the funeral procession. The clockwork predictability of the events around this death only underline the idea that death comes to everyone, sooner or later: these rituals are only familiar because death is unavoidable. Death, this poem's well-worn routines suggest, is an inevitable part of life—and no matter how well one knows this, the thought isn't altogether comfortable.

The speaker of this poem doesn't have to be told that "there's been a Death, in the Opposite House": he can tell just by observing the usual postmortem routine going on over there. As the "Doctor" leaves to be replaced by the "Minister," the speaker can predict all the next steps, right up to the formal "Tassels" and "Coaches" of the funeral procession. Especially in this speaker's small 19th-century "Country Town," death is an ordinary thing, framed by all sorts of predictable and even humdrum rituals. Everything happening across the road is so familiar to the speaker that he doesn't even sound particularly moved or upset by what he sees.

But perhaps the speaker's blasé tone, and even the orderly funeral rituals themselves, are just ways to keep the uncomfortable (and unavoidable) realities of death at bay. As the people in the house throw out an old mattress, the speaker observes children hurrying past and speculates that they "wonder if it died — on that," just as he used to wonder as a child. The use of the word "it" to describe the corpse (rather than "he" or "she") suggests just how uncanny and alien a dead



## SUMMARY

Someone has died in the house across the street this very day. I can tell by the blank, empty look that houses in mourning always have.

The neighbors are bustling in and out the door. The doctor (with nothing else to do) leaves in his carriage. A window flies open as suddenly and automatically as a seed-pod.

Someone throws a mattress out the door. Little kids scurry past, wondering if the dead person died on that very mattress. (I remember wondering the same thing, when I was a boy.)

body feels—and the speaker clearly shares the children’s unease. Similarly, when the speaker euphemistically describes a mortician as a “Man / Of the Appalling Trade,” his indirect language makes it sound as if a mortician’s job is too horrific to describe plainly. The conventional bustle of funerals can’t quite make death itself seem ordinary.

Death might happen every day, the poem thus suggests, but that doesn’t mean it’s pleasant to contemplate—especially because there’s no avoiding death oneself! Even this speaker, who describes the proceedings in such a detached voice, nevertheless pays close attention all day to what’s happening across the road, and sometimes feels “appall[ed]”; he’s at a literal and figurative distance from death for now, but that won’t last forever. The well-worn, conventional rituals that people use to manage their feelings about death, the poem suggests, might only underline death’s uncomfortable inevitability.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24



### THE PRESSURES OF SMALL-TOWN LIFE

With its speaker who peeks through his curtains at the “Opposite House” and speculates about the “Death” he’s certain happened there this afternoon, this poem suggests that there’s no such thing as privacy in a place where everybody knows everybody and everything has always been done a certain way. That lack of privacy, alas, doesn’t always mean that neighbors know each other better. Small-town culture, the poem hints, can be simultaneously intrusive and cold.

This poem’s speaker, a nosy neighbor peering out at the “Opposite House,” can tell what’s happened there even though no one has told him: the rituals around a “Death” in this small town spell out the truth as clearly as a painted “Sign.” As the speaker watches, he observes the doctor leaving, the deathbed mattress being thrown out the door, and the “Minister” arriving. All of these signals allow him not just to guess that someone has died across the road, but to predict the future: soon, he says, the “Dark Parade” of the funeral procession will inevitably pass. He can make these educated guesses because he’s lived in this town since he was “a Boy”; the people of small towns, the poem suggests, tend to always behave in the same ways.

What’s more, the speaker’s long and careful observations of what’s going on across the road suggest that it won’t be long before the whole town knows what happened: in a town where everyone can always guess what’s going on (and everyone keeps a watchful eye on their neighbors), there’s no such thing as privacy! The “Intuition of the News” will spread before the

body’s even cold.

This small-town claustrophobia, the poem hints, isn’t necessarily accompanied by a warm sense of community, either. This speaker merely observes that “there’s been a Death”—not, say, “I think my neighbor Frank might have died!” His dispassionate observations of the funeral preparations next door suggest that small towns can feel at once nosy, conventional, and rather chilly.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24



### LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

#### LINES 1-4

*There's been a Death, in the Opposite House,  
As lately as Today —  
I know it, by the numb look  
Such Houses have — always —*

As the poem begins, the speaker appears to be rubbernecking. “There’s been a Death, in the Opposite House,” he says—and the [caesura](#) in the middle of the line makes it feel as if he’s pausing in the middle of this news to peek through the curtains again. This will be a poem about both the eeriness of death and the difficulty of keeping any news private for long in a small town.

The speaker doesn’t have to see anything as telling as, say, a weeping mourner or a coffin delivery to know that a neighbor across the street has died “as lately as Today.” Rather, he detects:

[...] the numb look  
Such Houses have — always —

The “numb look” on the [personified](#) house’s face suggests that death has a creepy, spell-like power: the news seems to radiate out through the house itself, changing not just the lives of the mourners, but the world around them.

And the speaker knows that “numb look” well. Houses in which someone has just died “always” (that is, always) have the exact same look, he suggests. This isn’t his first rodeo: he’s watched death from a distance before and knows how it plays out.

Readers might already be wondering about the speaker’s [tone](#) in these first few lines. Considering that the “Opposite House” is right across the street, the speaker doesn’t seem worried (or even curious) about *who* has died: “There’s been a Death” feels rather chilly and distant as compared to, say, “Oh my word, I think my neighbor Sue might have died!” But perhaps, as readers will see, that emotional distance comes from unease as

much as indifference.

### LINES 5-8

*The Neighbors rustle in and out –  
The Doctor – drives away –  
A Window opens like a Pod –  
Abrupt – mechanically –*

The speaker keeps a weather eye on the "Opposite House" as the poem continues, and finds that all is just as he suspected: this small town's predictable routines around death are creaking into motion.

Listen to how he phrases his description of those routines:

**The Neighbors rustle in and out –  
The Doctor – drives away –  
A Window opens like a Pod –**

The [parallel](#) phrasing of all of these lines makes it sound as if the speaker is ticking off a list: *yep, there's the neighbor—and the doctor—and the opening window.*

But other details here feel less rote. The [onomatopoeic](#) "rustle" as the neighbors come and go, for instance, suggests that the house is so quiet that the only sound is the movement of clothing. And take another look at the [simile](#) the speaker uses here:

**A Window opens like a Pod –  
Abrupt – mechanically –**

If the window opens "like a Pod" (a seed pod, that is), then it seems driven by some involuntary force—an idea underlined by the fact that the speaker doesn't mention a *person* opening the window. This "numb" house seems to be working on its own. And if this window opens "mechanically," there's not even a consoling image of nature taking its course, here. Everything across the road seems to be happening automatically and emotionlessly, as if the house has become a clockwork device.

In short, then, this stanza suggests the *helplessness* of loss and grief. Before the people in the house can feel anything but "numb," they're carried away by the town's "mechanical" rituals around death. Everything here feels both routine and eerie.

The speaker, meanwhile, sounds positively transfixed: he seems to be watching the house across the street as if he were a field biologist, making careful note of all the comings and goings.

### LINES 9-12

*Somebody flings a Mattress out –  
The Children hurry by –  
They wonder if it died – on that –  
I used to – when a Boy –*

As the speaker continues his watch over the "Opposite House,"

he sees something at once creepy and comical. "Somebody" abruptly "flings a Mattress out" the door just as a group of "Children hurry by." Those children, the speaker says, are also all part of this small town's death routines:

**They wonder if it died – on that –  
I used to – when a Boy –**

The children's morbid curiosity is a familiar part of the action here, as much as the departing doctor and the bustling neighbors—or, for that matter, the rubbernecking speaker! All can be counted on to turn up after a death, the poem suggests.

The speaker obviously relates to these children and their unease, saying that he knows just how they feel; he "used to" ask just the same questions. But readers might question the speaker's "used to," here, for a couple of reasons. For one thing, it's not totally clear whether the speaker is overhearing the children, or just confidently saying what they must "wonder," since he used to wonder the same thing as a child. Perhaps he *can't* hear what the kids are saying; perhaps he's just seeing his own discomfort reflected in the gaggle of whispering kids out front.

And the phrasing here suggests pure uncanny unease. Wondering if "**it** died – on that," after all, is quite different from wondering if "**she** died" or "**he** died": horribly, death has made a person into a thing.

Notice the [caesurae](#) here, too:

**They wonder if it died – || on that –  
I used to – || when a Boy –**

Those strong mid-line breaks suggest both the children's halting, spooked whispers and the speaker's efforts to reassure himself. The caesura in line 12 makes it sound as if the speaker is hastening to add a caveat: *Yes, I used to be frightened—but long ago, you know!*

### LINES 13-16

*The Minister – goes stiffly in –  
As if the House were His –  
And He owned all the Mourners – now –  
And little Boys – besides.*

In the fourth stanza, a new phase of the proceedings begins with the arrival of the "Minister": an imposing, not particularly friendly figure. Listen to the poem's [assonance](#) as this authority strides in:

**The Minister – goes stiffly in –  
As if the House were His –**

All those dry little /ih/ sounds in a row give these lines a feeling of stiff ceremony. Now that the minister is here, the heightened

language here suggests, the *official* business of death has begun.

Not only does the minister act "as if the House were His," he acts as if he were the master of everything around him, from the "Mourners" to the "little Boys" whispering over the mattress in the street. Readers might imagine him pausing on the doorstep to scowl at those boys before entering the house.

There's something darkly funny about this imperious minister. In one sense, he's quite right to feel that the "House" has become "His": in the face of all that's fearful and unknown about death, religious authorities might well take on a special power. But this man's self-importance also looks ridiculous next to the thought of the dehumanized corpse, the "it" on the mattress. After all, he's as mortal as anyone here, from the "Mourners" to the "Boys" to the speaker.

And readers mustn't forget that it's the speaker making all these observations—the speaker who, these continued observations suggest, is still posted at his window, watching everything that's going on across the road. Perhaps making a little fun of the minister is yet another way for the speaker to put some distance between himself and his own discomfort.

### LINES 17-19

*And then the Milliner — and the Man  
Of the Appalling Trade —  
To take the measure of the House —*

For the whole length of the poem, the speaker has been transfixed by what's going on in the "Opposite House"—and readers have gathered that he might be more uncomfortable about the rituals of death than he's willing to admit. That impression only gets stronger in this odd stanza.

And it is odd—literally:

- So far the poem has been written in Dickinson's favorite [ballad](#) stanzas. That means that each stanza has been a four-line [quatrain](#) written in [common meter](#) with an ABCB [rhyme scheme](#).
- But this stanza cuts off short: it's a tercet, only *three* lines long. Something here brings the speaker up short.

At first, his [anaphora](#) makes it seem as if he's just about to resume his list of predictable comings and goings at the house across the street:

*And then the Milliner — and the Man  
Of the Appalling Trade —*

But there's a serious difference between the two people in this list. The "Milliner," or hat-maker, is benign enough: they're here to measure the mourners for their funeral hats. But the "Man / Of the Appalling Trade" is so sinister that the speaker can't even

bring himself to say what that "trade" is.

This unspeakable "Man" is a mortician, of course—and perhaps an embalmer. (Embalming was a relatively new technology when Dickinson was writing, and even as it gained popularity, people felt pretty nervous about it, finding the resultant preserved corpses [more than a little creepy](#).)

Here to "take the measure of the House," presumably to prepare the corpse to lie in state in the living room, this mortician strikes the speaker as positively "Appalling." This is the first moment in which the speaker reveals a flash of genuine discomfort. He sounds so shaken, in fact, that he shivers the last line of the stanza right off.

### LINE 20

*There'll be that Dark Parade —*

Line 20—the line that would usually have formed the last line of the previous stanza—here becomes a stanza of its own, as if the speaker's discomfort has shaken it loose. Something else changes here, too. So far, the speaker has only observed what's happening right in front of him. Now, he makes a prediction:

*There'll be that Dark Parade —*

This one-line stanza might evoke that macabre "Dark Parade" itself: the funeral procession, which will also be a straight, formal line, all alone.

But this line doesn't *quite* stand alone, either:

- It's linked to the previous stanza metrically as a final line of [iambic trimeter](#)—that is, a line of three iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm: "There'll be | that Dark | Parade." Each stanza so far has been written in [common meter](#), which alternates between iambic tetrameter (four iambs) and iambic trimeter, so this line feels like the natural close to the previous stanza.
- But it's also linked to the next stanza, which begins by *completing* the speaker's description of the "Dark Parade": it's made "Of Tassels — and of Coaches [...]."

This "Parade," in other words, is an in-between affair, neither here nor there. Perhaps that's exactly what a funerary procession is: the last point of contact between the living and the dead, before the dead are buried and gone.

### LINES 21-24

*Of Tassels — and of Coaches — soon —  
It's easy as a Sign —  
The Intuition of the News —  
In just a Country Town —*

The final stanza begins by picking up where the stand-alone line 20 left off. Take a look at the strong [enjambment](#) here:

There'll be that Dark Parade —  
Of Tassels — and of Coaches — soon —

There's no reason the reader should expect line 20 to be an incomplete sentence—especially not set off in its own stanza like this! The enjambment here thus comes as a surprise; it's as if the speaker is shaking himself out of a morbid reverie over the procession to come.

And if that's so, he's shaking himself right back into a self-protective detachment. When he describes a parade of "Tassels" (or decorative bits of cord and braid), for instance, his [synecdoche](#) makes it sound as if he's making fun of all the pomp and ritual around funerals: it's as if the mourners themselves become walking bits of over-formal decoration. No amount of ritual, the speaker suggests, can take away from the nasty fact he's been grappling with this whole poem long: death is both incomprehensible and inevitable. It gets everyone.

Perhaps that's part of why this poem has the speaker looking at the "Opposite House," rather than, say, the house next door. Looking out his window and across the street, he might as well be looking into a mirror, reflecting the truth that he, too, will be an "it" on a spoiled mattress one day.

But rather than engage with that idea more directly, the speaker pulls back for a moment of social commentary, instead. All the bustle around a house in mourning, he concludes, is "easy" to interpret "as a Sign," a [simile](#) that suggests just how plainly death broadcasts itself.

It's not just that these signs are easy to read, though: it's that they take place in "a Country Town," a place where everyone knows everyone else's business and looky-loos like the speaker can guess what has happened without being told. The "Intuition of the News" spreads through this tiny town before the body is even cold.

Such a lack of privacy, the poem suggests, doesn't necessarily lead to warmth or sympathy. Like the goggling children, the speaker seems more concerned with keeping himself apart from the "Death, in the Opposite House" than with how the "Mourners" must be feeling. Life and death in a small town might be public, the poem suggests, but that doesn't mean they're shared.

interpret. One of the most striking of these signs is also one of the most ordinary: a window opening. But it's *how* the window opens that matters:

A Window opens like a Pod —  
Abrupt — mechanically —

If this window opens "like a Pod," then it's the person *opening* it who behaves "abrupt[ly]" and "mechanically": the simile here suggests that they're caught up in a process as involuntary as the one that drives seed pods to split open. Readers might reflect that both mourning and death itself are indeed unwilling, unchosen, automatic, and even "mechanical" parts of life.

But there's human power at work here, too. When the "Minister" arrives to discuss the funeral service, he behaves "as if the House were His"—and as if he "owned" the "Mourners" and the "little Boys" rubbernecking in the street outside, too. This simile underscores the idea that death *does* give the minister a special kind of power: in the world of death and dying, religious authority takes on a new weight! However, the minister's self-conscious, pompous, "stiff" demeanor also reminds readers that he, too, has no real power over death.

#### Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "A Window opens like a Pod — / Abrupt — mechanically —"
- **Lines 13-16:** "The Minister — goes stiffly in — / As if the House were His — / And He owned all the Mourners — now — / And little Boys — besides."
- **Line 22:** "It's easy as a Sign —"

## METAPHOR

The poem's subtle [metaphors](#) evoke both sincere grief and the futility of funeral rituals.

In the first stanza, the speaker describes the "numb look" by which one can identify a house in mourning. This [personification](#) suggests that grief is so powerful it can stun a whole household. But it also might lead readers to reflect that the speaker never seems to see any actual *mourners* in the "Opposite House." The house's window flies open "mechanically," as if no one were behind it—and while plenty of visitors and tradespeople go *in*, no inhabitant ever comes *out*. By presenting the house as a "numb" mourner itself (but never showing any mourners), the poem suggests that the people inside might feel almost *erased* by their grief, caught up helplessly in the mechanical rituals that surround a person's death.

The poem's second metaphor is less sympathetic. Judging by all the bustle around the house, the speaker says, it's easy to tell what's coming next:



## POETIC DEVICES

### SIMILE

The poem's vivid [similes](#) help to evoke the rituals that automatically kick into gear when someone dies.

While the poem's speaker can tell that "there's been a Death" in the house across the road, he doesn't know it by the sound of weeping or the sight of a corpse. Rather, he observes a series of tell-tale events—ones that are "easy as a Sign" to read and

There'll be that Dark Parade —  
Of Tassels — and of Coaches — soon —

The image of a funerary procession as a "Dark Parade" feels darkly funny: a less festive parade, one could never imagine. Through this metaphor, the poem also hints that mourners really only have small, weak tools to deal with the reality of death; even the most elegant funeral procession might seem to have a flimsy, theatrical quality.

#### Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "the numb look"
- **Line 20:** "There'll be that Dark Parade —"

## PARALLELISM

[Parallelism](#) helps the poem to depict the routine bustle of a small-town funeral.

As the speaker watches funeral preparations kick into gear across the road, he observes a whole long sequence of events using the same sentence structure:

The Neighbors rustle in and out —  
The Doctor — drives away —  
A Window opens like a Pod —

And he's not done yet! This pattern continues in the third and fourth stanzas, where:

Somebody flings a Mattress out —  
The Children hurry by —  
[...]  
The Minister — goes stiffly in —

By phrasing all of these events in the same way, the speaker suggests that all of these events *also* happen in the same way whenever there's a death in this small town: the orderly, repetitive sentence structure suggests a series of predictable, familiar rituals.

But these events aren't just predictable: they're also hard to watch, no matter how much the speaker tries to keep them at an emotional distance. Parallelism (and more specifically, [anaphora](#)) also helps to evoke a sense of inevitability or overwhelm. Listen to what happens between stanzas 4 and 5:

And He owned all the Mourners — now —  
And little Boys — besides.  
And then the Milliner — and the Man  
Of the Appalling Trade —

- First, the speaker begins by using a pair of "and"s to suggest the minister's imposing power: he behaves

as if he "owned" the "Mourners" and the house and the little boys outside.

- Then, those "and"s return in the next stanza in a different role: now they suggest the endless parade of tradespeople coming and going around the house, from the milliner (or hatmaker) to the mortician (whose "trade" strikes the speaker as so awful he can't name it).

In the end, all these different "and"s in a row, referring to different parts of the proceedings, suggest that the ritual of mourning sweeps through the "Opposite House" with unstoppable momentum.

#### Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "The Neighbors rustle"
- **Line 6:** "The Doctor — drives"
- **Line 7:** "A Window opens"
- **Line 9:** "Somebody flings"
- **Line 10:** "The Children hurry"
- **Line 13:** "The Minister — goes stiffly in —"
- **Line 15:** "And"
- **Line 16:** "And"
- **Line 17:** "And," "and"

## CAESURA

Frequent strong [caesurae](#) make the speaker's voice sound halting; it's as if he's speaking half-distractedly while peering out the window to catch whatever's going to happen next at the "Opposite House."

That effect feels especially pronounced in the first stanza:

There's been a Death, || in the Opposite House,  
As lately as Today —  
I know it, || by the numb look  
Such Houses have — || always —

Not only does this passage use three strong caesurae, but it also puts them in places where one wouldn't necessarily pause in everyday speech. Reader can almost see the speaker peeking through his front-room curtains here, observing, with sudden fascination: "There's been a Death"—then pausing to take a good long look—then finally concluding, "in the Opposite House."

Elsewhere, caesurae also evoke the herky-jerky, "mechanical" activity the speaker observes across the road:

A Window opens like a Pod —  
Abrupt — || mechanically —

Here, that mid-line dash feels as "abrupt" as the window's swing.

Caesurae can suggest emotional unease, too. Look what happens when the speaker observes a gaggle of curious children watching an old mattress get flung out the house's front door:

They wonder if it died — || on that —  
I used to — || when a Boy —

The pause in the children's "wondering" makes it sound as if they're almost too fascinated (and creeped out) to finish their question in one breath. And the corresponding awkward caesura in the speaker's memories of what he "used to" feel suggests he might be protesting a little too much: maybe he *still* has the same macabre question, though he hastens to assure himself that such curiosity is all in his past.

#### Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Death, in"
- **Line 3:** "it, by"
- **Line 4:** "have — alway"
- **Line 6:** "Doctor — drives"
- **Line 8:** "Abrupt — mechanically"
- **Line 11:** "died — on"
- **Line 12:** "to — when"
- **Line 13:** "Minister — goes"
- **Line 15:** "Mourners — now"
- **Line 17:** "Milliner — and"
- **Line 21:** "Tassels — and," "Coaches — soon"

## SYNECDOCHE

One little moment of [synecdoche](#) underscores the speaker's perspective on funeral rituals and mourning.

In lines 20-21, having detected and cataloged all the signs of a "Death, in the Opposite House," the speaker anticipates that:

There'll be that Dark Parade —  
Of Tassels — and of Coaches — soon —

The "tassels" (or ornamental bits of braid and cord) here stand in for a whole mortuary full of solemn funerary adornments: all the mourning clothes and hearse hangings you can shake a stick at. Such decorations, the speaker suggests, are as much an expected part of the postmortem scene as the departure of the doctor and the arrival of the mortician.

These decorations also sound, in this context, a tiny bit silly or futile; the poem's description of a funeral procession as a "Dark Parade" decked out in "Tassels" feels rather dismissive. Decorations can't do that much to cover the "Appalling" realities of death, the poem suggests—and people might use elegant funeral trappings and rituals to distract themselves from their helplessness in the face of mortality.

By allowing the poem to dismissively sum up all the pomp of a grand funeral with one silly little word, synecdoche thus helps to suggest that death rituals can only do so much to console mourners.

#### Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Line 21:** "Tassels"

## ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) gives a few vivid moments in the poem some extra punch.

For instance, listen to the echoing sounds in lines 13-16:

The Minister — goes stiffly in —  
As if the House were His —  
And He owned all the Mourners — now —  
And little Boys — besides.

As the masterful, imposing minister takes charge of the house, strong alliteration makes his arrival feel even more formal and grand. The repeated /h/ sounds underline his new power, stressing that the "House" is "His" now. And when the stanza turns from /h/ alliteration to /b/ alliteration in its final line, it feels as if the minister is scowling over his shoulder at the boisterous kids whispering about the corpse in the street behind him.

And listen to what happens in the next stanza:

And then the Milliner — and the Man  
Of the Appalling Trade —  
To take the measure of the House —

Those low /m/ sounds feel like the mutter of these different tradespeople as they come and go. They also draw special attention to the speaker's euphemistic avoidance of the word "mortician": he can only refer to the "Man / Of the Appalling Trade," as if that trade were literally unspeakable.

#### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Doctor," "drives"
- **Line 14:** "House," "His"
- **Line 15:** "He"
- **Line 16:** "Boys," "besides"
- **Line 17:** "Milliner," "Man"
- **Line 19:** "measure"
- **Line 21:** "soon"
- **Line 22:** "Sign"

## ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) works much much [alliteration](#), giving the poem a

touch of eerie music.

For instance, listen to the vowel sound that threads through the third stanza:

Somebody flings a Mattress out –  
The Children hurry by –  
They wonder if it died – on that –  
I used to – when a Boy –

That echoing long /i/ sound, besides intensifying this passage, draws a subtle connection between the hurrying children, the speaker, and death itself. Everyone is caught up in the macabre drama around what's left of whoever "died" in the house.

For another example, listen to the string of short /ih/ sounds in the next two lines:

The Minister – goes stiffly in –  
As if the House were His –

These quick sounds seem to lend the line a kind of clipped stiffness. This heightened language suggests that, now that the Minister is here, the proceedings can *officially* begin.

#### Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "been," "Death"
- **Line 2:** "lately," "Today"
- **Line 5:** "Neighbors"
- **Line 6:** "away"
- **Line 7:** "Window opens"
- **Line 10:** "by"
- **Line 11:** "died"
- **Line 12:** "I"
- **Line 13:** "Minister," "stiffly in"
- **Line 14:** "if," "His"
- **Line 18:** "Trade"
- **Line 19:** "take"
- **Line 24:** "just," "Country"



## VOCABULARY

**The Opposite House** (Line 1) - That is, the house across the road from the speaker's.

**Always** (Line 4) - An old-fashioned way of saying "always."

**Pod** (Line 7) - A seed-case on a plant—the kind that bursts open to let seeds fly free.

**Abrupt** (Line 8) - Forceful and without warning.

**Flings** (Line 9) - Energetically throws.

**Minister** (Line 13) - Church leader.

**Milliner** (Line 17) - A hat-maker—presumably visiting to make a

funeral hat for one of the bereaved.

**The Appalling Trade** (Line 18) - An "Appalling Trade" is a terrible job. Here, the speaker probably means a funeral director or a mortician (relatively new jobs in Dickinson's era!).

**Tassels** (Line 21) - Ornamental braid. In this case, "tassels" are being used to decorate the house or a carriage for the funeral.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

The form Dickinson uses in this poem is one of her favorites: the [ballad](#) stanza, so called because it turns up in countless old folk songs. Technically speaking, this means that the poem is written in four-line [quatrains](#) (four-line stanzas) of [common meter](#), with an ABCB [rhyme scheme](#).

Or at least, *most* of the poem is written that way. Dickinson does something innovative in lines 17-20, where she breaks out what would usually be the last line of the fifth stanza into its own stand-alone space. The poem thus has seven stanzas instead of the expected six.

And that choice has a good, shivery, atmospheric effect. The particular line Dickinson chooses to set off here describes the "Dark Parade" of a funeral procession. By giving that image a line to itself, she evokes the eerie silence of such a grim "Parade," its stillness broken only by the sound of slow hoofbeats. Perhaps this single lonely line even *visually* evokes a funeral procession.

### METER

Like almost all of Dickinson's poetry, "There's been a Death, in the Opposite House" is written in [common meter](#). That means that the lines alternate between [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 11-12:

They won- | der if | it died – | on that –  
I used | to – when | a Boy –

But Dickinson often plays with this meter, varying it for effect. The poem's first line, for example, breaks from the meter before it's even established:

There's been | a Death, | in the Op- | posite House,

The first foot here is ambiguous; readers might hear it as an iamb (as scanned above) or as the opposite foot, a [trochee](#) (DUM-da: "There's been"), which would kick the poem off with an emphatic stress. The last two feet, meanwhile, are clearer variations: they're both [anapests](#), feet with a da-da-DUM



rhythm. Those extra syllables make this line feel packed with energy, evoking the speaker's ill-concealed anxiety as he watches what's going on across the street.

## RHYME SCHEME

"There's been a Death, in the Opposite House" uses a [ballad rhyme scheme](#). That means its second and fourth lines rhyme, creating the following pattern:

ABCB

But in this poem as in many others, Dickinson makes that neat pattern feel a little uneasy with a wealth of [slant rhymes](#): "away" and "mechanically," for instance, or "by" and "Boy." Those ever-so-slightly off-kilter sounds help, in this case, to evoke the eerie reality of death lurking just beneath all the town's predictable funeral rituals.



## SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a thoughtful man who lives in a small "Country Town." As he sits watching all the bustle around a "Death" in the neighbors' house across the road, he reflects on the predictable rituals that people go through in these moments of crisis. While he knows his neighborhood well enough to foretell exactly what's going to happen across the road step by step, he doesn't seem very emotionally involved, never naming the dead person nor the mourners. But perhaps that emotional distance is a way for him to protect himself: he's clearly unnerved by the thought of the dead body. His simultaneous curiosity and detachment hint that small-town life can feel both claustrophobic and chilly—and that people often have a hard time confronting the realities of death.



## SETTING

"There's been a Death, in the Opposite House" is set in a small "Country Town": a place where everyone knows everyone's business, and people always seem to act in the same ways. As the speaker watches children hurrying superstitiously past a discarded deathbed mattress, for instance, he remembers acting just that way when he was "a Boy"; little changes around this town. The poem suggests that life in a place like this, with its familiar rituals, can feel both stable and a little restrictive.

This town might have more than a little in common with Dickinson's own hometown of Amherst, Massachusetts—the place where she spent nearly all of her life.



## 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, folksy forms—[ballad](#) stanzas, for instance—to explore profound philosophical questions, passionate loves, and the mysteries of nature. "There's been a Death, in the Opposite House" is a perfect example: its six short stanzas simultaneously capture the eeriness of death and the nosiness of a small town. Death was a frequent theme for Dickinson; she wrote about it from every conceivable perspective, from that of a [heartbroken mourner](#) to that of the [deceased](#)!

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—this one 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.

This poem might even hint at a new aspect of Civil-War-era death: embalming. Before the Civil War, very few bodies were embalmed; the practice [became more popular](#) as soldiers' bodies needed to be shipped from battlefields back to their hometowns. But many people were uneasy with embalming, seeing it as unnatural. Perhaps that's what makes the

mortician's "Trade" so "Appalling."



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [A Manuscript of the Poem](#) — See an image of the poem in Emily Dickinson's own handwriting. ([https://www.edickinson.org/editions/5/image\\_sets/12168346](https://www.edickinson.org/editions/5/image_sets/12168346))
- [The Dickinson Museum](#) — Visit the website of the Emily Dickinson Museum to learn more about her life and work. (<https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/>)
- [The Poem Aloud](#) — Listen to a reading of the poem. (<https://youtu.be/idfoMUOVC4M>)
- [Dickinson's Legacy](#) — Listen to three contemporary writers discussing Dickinson's influence on their work. (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000198y>)
- [A Portrait of Dickinson](#) — See a recently rediscovered photo of Dickinson—one of only two we know of!—and learn more about her later life after she withdrew from society. (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/sep/05/emily-dickinson-new-photograph>)

### 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 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

Nelson, Kristin. "There's been a Death, in the Opposite House." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 20 Jan 2022. Web. 7 Feb 2022.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "There's been a Death, in the Opposite House." LitCharts LLC, January 20, 2022. Retrieved February 7, 2022. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/emily-dickinson/there-s-been-a-death-in-the-opposite-house>.