

As imperceptibly as grief



POEM TEXT

- 1 As imperceptibly as grief
- 2 The summer lapsed away,—
- 3 Too imperceptible, at last,
- 4 To seem like perfidy.

- 5 A quietness distilled,
- 6 As twilight long begun,
- 7 Or Nature, spending with herself
- 8 Sequestered afternoon.

- 9 The dusk drew earlier in,
- 10 The morning foreign shone,—
- 11 A courteous, yet harrowing grace,
- 12 As guest who would be gone.

- 13 And thus, without a wing,
- 14 Or service of a keel,
- 15 Our summer made her light escape
- 16 Into the beautiful.

readers. The poem gently reminds the reader that life is fleeting—the passage of time eventually brings all life to its inevitable end, but it does so gradually, in a way similar to the turning of summer into autumn. By discussing the subtle shift of the seasons—which happens incrementally but definitively—the speaker suggests that life often passes by with this same “imperceptibility,” until, before long, it is gone. For people, time goes by almost without them noticing—but then, suddenly, they realize that everything has changed. Implied, then, is the argument that people should take notice of the beauty that is in front of them every day and pay close attention to both the majesty and the grief that every moment contains.

The poem uses the fading of summer to illustrate its point that life is fleeting and, in light of inevitable death, already contains a sense of loss. People tend to think of the seasons as four distinct units—winter, spring, summer and autumn. But the poem shows that the passage of time actually works in a much subtler way, and that there are transitions between these seasons just as there are between stages of an individual’s life. Summer is usually associated with sunshine, growth, maturity and warmth. But the speaker shows that all of these are temporary; summer is fated to turn to autumn. In the same way, the certainties of life will fade away too—everything that gives an individual’s life its meaning is made fleeting by the irreversible passage of time. Summer becomes a kind of metaphor for life itself—and its comparison with “grief” makes it clear that the poem is principally concerned with the way humans perceive their lives.

What’s more, this time-based trajectory towards death is subtle—people tend not to think about it. Everything described in the poem happens gradually: the “quietness” grows purer, the long days of summer get shorter bit by bit, and eventually summer makes “her light escape.” People, too, draw gradually closer to death: everything thing must pass.

The poem doesn’t present death as something to be feared, but instead emphasizes the beauty contained in the fact that nothing lasts forever. That’s why the speaker doesn’t exactly grieve the end of summer, but rather imagines it escaping “into the beautiful” (as autumn takes over). Just as people go from nothingness to existence and back to nothingness again, the summer goes through its natural cycles. This cycle of life and death happens too slowly “to seem like perfidy”—that is, these transitions are just the way of the world, and it’s no use projecting an idea of deception or malice onto them. In fact, the poem implies that the summer is not beautiful despite its temporary nature, but *because* of it. Stanzas 2 and 3 associate the summer with purity, contemplation and light, while the final stanza links it with freedom and beauty. Taken as a wider point,



SUMMARY

In a way that was barely noticeable but still amounted to a loss, summer faded. It happened too gradually, in the end, for anyone to claim it was deceiving or untrustworthy.

Quietness became purer, like the transition between day and night; or as if Nature was like a woman, hiding herself away in the afternoon.

The days started to get shorter, with nighttime arriving increasingly earlier. Something about the morning light became unfamiliar. It seemed eager to depart, polite but troubling, like a guest who needs to leave.

And so, with no method of transportation necessary—like wings or a boat—the summer subtly disappeared and went back to beauty.



THEMES



LIFE, LOSS, AND TIME

“As imperceptibly as grief” is a subtle and ambiguous poem that nevertheless contains a clear call to its

then, life is beautiful because it cannot last—if it did last forever, people might take it for granted, and, in fact, some do so even with the full knowledge that it will eventually come to an end. The poem, then, gently nudges its reader to appreciate life while it's still there.

Ultimately, "As imperceptibly as grief" presents its reader with a gentle but unflinching perspective on life, and how life's fleeting nature links it with loss from the very beginning. This isn't something to fear, argues the poem, but to be accepted: life's meaningfulness is inseparable from the fact that it cannot last, just as the seasons must go through their cycles.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*As imperceptibly as grief
The summer lapsed away,—
Too imperceptible, at last,
To seem like perfidy.*

The poem begins with a disorientating [simile](#) that contains two propositions. The first line describes grief as something imperceptible—a statement that the poem will go on to reinforce. Grief can be many things, but it's not often associated with being something difficult to perceive. Grief, of course, can sometimes be loud and expressive—think of mourners crying at a funeral—or more inward and quiet, but in both of these situations it remains perceivable, to the person who feels it at least. The poem is thus putting forward the idea that there is a different kind of grief, one that functions more subtly than the reader might expect. This grief is almost beyond the realm of human perception—but the poem shows right away that it wants to subtly point the reader in its general direction.

Moreover, the opening line hints at the way time and change may or may not be perceptible. Think of a slug or a snail: it can't perceive fast movements because its sight only refreshes at a certain speed (a bit like a camera's frame rate). Lurking in the atmosphere of this poem is the idea that there are things that humans are similarly unable to perceive. The first line is an [oxymoron](#): grief is a human emotion, and yet the line claims that there is a kind of grief that is almost beyond human powers of perception. From here on out, it's up to the reader to engage with the poem to figure out just what loss this kind of grief might mark.

The second proposition comes in line 2, which completes the simile begun by the poem's first word. The speaker says that the dimly-perceived experience of grief is similar to the way in

which summer disappears—and, in this poem's setting, has already disappeared. In the poem's present moment, the summer has moved from being a daily reality to a memory, a kind of gentle loss. "Lapsed" is an especially interesting choice of word. Its most obvious meaning here is that of "passing gradually," but it also has a subtle suggestion of something being lost. For example, "lapse" is often used in the context of forgetfulness, as in a lapse of memory—perhaps, then, this word hints that people might *forget* to perceive something fundamental about life. The poem subtly draws the reader's attention to the way that the relentless passage of time imbues everything with a sense of loss.

Lines 3 and 4 expand on the discussion of the faded summer. In essence, they argue that it would be a mistake to accuse the summer of being deceptive or dishonest ("perfidy"), because the shift in seasons happened so slowly. The near-repetition of "imperceptibly" neatly embodies the idea of subtle, gradual change—"imperceptible" is the same word without the last syllable. Behind this idea is an acceptance that nothing can last forever—the summer, with its positive associations of sun, warmth, and growth, comes to an end.

Line 4 concludes with a firm [end-stop](#), which sets up a pattern in which each subsequent [quatrain](#) does the same. Perhaps this use of the full stop is a subtle way of making the form represent seasonality, with the number of stanzas corresponding to the different seasons (though not discussing them specifically).

LINES 5-8

*A quietness distilled,
As twilight long begun,
Or Nature, spending with herself
Sequestered afternoon.*

Stanza 2 is syntactically complex. Line 5 introduces the idea of "quietness" being "distilled" into its essence. "Distilled" could either be an adjective to describe a quietness already distilled, or a past-tense verb: quietness was in the process of distilling. Either way, the [assonance](#) of /i/ sounds, the [consonance](#) of /t/ sounds and the [sibilance](#) in the /s/ sounds lends the phrase a kind of linguistic purity in line with the idea of distillation. The use of "distilled" perhaps has something to do with Emily Dickinson's interest in science, developed in her youth. In any case, distillation is a process that uses temperature alteration to purify a liquid. The suggestion here, then, is that the warmth of summer has progressively made "quietness" more pure. The use of past-tense perfect verbs elsewhere in the poem suggests that "distilled" here is most likely a verb, too.

Line 6, and 7 and 8 together can then be read as examples of the way in which quietness became purified as the summer began to fade. Each evening, the transition between day and night came slightly—imperceptibly—earlier. This hints at the way life is a series of days and nights, with each one bringing death a little bit closer. In this reading, "quietness" can also be

considered the nothingness that comes with death—which the passage of time brings ever nearer. "Twilight" also reinforces both the assonance and the consonance of line 5, creating a connection between these notions of dark and quiet.

Lines 7 and 8 introduce another scenario in which "quietness" is "distilled." Nature is personified here as a woman—Mother Earth, perhaps—spending time alone ("sequestered") in the afternoon. There is a sense of solitude in these lines with which parallels could be drawn to the author's life—Dickinson herself was notoriously reclusive. These lines suggest that solitude may be a kind of precursor to death, though notably, that doesn't make it something negative or sad; here it sounds peaceful and almost pleasant, or at least neutral.

Additionally, the use of /n/ sounds across this stanza create a sense of slowness: "quietness," "long begun," "spending," "afternoon." The /n/ sound gestures to a word that isn't there but is certainly implied: "alone." The general effect of the stanza is to create a feeling of time coming to a standstill. The lines do not rush, and very little that's tangible is actually happening. And that's the whole point—the speaker is describing a type of change that happens so gradually that it doesn't even seem like it's happening. The first stanza has already told the reader that, in such times, the feeling that life is static and unchanging is an illusion. The long monotony that might make up a child's summer, for example, is nonetheless part of a passage of time that is changing them—making them age and bringing them closer to death. The poem, then, is aiming to attune the reader's mind to the relentless change that exists in every moment, however small, as time goes on.

Stanza 2, like the first stanza, ends with a [full stop](#). Another potential reason for the uniform placement of full stops at the ends of stanzas could be that this creates a tension between a sense of flow and a sense of interruption. In addition, each stanza takes its time to work out its syntax, with commas and dashes used to pin down what the speaker is trying to say. But in contrast, the full stops have a more final quality, perhaps suggesting the poem's interplay between seemingly limitless time and those moments that make time's passing very clear (e.g. the deaths of others).

LINES 9-12

*The dusk drew earlier in,
The morning foreign shone,—
A courteous, yet harrowing grace,
As guest who would be gone.*

Stanza 3 is, in content, a development of the second stanza. It adds further detail to the way in which "summer lapsed away," bit by bit. The first two lines are a relatively straightforward description of the way in which, as summer turns to autumn, the evenings arrive earlier. Dusk comes after the sun has set but some of its light still lingers and is part of the "twilight" mentioned in line 6. These lines describe a transition between

day and night, two categories that are usually perceived as utterly distinct but that actually change into each other in a gradual, incremental way. The passing of day into night is itself, then, a microcosm of the poem's overall discussion of summer's transformation into autumn. Both are transitions, and, with the first line of the poem having raised the spectre of grief and death, the implication is that life itself is a transition too. Just as night follows day and autumn follows summer, death follows life.

The use of [alliteration](#) in line 9—"dusk drew"—emphasizes the dusk's arrival; it brings with it a certain type of new light and this is hinted at by the two /d/ sounds.

Line 10 picks up on the /n/ sounds of the previous stanza, again creating a slow pace but also perhaps suggesting the idea of distillation introduced in line 5. Sound-wise, the lines up to line 11 are becoming purer, the /n/ sounds filtering through with a subtle dominance. But line 10 sets up a disruption of this generally quite peaceful atmosphere. First of all, it's important to note that "foreign" here acts as an adverb modifying "shone"—in plain terms, the morning began to shine in a way that was unfamiliar. It no longer brought with it the same sense of timelessness of long summer days, but rather grew gradually different in a way that was hard to pin down. The use of the dash at the end of line 10 signals an important moment in the speaker's thought process—here, they find the words to clarify the idea of the morning's foreignness.

Lines 11 and 12 introduce the [simile](#) that responds to the dash. The morning, in this idea, is like a guest who went through the motions of politeness but seemed troubled and, indeed, troubling. It seems that there was a suppressed sense of urgency about the way in which they *had* to leave. In other words, the speaker perceived the summer's impending absence, even though it was on the surface still present. A kind of loneliness washes through these lines—notice that it's not a "friend" who "would be gone," but rather a "guest." The use of guest suggests impermanence; you are a guest somewhere because it is not where you would usually be, and your departure is already determined when you arrive. Linking this back to the "grief" in line 1, these lines are suggestive of the shortness of human life—people are guests on the earth, soon gone.

LINES 13-16

*And thus, without a wing,
Or service of a keel,
Our summer made her light escape
Into the beautiful.*

The final stanza moves away from the descriptions of the transition between summer and autumn. The start of line 13—"and thus"—signals that the poem is reaching its logical conclusion. In other words, it reminds the reader that stanzas 2 and 3 have been proof of the poem's opening proposition,

which is to be concluded and clarified here. Additionally, there is a lightness to the [caesura](#) in line 13 that preemptively suggests the "light escape" of summer in line 15.

Lines 13 and 14 take an interesting approach: instead of saying that summer escaped *like* this or that, it outlines two images that the summer's departure was specifically *not* like. Both of these are types of transportation, one a part of natural life forms and the other man-made.

"Wing" is suggestive of flight, and is arguably a [synecdoche](#) for birds. But the point of the image is that this is something that the summer—and, by extension, grief—doesn't require.

Basically, the summer gradually flies away without even needing the obvious symbol of flight, a surprising turn that mirrors the idea of imperceptibility introduced in the first stanza. Like summer, itself also flies away no matter what. Here, of course, there are religious connotations too. Wings are associated with angels; however, angels are not required for people's passage from life into death. That people will die with or without the help of angels is an unavoidable fact, as true for non-believers as it is for those with religious beliefs.

The "keel" in line 14 is a kind of synecdoche as well, again for something that the summer's departure *didn't* require. This time the image refers to boats—a keel is a stabilizing structure on the bottom of a boat that helps keep it from being blown sideways or upside down. The summer's departure didn't need this either; it wasn't tethered to the earth, whether on land or sea.

The pronoun shift at the beginning of line 15 is surprising. Up until this line, the speaker has had a detached but sensitive and authoritative tone, while giving little away about who they are (other than a perceptive and intellectual thinker). But the word "our" brings in a sense of collectivity, as if the speaker is suddenly asking the reader: to whom does the summer belong? The speaker implies that it belongs to everyone, hinting that this poem is as much about the entirety of humanity as it is about summer itself.

There are two key interpretations of these final lines. First of all, at a literal level, the poem is restating the way in which summer gradually disappears. Furthermore, "she" (summer) goes back "into the beautiful." There's a [paradox](#) at play here. People perceive the summer as beautiful, but the speaker is suggesting that "the beautiful" is also where it rests when, essentially, it is not existing. This could either be a nod towards an abstract category of beauty, as if the summer departs and then lives on in the human *idea* of beauty—until it comes back the following year. Or, the line might mean that non-existence is itself a kind of beauty. The summer, in essence, lives and dies every year—and this non-existence, as part of that cycle, is in itself beautiful.

The other key interpretation, which is not necessarily mutually exclusive from the first, is that the pronoun "our" signals a shift

that modifies the discussion of summer from literal to metaphorical. That is, linking back to the human emotion of "grief" in the first line, the poem is making clear that it isn't really about summer, but rather about the trajectories of human life. "Our summer" could mean the time in human life when everything is at its fullest and perhaps seems like it will never end. This summer, too, will make its inevitable "light escape," propelled by the unstoppable passage of time. Life, suggests the poem, contains a kind of grief even when it is at its most full (when it is most like summer), because it is destined to draw, moment by imperceptible moment, towards its end.



SYMBOLS



LIGHT

Throughout, "As imperceptibly as grief" makes reference to light. It is a very particular kind of light, namely a fading light—the light that marks the in-between state that divides day and night. It is first mentioned in line 6, then lines 9 and 10, and finally in a [pun](#) in line 15.

The light mentioned is transitional, neither day nor night, but in the process of moving between the two. Accordingly, it is representative of the poem's central idea: that all things are, because of the passage of time, in transition.

Light in the poem, as in life, is a marker of seasons. That is, the increase or decrease of light in the everyday is part of how humans experience the different times of year. It is thus not just a symbol of transition, but also a way in which people *measure* transition. It is a part of the toolkit of human perception, allowing us to make sense of the world, and is therefore also a representation of this interaction between human life and the world in which it exists.

Line 15 plays on this importance of light to life (it's worth remembering that light is linked to biological growth—e.g. photosynthesis—too). Summer makes "her" disappearance in a way that is subtle, almost dainty—light. But it also escapes as light, or by light—summer is, amongst other things, a particular type of light. Light is so integral to life, but it's also a mysterious and intangible element of human existence. The escape of "our summer"—whether the summer of our lives or the summer that some unnamed "we" shared—happens in a way that is beyond our understanding or control.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "twilight"
- **Line 9:** "dusk"
- **Line 10:** "shone"
- **Line 15:** "light"



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) occurs at two moments in "As imperceptibly as grief."

It is first used in line 9 with "dusk drew," both beginning with /d/ sounds. The effect is subtle but it conjures the idea of the day being covered with darkness.

Lines 11 and 12 then feature three /g/ sounds across "grace," "guest," and "gone." This links the three words together conceptually, and as they are the main examples of /g/ create a sense of presence that is absent elsewhere. This embodies the idea of something or someone arriving, and then departing, which applies both to the "lapsing" summer and the way that people come into existence and then eventually die. The /g/ sound here gently echoes its first appearance in line 1—"grief." The idea of departure, then, becomes linked to the feeling of loss, supporting the poem's overall proposition that loss is everywhere in everyday reality—nothing can last forever.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "dusk drew"
- **Line 11:** "grace"
- **Line 12:** "guest," "gone"

ENJAMBMENT

[Enjambment](#) occurs in three instances in "As imperceptibly as grief," between lines 1 and 2, 7 and 8, and 15 and 16. On a practical level, these instances allow for a longer phrase length than would fit if each line were a contained unit, which lets the poem to vary its pace.

There is a lightness to each use of enjambment, which ties in with the idea of "light escape" introduced at the poem's end. Between lines 1 and 2, the enjambment introduces the idea of the summer's end and ties it together with grief.

The enjambment of line 7 allows for an increased sense of solitude, the "herself" resolving into "sequestered afternoon."

But the most impactful use of enjambment is the final one, between lines 15 and 16. The enjambment manifests the "light escape," as the final word of line 15 briefly "escapes" into the white space that follows. It lends the lines a sense of delicateness, mirroring the idea of imperceptibility that runs throughout the poem.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "grief"
- **Line 2:** "The"
- **Line 7:** "herself"

- **Line 8:** "Sequestered"
- **Line 15:** "escape"
- **Line 16:** "Into"

PERSONIFICATION

Throughout the poem, the summer is [personified](#). This is most prominent and obvious in lines 7 and 15, in which nature and the summer are personified together as a woman. This gestures to the idea of Mother Nature, which dates all the way back to Greek and Roman mythology (e.g. Mother Gaia). Overall, the personification has the effect of pushing the poem beyond its immediate, literal content—this is a poem in part about the fading of summer, but really it is about life itself. Personifying nature and summer reminds the reader that the process of transition discussed in the poem is not specific to the material at hand, but applies to people too.

There is another instance of personification in line 12, though this is in part a [simile](#) as well. The morning and, by extension, the summer are conceptualized as a "guest" that, though "courteous," needs to leave. This speaks to the inevitability of change, with a second meaning that suggests that people themselves are guests on earth. They briefly exist, but before too long, like the summer, they will be gone.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "Or Nature, spending with herself"
- **Line 12:** "As guest who would be gone."
- **Line 15:** "Our summer made her light escape"

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) is gently present in line 2, with "lapsed away." It is used delicately, and this subtlety reinforces the idea of imperceptibility by not being overly noticeable.

The second stanza is full of assonance, firstly through the use of /i/ sounds which, in close proximity across lines 5 and 6, embody the idea of distillation. That is, the sound of the lines is in a sense undergoing a process of purification, with other vowel sounds being filtered away.

But this stanza also introduces the assonant sounds of /o/ and /u/, which ring out so similarly that they can be considered part of the same group. They are slow sounds, mirroring the gradual change of summer into autumn, and of life into death. They are audible in "long begun," "or," and "afternoon," and then pick up again in the third stanza: "morning foreign shone" and "gone."

Finally, in line 16 the second syllable of "into" and the first of "beautiful" chime together, reinforcing the idea that "beauty" is a kind of abstract place into which things can go.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “lapsed away”
- **Line 5:** “quietness distilled”
- **Line 6:** “twilight,” “long begun”
- **Line 7:** “Or”
- **Line 8:** “afternoon”
- **Line 10:** “morning foreign shone”
- **Line 12:** “gone”
- **Line 16:** “Into,” “beautiful”

SIMILE

[Simile](#) is used to great effect in “As imperceptibly as grief.” In fact, blink and you’ll miss it, but the first use of simile is in the first line. The whole poem hinges on the idea that the way in which summer fades is *like*—shown in the comparative use of “as”—grief. This loss, which is the natural turning of the seasons, is somehow comparable to this particular human emotion. The simile means that the poem works in two different ways: firstly as a discussion of the way in which summer turns to autumn, but more importantly as an examination of how this transition is applicable to human existence. Of course, the underlying point is that all life is transitional—just as summer turns to autumn, life turns to death.

The second key example of simile is in line 12, in which the summer morning is characterized as being like a guest who has to leave. This reminds the reader that the poem is as much about people as it is about seasons, and that people, too are guests in the experience of being alive.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “As imperceptibly as grief”
- **Line 12:** “As guest who would be gone”

OXYMORON

There are two examples of [oxymoron](#) in the poem.

The first one occurs in the main set-up—the idea that grief is imperceptible. Grief may be expressed in many different ways: some people deal with it loudly and demonstratively, while others might keep it locked inside. But not many people would argue that the emotion of grief goes by unnoticed, which is the basic proposition here. The reader then has to work hard using the material of the poem to resolve the idea of imperceptibility with the emotion of grief. But this is, in fact, the point of the poem: it is trying to argue that there *is* a kind of grief that imbues everyday existence, even when the long days of summer make it seem as if it might never end. This kind of grief is linked to the passage of time—each moment passes away as soon as it exists, and nothing lasts forever. Eventually, this catches up with people; they notice how much time has passed, or life events suddenly make time seem all too real. The poem is partly, then, trying to make people see the value in every

moment.

The second oxymoron comes in line 11. Here, morning is characterized as having a “harrowing grace.” Grace is usually a kind of charm and kindness, a thoughtfulness—it’s not usually associated with something that is troubled or troubling, as “harrowing” implies. This embodies the way that time passes subtly—gracefully—but, when properly thought about, is anxiety-provoking too.

Where Oxymoron appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “As imperceptibly as grief”
- **Line 11:** “harrowing grace”

SYNECDOCHE

[Synecdoche](#) is used twice in quick succession in the first two lines of the final stanza. Here, “wing” stands in for either birds or angels (or perhaps both), and generally relates to flight. A “keel” is a part of a ship or boat. Both are used to suggest methods of transportation that aren’t needed for summer to make its “light escape,” which takes place using a different method: the gradual passage of time. Time, suggests the poem, transports everything effortlessly—summer into autumn, and life into death.

The ambiguity of “wing” allows for spiritual and religious connotations with the subtle suggestion of angels, but it also relates to nature more generally (as wings occur naturally in birds). It is gently reminiscent of the idea of the soul departing the body in death. A “keel” is part of a man-made object, suggesting that this type of transition doesn’t need human knowledge in order to take place. This ties in with the idea of imperceptibility. The fact that both of these words relate to parts of a whole also suggests an inability to perceive the entirety of something—in this case, the passage of time.

Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** “wing”
- **Line 14:** “keel”

CAESURA

[Caesura](#) is used in lines 3, 7, 11, and 13. In general, caesura in the poem creates a variation in pace and prevents the poem from feeling too rhythmically monotonous. The caesurae are also subtle, adding to the idea of imperceptibility.

In lines 3 and 13, the caesurae provide space for the insertion of a small phrase that indicates a causal logic to develop. In line 3, this “last” is linked to an idea of slowness, which in turn implies the gradual nature of summer that means it would be wrong to treat its fading as a kind of “perfidy.” In line 13, the caesura following “and thus,” reinforces the fact that the poem is drawing to a conclusion based on its internal logic.

In line 7, the caesura creates a pause which then makes the following phrase linger for longer. This is important because what's being discussed at that moment of the poem is a kind of slow time, in which nature whiles away the hours.

Line 11's caesura has a different effect, allowing for "courteous" to sit with "harrowing"—in other words, to introduce a more negative trait to go with the positive connotations of being "courteous."

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “”
- **Line 7:** “”
- **Line 11:** “”
- **Line 13:** “”

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) occurs throughout the poem. The gentle use of /m/ sounds in the first stanza links the imperceptibility of grief with that of the turn of the seasons. The whole stanza is comprised of delicate sounds, and the way the /m/ sounds chime together is part of that.

Stanza 2 develops a /t/ sound, occurring across "quietness distilled," "twilight," "nature," "sequestered" and "afternoon." Again, these sounds are not grouped together to be harsh, but to be gently suggestive of an increasingly pure kind of "quiet." This mirrors the process of distillation referred to in line 5.

In the final stanza, the use of /l/ sounds links "keel," "light" and "beautiful." These syllables are gentle and emphasize the "lightness" of summer's escape.

Overall, then, the consonance functions in a fairly uniform way—suggesting gentleness and imperceptibility, rather than drawing too much attention to the poem's sound.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “summer”
- **Line 3:** “imperceptible”
- **Line 4:** “seem”
- **Line 5:** “quietness distilled”
- **Line 6:** “twilight”
- **Line 7:** “Nature”
- **Line 8:** “Sequestered afternoon”
- **Line 9:** “dusk drew”
- **Line 12:** “guest,” “gone”
- **Line 14:** “keel”
- **Line 15:** “light”
- **Line 16:** “beautiful”

SIBILANCE

[Sibilance](#) courses through the poem from start to finish. Cleverly, some of its instances are not obvious to the eye, but

become prominent to the ear when the poem is spoken out loud. In the first stanza, the letter /c/ in "imperceptibly" and "imperceptible" creates a sibilance that links with "as," "summer," "lapsed," "last" and "seem." Again, the poet is careful to keep the sibilance gentle, as though the poem is a barely audible (but undoubtedly purposeful) whisper.

The sibilance intensifies in the second stanza, as though the sound is being purified—"distilled." It's found in every one of the stanza's four lines.

In the rest of the poem, only the last line doesn't have some element of sibilance present. This *lack* of sibilance in that final line might be read as capturing summer's "light escape." The lines with sibilance preserve the slow progression of summer. The last line, lacking sibilance, indicates that summer has gone.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “As imperceptibly as”
- **Line 2:** “summer lapsed”
- **Line 3:** “imperceptible,” “last”
- **Line 4:** “seem”
- **Line 5:** “quietness distilled”
- **Line 6:** “As”
- **Line 7:** “spending,” “herself”
- **Line 8:** “Sequestered”
- **Line 9:** “dusk”
- **Line 10:** “shone”
- **Line 11:** “courteous,” “grace”
- **Line 12:** “guest”
- **Line 13:** “thus”
- **Line 14:** “service”
- **Line 15:** “summer,” “escape”



VOCABULARY

Imperceptibly (Line 1, Line 3) - If something happens imperceptibly, it happens beyond people's usual powers of perception. It could be too gradual, or too small, to be noticed.

Lapsed (Line 2) - Lapsed has multiple meanings. Its literal sense is that the summer disappeared, but it can also mean to fall metaphorically (as in "prelapsarian," which denotes mankind in the garden of Eden before the Fall of man). It also has connotations of forgetfulness, as in a "lapse" in memory.

Perfidy (Line 4) - Perfidy is a now uncommon word meaning treachery/deception. It was used significantly more often during the era in which the poem was written.

Distilled (Line 5) - Distilled is a verb form of distillation, a process by which liquids are purified (usually by changing their temperature).

Sequestered (Line 8) - Sequester means to isolate or hide away, and was more commonly used in the 19th century than

now.

Harrowing (Line 11) - If something is harrowing, it is troubling and distressing.

Wing (Line 13) - Wing is a reference to flight. It could be interpreted as relating to birds, angels, or both.

Keel (Line 14) - A keel is part of a boat's hull. It is a structure on the underside that helps to keep the ship balanced.

The last line is a beautifully subtle variation on the use of stress earlier in the poem. Here, the stresses are reduced to two—dimeter. "Into the beautiful" can be scanned as having an initial stress on either the first or second syllable:

Into the beautiful

or

Into the beautiful

Either way, the phrase is delicate and represents the "lightness" with which summer disappeared. The absence of the final stress makes the final line feel almost incomplete, which ties in with the idea of grief introduced in the first line.

RHYME SCHEME

"As imperceptibly as grief" employs the [ballad](#) rhyme scheme, which goes ABCB. This means that lines 2 and 4 of each stanza rhyme, but the others do not. As with many of Dickinson's poems, the rhymes here are generally not full-sounding, but are [slant/near rhymes](#). These almost-but-not-quite perfect rhymes in part lend the poem a delicate sound, which matches with the subtlety of what is being described—the "imperceptible" passage of summer to autumn, and life to death. They play with the ear's desire for pattern by *almost* rhyming.

There is also a subtle interplay of [internal rhymes](#) at work. For example, the second syllable of "courteous," "grace," and "guest" are all *nearly* rhymes. But the fact that the rhymes generally don't quite match is part of an overall doubtfulness that aims to make the reader think about the mysteries of life—what it is that lies outside of the realms of perception.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem consists of four quatrains, which in itself gently suggests the four different seasons (though the poem discusses only the transition between summer and autumn).

Each quatrain is a contained unit, a single phrase marked by a full stop. This allows for a sense of gradual but purposeful development that mirrors the poem's discussion of the passing of time. The lines are short and compact, which lends the poem intensity.

As with many of Dickinson's poems, "As imperceptibly as grief" (which is actually untitled) employs dashes. These create a fragmentary effect, which combined with the delicate language used throughout builds a feeling that the poem could collapse under the pressure of the speaker's thoughts. They also allow a sense of doubt and mystery to inhabit the poem, in keeping with its general idea of the "imperceptible."

METER

"As imperceptibly as grief" has a fairly regular [iambic](#) meter throughout, with each line other than the last either trimeter or tetrameter (3 or 4 stressed syllables). Each line is either 6 or 8 syllables long (though this is in part dependent on pronunciation; "courteous," for instance, could be read as 2 or 3 syllables).

Dickinson's poetry generally has a metrical sound close to that of Biblical hymns, and this poem is no exception. This similarity of sound naturally draws a parallel between the *content* of hymn tunes and Dickinson's poems—both deal with deep questions about the nature of existence.

Technically speaking, this poem consists of one stanza of common meter (8/6/8/6 syllables) followed by three of short meter (6/6/8/6). This is a subtle transition—almost imperceptible—that gives metrical expression to the poem's discussion of slow, gradual change. The total number of syllables per stanza reduces after stanza 1—whereas stanza 1 introduces the general subject, the following stanzas deal specifically with the way in which "summer lapsed away." There is a gentle suggestion of absence, then, in the reduced amount of syllables as the poem focuses in on specifically *how* summer passed.



SPEAKER

As with many of Dickinson's poems, "As imperceptibly as grief" offers little information about its speaker. In a sense, the speaker has stepped aside in order to allow the reader to pay closer attention to what is discussed within the poem. But it is worthwhile to note that the speaker is certainly directing the reader's attention, and that the speaker is phenomenally observant to the "imperceptible."

There is one telling use of pronoun that applies to the speaker, which comes in line 15. Having avoided naming themselves thus far in the poem, the speaker suddenly uses "our." It's a surprising moment for the reader, who then has to resolve the question of who belongs within this "our." It could be the speaker and the reader, or it might be a more universal way of expressing that this is a poem about humanity more generally.



SETTING

"As imperceptibly as grief" is spoken entirely in the past tense. It is therefore a memory or collective sense of memories. It is written from a perspective in which summer has already passed. This develops the sense of loss that is suggested by "grief" in the first line—the poem is describing something that has already gone.

Within that discussion, the poem situates itself within the fading of summer as it passes into autumn. Specifically, it aims to conjure the atmosphere of those transitional days as the seasons turn in an effort to express the subtle but unrelenting passage of time. But the poem contains little concrete details, and generally gives voice to an abstract sense of time passing. The setting, then, can also be said to be the speaker's mind as they discuss the effects of passing time on their own perception.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson was an American poet during the 19th century, who lived in Amherst, Massachusetts. Perhaps more so than any other poet in the English language, she is a kind of singular entity. She published very little during her lifetime—indeed, published work was predominantly put out by men—and was a famously reclusive figure, choosing to stay indoors for most of her adult life. It wasn't until after her death that a route was found for her large body of work to be published with her sister, Lavinia Dickinson, playing a major role. Dickinson's reclusiveness, however, does not equate to a lack of influences. She is known to have valued the writings of William Wordsworth and Ralph Waldo Emerson, as well as Charlotte Bronte and Shakespeare. During her early life, Dickinson went to a religious school and continued to be preoccupied with questions about faith and the meaning of existence. Church literature, then, was also a major part of her literary context, and her poems often employ a meter and diction similar to that found in hymns. Her posthumous influence was far-reaching and she is now considered one of the most important poets in the English language.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dickinson grew up within a Puritan environment that placed great emphasis on the proper morality of the Christian tradition. Her father was a congressman and the patriarch of the family—and Dickinson could only begin writing her poetry because her father gave her implicit permission. In this respect, then, there is a gendered aspect to Dickinson's existence—she was a female author in a time and situation when this was not encouraged. Dickinson's America was one of religious

revivalism, with competing ideas about the way in which people ought to serve God, including the temperance movement of which her father was a part. The morality of slavery—and whether slavery should be abolished—was also an intensely debated issue at the forefront of the political scene, and which, of course, led to the outbreak of the American Civil War. Dickinson's brother, Austin, did not fight in the war, instead replaced by a conscript (at a financial cost); but she did have other friends and acquaintances that were drawn into the conflict.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Cynthia Nixon interview](#) — A clip in which actor Cynthia Nixon discusses playing Emily Dickinson in the brilliant film, *A Quiet Passion*. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_Sld6che2k)
- [Dickinson's Meter](#) — A valuable discussion of Emily Dickinson's use of meter. (<https://poemshape.wordpress.com/2009/01/18/emily-dickinson-iambic-meter-and-rhyme/>)
- [In Our Time podcast](#) — Experts talk about Emily Dickinson's life and work on the BBC's *In Our Time* podcast/radio show. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDBADIHwchQ>)
- [Other poems](#) — A link to numerous other Emily Dickinson poems. (<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poems/45673>)
- [Educational resources](#) — Resources for students about Emily Dickinson provided by the Dickinson museum (situated in her old house). (<https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/node/407>)
- [The Poem in Animation](#) — A somewhat spooky animated version of the poem, complete with reading. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzK0mQER28A>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- [Because I could not stop for Death —](#)
- [Hope is the thing with feathers](#)
- [I felt a Funeral, in my Brain](#)
- [I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -](#)
- [I'm Nobody! Who are you?](#)
- [Much Madness is divinest Sense -](#)
- [Success is counted sweetest](#)
- [This is my letter to the world](#)



HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*As imperceptibly as grief*." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 23 Jan 2019. Web. 22 Nov 2019.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*As imperceptibly as grief*." LitCharts LLC, January 23, 2019. Retrieved November 22, 2019.
<https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/emily-dickinson/as-imperceptibly-as-grief>.