I started Early — Took my Dog —

POEM TEXT

I started Early – Took my Dog –
And visited the Sea –
The Mermaids in the Basement
Came out to look at me –

And Frigates – in the Upper Floor
Extended Hempen Hands –
Presuming Me to be a Mouse –
Aground – opon the Sands –

But no Man moved Me – till the Tide
Went past my simple Shoe –
And past my Apron – and my Belt
And past my Boddice – too –

And made as He would eat me up –
As wholly as a Dew
Opon a Dandelion's Sleeve –
And then – I started – too –

And He – He followed – close behind –
I felt His Silver Heel
Opon my Ancle – Then My Shoes
Would overflow with Pearl –

Until We met the Solid Town –
No One He seemed to know –
And bowing – with a Mighty look –
At me – The Sea withdrew –

SUMMARY

The speaker set out early in the morning to walk her dog along the shore. There, she looked out at the water and saw mermaids rising from the depths of the sea to stare back at her.

The speaker also saw large warships on the water's surface. The ropes hanging off the sides of these ships looked like hands reaching out to her, as if the speaker were a mouse stranded on the shore and the ropes wanted to lift her up and take her away.

No man had ever filled the speaker with such intense feelings until the ocean slowly enveloped her, creeping past her feet, sliding up past her dress, past her waist, and beyond her undergarments.

The water surrounded the speaker's body as if it wanted to devour her, or completely cover her like the fine mist that coats the stem of a dandelion. The speaker startled to attention with a jolt.

The sea followed the speaker as she rushed away from the waterline, and she felt the tempting waters still grasping at her legs as her shoes sloshed with white froth.

The sea continued to follow the speaker until she reached the firm ground of a nearby town, which was unfamiliar to the sea. The water held back for a moment, cast the speaker a long and powerful glance, and then left her alone.

THEMES

ADVENTURE, FREEDOM, AND THE ALLURE OF THE UNKNOWN

On the most basic level, the poem is about temptation, desire, and adventure. To the speaker, the deep, powerful ocean waters represent a chance for a new experience or, perhaps, for some sort of escape from her life on land. She feels both pulled towards and frightened of the sea, only momentarily giving into her desire to feels its embrace—to experience the total freedom it offers—before scurrying away towards "the Solid Town" (figuratively, to more secure, familiar footing).

What exactly the sea represents here is up for debate. Maybe it's a stand-in for the depths of the speaker's mind, and she fears fully diving into her own thoughts and imagination—which she keeps in check, closely hemmed in, when not strolling by the water. Perhaps it suggests that the speaker momentarily wishes to break free from the societal expectations of that "Solid Town," but quickly wishes to return to the structure and comfort of a world she knows.

What's important to grasp is how the poem balances the speaker's many emotions surrounding the pull of her desire for adventure and freedom, and how these conflict with the safety and security of familiar life on land. In other words, the poem suggests that stepping away from the structure of society is both exhilarating and terrifying.

Indeed, the water seems so alluring to the speaker because it is so *foreign*, so unknown. It's filled with magical mermaids (who themselves find the speaker to be strange, evidenced by the fact that they stare right back at her). The large ships on the surface of the water feel friendly, their metaphorical "Hempen Hands" (i.e., their ropes) seeming to reach out to the speaker

and help her take her first timid steps towards a new and exciting adventure.

The speaker, for her part, is timid and inexperienced. She's "a Mouse / Aground — opon the Sands," implying that she has never before strayed too far from the world she knows. To her, the sea seems to ultimately represent a unique kind of freedom from the rules and expectations of society, and a chance to become someone entirely new. Soon enough, though, she scurries back to town, where the sea doesn't "know" anyone. The humdrum expectations of daily life are antithetical to the adventure and freedom offered by the sea, the poem suggests, even as it implies that such freedom can be utterly overwhelming.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

SEXUAL AWAKENING AND DESIRE

While on a general level the poem can be thought of as being about the broad desire for adventure and freedom, it's impossible to discuss the poem without noting its strong sexual undertones. In fact, many readers interpret the poem as being specifically about a sexual experience or awakening of some sort.

Note that the sea in the poem is personified as a man, and that the speaker at first finds him alluring. The speaker also implies that she is sexually inexperienced and has never been touched by a man in the way the ocean eventually touches her—making this moment new and unfamiliar. Yet despite her initial interest in this experience, the speaker soon feels threatened when it seems like the ocean is about to "eat [her] up," at which point she tries to end the encounter by retreating to a nearby town. In this way, the poem spotlights the excitement of sexual possibility while also exploring the speaker's hesitancy to fully give herself over to this kind of experience.

The speaker's interest in seeking out a sexual encounter is made evident by her depiction of the ocean as a welcoming, pleasing sight. When she walks her dog to the shore and stares out at the water, she sees mermaids looking back at her. Since mermaids are mythical creatures known for their extraordinary beauty, this implies that the ocean looks especially appealing to the speaker. The fact that the mermaids gaze at her suggests that she, too, is desirable—or at least that she *feels* desirable at this moment, which is yet another sign that she's undergoing some kind of sexual awakening.

Similarly, the speaker observes large boats (called "frigates") and feels as if the ropes hanging off their decks are reaching out to her, urging her to grab them so that she can come aboard. In these ways, the ocean seems welcoming and tempting, full of beauty and promise. This, in turn, frames the ocean in a vaguely sexualized way, implying that the speaker's interest in the sea has to do with her desire to have a sexual experience.

But it soon turns out that the speaker *isn't* ready to welcome a full-on sexual awakening, or at least not the one she ends up having with the ocean. Indeed, when it seems as if the ocean is about to overwhelm her with its—or, rather, *his*—embrace, she attempts to break free by walking back to town. What this means from a metaphorical standpoint isn't very clear; the only thing readers know for sure is that the speaker has apparently decided she *doesn't* want to act on her sexual desires.

One interpretation of this is that surrendering herself to passion feels like a frightening loss of control. Another possible interpretation is that women in 19th century society aren't encouraged to pursue their sexual desires (a reading supported by the fact that the ocean only stops following the speaker once she reaches the town, which likely represents society's disapproval of overt female sexuality). A third possible analysis is that the speaker actually *does* go through with her sexual awakening and then, after it's over, no longer has any need for her lover.

Because these interpretations contradict one another, though, the only thing that remains unquestionable is the speaker's initial attraction to the ocean and, more importantly, to the possibility of a sexual awakening. What actually *happens* during the subsequent sexual awakening remains confusingly unclear, and this is perhaps in keeping with the speaker's own feelings about her sexuality.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

I started Early – Took my Dog –
And visited the Sea –

The poem starts out very simply, as the speaker begins to tell a story about how she left home early one morning and walked her dog to the seashore. There is nothing particularly striking about this opening, at least not in terms of the subject. Indeed, the speaker's words seem straightforward and self-evident, preparing readers for what seems like it will be a simple story about a casual morning walk to the ocean.

However, the *way* that the speaker expresses herself isn't all that straightforward. As is the case in many of Emily Dickinson's poems, dashes divide clauses from one another. In this case, these dashes create a prominent caesura in the middle of the first line, as well as a strong end-stop at the ends

of both the first and second lines.

These interruptions give the poem a unique sound, making the speaker appear hesitant, unsure, or disjointed, as if what she's saying isn't quite as straightforward as it might otherwise seem. This, in turn, subtly encourages readers to pay close attention to what will follow these opening lines, as the halting rhythm makes this journey to the sea seem fraught with emotion. In this way, the speaker's unique pacing foreshadows the fact that the poem is actually about much more than an innocent, unassuming walk to the ocean!

These first two lines also establish the poem's use of common meter. This which is a meter in which the lines alternate between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. A line written in iambic tetrameter has four iambs, or metrical feet containing an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). A line written in iambic trimeter, on the other hand, only contains *three* iambs. Here's a look at the full meter of lines 1 and 2:

I start- | ed Ear | ly – | Took | my Dog –
And vis- | ited | the Sea –

This meter gives the lines a musical and satisfying sound that often recalls religious hymns. In this way, the speaker's tone in these opening lines seems lofty and important even though she's talking about the simple act of walking her dog. Consequently, readers sense yet again that there must be something more significant lurking beneath the surface of these words.

LINES 3-4

The Mermaids in the Basement
Came out to look at me –

The poem becomes more abstract and metaphorical in lines 3 and 4, as the speaker looks out at the ocean and sees mermaids coming up to the surface to stare back at her. This signals an abrupt change, as the poem has gone from a straightforward description of a morning walk to a fantastical description of mythical creatures in the ocean—all within the course of a single stanza!

Mermaids are mythical creatures, meaning the speaker's account of her morning walk has left the realm of the ordinary. Mermaids are usually considered beautiful, and the fact that the speaker sees mermaids in the water suggests that she views the sea as majestic and alluring. The appearance of mermaids in the poem associates the ocean with some kind of mystical, beautiful lifestyle or existence—a lifestyle or existence that the speaker has perhaps never experienced herself.

To go along with this image of the mermaids, the speaker refers metaphorically to the lower depths of the sea as a basement, as if the ocean were a house. This suggests that the speaker is perhaps more acquainted with the domestic setting of a house than with the intriguing yet unfamiliar allure of the ocean. Furthermore, the fact that the mermaids specifically come to the surface to look at the speaker implies that she feels pulled toward the ocean, as if these enticing creatures are interested in her and want to encourage her to venture beyond the confines of her life onshore.

This, in turn, has certain sexual implications, since the speaker feels like *she* is the focus of the alluring mermaids. In this way, she becomes the *subject* of their desire, an idea implied by the simple fact that the mermaids go out of their way to leave their habitat in the deep water in order to observe the speaker.

The use of consonance in these two lines implies that the speaker enjoys the mermaids' attention, since the repetition of the /m/ sound creates a pleasing sonic quality, one that mimics a murmur of desire or, at the very least, satisfaction:

The Mermaids in the Basement
Came out to look at me –

This repeated /m/ sound has a lulling effect that is also quite musical, inviting readers to luxuriate in the overall feeling of these two lines. What's more, the assonant repetition of the long /ay/ sound adds to this feeling:

The Mermaids in the Basement
Came out to look at me –

This sound enhances the musical quality of the lines, adding to the consonant /m/ and its pleasing effect. In turn, the speaker underscores the poem's sexual overtones without explicitly drawing attention to the fact that these lines deal with sexuality—a dynamic that runs throughout the poem and becomes increasingly pronounced in the coming stanzas.

LINES 5-8

And Frigates – in the Upper Floor
Extended Hempen Hands –
Presuming Me to be a Mouse –
Aground – opon the Sands –

Continuing her metaphor of the ocean as a house, the speaker suggests that frigates—which are large warships—are in the "upper floor" of the ocean. Moreover, the speaker personifies these ships while depicting the ropes extending off the sides of these boats, calling them "Hempen Hands" and suggesting that they are reaching out to her. (Hemp is a kind of rough, fibrous material.) Once again, then, readers see that "I started Early – Took my Dog –" is not a straightforward poem about a boring morning walk, but a poem in which common, everyday things (like boats) are personified and become unfamiliar and alluring.

The fact that these "Hempen Hands" are actively reaching toward the speaker is worth noting, because it aligns with the idea that the speaker feels as if the ocean is inviting her to step

beyond the confines of her life onshore. Of course, there are sexual implications here, since the speaker has already hinted at her romantic desires by focusing on the enticing mermaids in the first stanza. That even the warships on the horizon seem to beckon her only emphasizes the extent to which she feels attracted to the sea.

The speaker clarifies this attraction in lines 7 and 8 by suggesting that the frigates reaching out to her see her as a small mouse stranded on shore. This metaphor depicts the speaker as somewhat helpless, as if she depends upon the ships to give her the (most likely sexual) experience for which she yearns. However, there is also a double-meaning at play in this stanza, since a frigate is also a kind of bird that flies over the sea and feeds off of fish or other small animals.

With this in mind, the speaker underhandedly implies that there might be a small amount of *danger* associated with giving herself over to her desires. Although she wants to indulge her desire to venture beyond the shore, she recognizes that this involves a certain kind of risk. At this point in the poem, though, what this risk actually *is* remains unclear, but it's helpful to keep this dynamic in mind, since it resurfaces later on.

Despite this subtle acknowledgment of danger, these lines are still musical in a way that conveys the speaker's excitement and her fondness of the ocean. For example the alliteration of the /f/ sound in line 5 creates a pleasing softness: "And Frigates – in the Upper Floor." The /h/ sound in line 6 creates a similar effect with the phrase "Hempen Hands." The capitalization of the letter H in this phrase further emphasizes the alliteration. The /m/ sound also alliterates in line 7 between the words "Me" and "Mouse," linking the speaker to this image of timidness

All in all, alliteration and consonance increase the musicality of this stanza and, therefore, help the speaker convey the excitement and pleasure she feels while looking out at the ocean. Indeed, this pleasing sonic quality is also reinforced by the poem's rhyme scheme, as readers will perhaps have noticed by now that the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme: ABCB. This is a common rhyme scheme for a ballad stanza.

LINES 9-12

But no Man moved Me – till the Tide
Went past my simple Shoe –
And past my Apron – and my Belt
And past my Boddice – too –

The poem becomes more explicitly sexual at the beginning of the third stanza. Here, the speaker focuses on her previous experiences with men and then personifies the ocean itself as a man. Until now, the sexual undertones of the poem have been rather subtle, but the speaker's consideration of her sexual history with other men makes it difficult to ignore what this poem is really about: sexual passion, experience, and awakening.

It's worth stopping to reflect upon what the speaker says in lines 9 and 10. She begins by saying that a man has never "moved" her. One interpretation of this is that the speaker has never been "moved" to sexual pleasure by a man. Another interpretation is that a man has never swept her up in a physical embrace. Regardless of the specific meaning of this rather ambiguous phrase, it's clear that the speaker is talking about some kind of sexual activity, especially since the first two stanzas suggest that the speaker yearns for the sea. Furthermore, the speaker continues in the third stanza to say that the ocean does more to her than a man ever has, sliding past her feet and working its way up her body.

If readers were previously unconvinced that this poem is about a sexual encounter, it becomes all but undeniable when the speaker says that the ocean moves up and under her belt and, more importantly, her bodice, which is a kind of undergarment that women in the 19th century wore on their torsos. As a result, the speaker presents an image of the sea fully embracing her and going beyond even the most intimate articles of clothing on her body.

Adding even more significance to this moment, the speaker uses anaphora to call attention to the word "past," clearly wanting to underscore the idea that the sea is venturing into intimate territory. Indeed, line 10 begins with the phrase "went past," and then lines 11 and 12 both begin with the phrase "and past." This creates a feeling of progression and escalation, ultimately accentuating the ocean's bold embrace of the speaker's body. And since the speaker has already noted that a man has never touched her like this, the repetition of the word "past" reminds readers that the speaker is undergoing a completely *new* sexual experience. This, in turn, means that the speaker is going through not only a sexual encounter, but a sexual *awakening*.

The speaker seems to enjoy this awakening, as evidenced by the fact that this stanza is packed with poetic devices that make it sound pleasing. There is, for starters, quite a bit of alliteration, which can be found in line 9 with the repetition of the /m/ sound *and* the repetition of the /t/ sound:

> But no Man moved Me – till the Tide

The next three lines are also very sibilant, especially if readers count the /sh/ and /z/ sounds as sibilant (along with the standard /s/ sound):

> Went past my simple Shoe –
> And past my Apron – and my Belt
> And past my Boddice – too –

The soft hissing sound that this sibilance creates reflects the noise that the ocean makes as it breaks on the shore. This is quite fitting, since this is what the ocean is doing to the speaker

herself as it envelops her body. On the whole, though, the use of both sibilance and alliteration works to enhance the pleasing and soothing sound of this stanza, ultimately illustrating the speaker's state of mind in this moment of newfound sexual pleasure.

LINES 13-15

And made as He would eat me up –
As wholly as a Dew
Opon a Dandelion's Sleeve –

These lines build upon the speaker's personification of the ocean and what it's like to experience its sexual embrace. In line 13, she suggests that it seems as if the ocean is about to "eat [her] up." Although the previous stanza framed this sexual encounter as exciting and pleasing, the speaker now implies that she has lost control over the situation—after all, the ocean seems like it's going to completely consume her.

To describe just how surrounded she feels by the ocean, the speaker uses a metaphor in which she is a dandelion and the ocean is a mist that has settled around her entire stem. This is a sexually-charged metaphor, since flowers are often used to represent sexual awakenings. What's more, dandelions are known to spread their seeds widely on the wind. Accordingly, this mention of dandelions is filled with sexual connotations, including the idea that the speaker could, perhaps, become pregnant from this encounter.

In turn, readers will perhaps notice that the speaker has now identified two worries about her sexual embrace with the ocean:

1. That she has lost control over the situation and might find herself completely overwhelmed by the ocean;
2. And that the water's embrace could have potentially complicated consequences (like pregnancy). What began as an exciting new experience, then, has now become frightening.

These lines include a notable instance of assonance, as the long /ee/ sound repeats throughout:

And made as H**e** would **ea**t m**e** up –
As wholl**y** as a Dew
Opon a Dandelion's Sl**ee**ve

This assonance is also surrounded by strong, blunt instances of consonance. Note the /d/ and /p/ sounds in words like "ma**d**e," "wou**l**d," "u**p**," "**D**ew," "O**p**on," and "**D**an**d**elion." Unlike the other moments of assonance or consonance in the poem, these loud sounds blend together in a somewhat harsh way—or, at least, they don't create the same kind of pleasing, soothing sound that exists in the sections of the poem in which the speaker is excited by the ocean's embrace. In this way, readers sense that this encounter has turned into something undesirable or ominous, though it's not exactly clear *why* this is the case.

Despite the fact that the circumstances of this experience seem to have changed, it's worth noting that the rhythm of these three lines adheres perfectly to the poem's use of common meter. Indeed, these lines alternate between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter.

More specifically, lines 13 and 15 are written in iambic tetrameter, meaning that they contain four iambs, or four feet that include an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (four da-DUMs). Line 14, on the other hand, is in iambic trimeter, meaning that it contains just *three* iambs (three da-DUMs). That this moment of anxiety remains so perfectly aligned with the poem's meter—without any variation to the rhythm—is interesting, since the speaker's tone has changed from one of excitement and pleasure to one of caution and hesitancy. And yet, the rhythm of the poem remains consistent.

LINES 16-17

And then – I started – too –
And He – He followed – close behind –

This is perhaps the poem's most ambiguous moment. The speaker has just explained that it feels like the ocean is about to completely consume her, and—for the first time—it seems as if she is overwhelmed by this sexual encounter. Then, in line 16, she says that she "started," a word that is difficult to define with certainty in this context.

The most straightforward interpretation is that the speaker suddenly turns around and walks away from the ocean. This reading is supported by line 17's assertion that the ocean follows the speaker, and it also aligns with the speaker's first use of the word "started" in line 1, when she uses it to describe the physical act of leaving.

However, it's not all that clear *why* the speaker would abruptly turn around in the middle of her sexual encounter with the ocean. Because the poem focuses mainly on the speaker's actions and not on her thoughts or emotions, readers are left to their own devices and intuition when it comes to interpreting this moment.

Having said that, the speaker's decision to suddenly halt her own sexual awakening could have to do with the fact that the ocean now seems as if it might "eat [her] up." To that end, it's possible that the speaker feels threatened by the intensity of this encounter and, because of this, wants to retreat to safety.

In a similar regard, the word "started" could refer not just to the speaker's literal movement away from the ocean, but to her sense of alarm in response to the sea's overpowering embrace. "Started" doesn't mean "began," but rather refers to making a sudden jolt or movement—typically out of surprise or alarm.

According to this interpretation, the speaker becomes startled

or surprised by the ocean's strength, suddenly coming to her senses and realizing that she actually *doesn't* want to go through with this sexual awakening. Consequently, this moment becomes a turning point, one in which the speaker feels shocked and—in response to this shock—tries to put an end to her interaction with the ocean.

Either of these readings are perfectly valid, but there is yet another possible way of interpreting what happens in these lines. Indeed, one might argue that the word "started" is a euphemistic way of saying that the speaker has an orgasm. This would suggest that the speaker *doesn't* stop her sexual awakening from playing out, but actually fully experiences it, derives pleasure from it, and then turns to leave the ocean because she has gotten what she wanted—namely, sexual satisfaction.

One interesting thing about this reading is that it changes the meaning of the phrase "And He – He followed – close behind," ultimately implying that the ocean reaches sexual completion shortly after the speaker. What's more, the image of the ocean literally following the speaker changes the notion that it (the ocean) is the one that holds all the power in this relationship—in fact, if readers believe that the speaker orgasms and then tries to leave the ocean behind, the entire power dynamic laid out in the previous stanzas shifts, as her retreat implies that she only wanted to use the ocean for her own sexual awakening. In the aftermath of this awakening, it seems, she has little use for the ocean, though the ocean itself apparently still wants to be with her.

Regardless of how one interprets the word "started," it's clear that the poem encourages readers to dwell on this moment. This is made evident by the fact that lines 16 and 17 are the only ones in the entire poem to contain not just one, but *two* caesuras per line. These caesuras surround the phrase "I started" and "He followed," calling attention to these ambiguous statements and inviting readers to thoroughly consider their implications, which are wide-ranging and possibly even—as outlined above—contradictory.

LINES 18-20

I felt His Silver Heel
Opon my Ancle – Then My Shoes
Would overflow with Pearl –

As the speaker walks away, she feels the ocean lapping at her feet. Although she suggests in line 17 that the ocean follows her "close behind," it now seems as if the water has caught up with her, since its heel syncs up with the speaker's footsteps. At this moment, then, the personified ocean seems to move with the speaker as if the two were one person, as its foamy water envelops her ankle and pours through her shoes. Once again, then, the ocean emerges as a force that might completely consume the speaker, this time seeming as if it will become one with her.

Like many other sections of the poem, these lines contain an ambiguous mixture of fear and appreciation of the ocean. The speaker's use of the word "would" suggests that she is imagining what it would be like if the ocean were to completely overtake her, thinking of this scenario in hypothetical terms that suggest a certain hesitancy to actually let this happen. And yet, it seems that this has *already* happened—after all, she has already felt the ocean's "silver heel" on her ankle, thereby suggesting that they are walking in sync with one another.

Setting this ambiguity aside, though, it's also worth noting that the speaker seems to find beauty in the idea of the ocean overtaking her, since she imagines her shoes overflowing with pearl, a beautiful material hidden inside mollusks and other shelled creatures. This, then, seems like a metaphor for the beauty that the speaker imagines might pour out of her own being if she fully opened herself up to the ocean. If she lets the ocean consume her, she thinks, something beautiful—like pearl—might emerge from within her own body.

Mimicking the sound of the hissing ocean, these lines contain sibilance. This is especially noticeable if readers expand their definition of sibilance to include not just the /s/ sound, but also the /z/, /f/, /sh/, and /th/ sounds (which many people *do* count as sibilant):

I felt His Silver Heel
Opon my Ancle – Then My Shoes

In addition to this hissing sibilance, the speaker also uses alliteration in line 18, repeating the /h/ sound in the words "His" and "Heel." This adds yet another soft sound, helping the speaker not only recreate the noise of the fizzling ocean all around her, but also a sound that, in its breathiness, evokes the sexual pleasure she has just experienced.

LINES 21-24

Until We met the Solid Town –
No One He seemed to know –
And bowing – with a Mighty look –
At me – The Sea withdrew –

In the poem's final stanza, the speaker escapes the ocean. She manages to do this by finally reaching the nearby town, which is unfamiliar to the ocean. The implication here is that the ocean is intimidated by the town, though it's never made explicitly clear why this is the case.

One reasonable interpretation of the ocean's eventual retreat is that the town represents the strict way that society limits or frowns upon sexuality and, perhaps more importantly, on open displays of sexual intimacy. This dynamic seems especially relevant if readers consider the fact that "I started Early – Took my Dog –" was composed sometime in the early 1860s, long before any kind of sexual revolutions took place.

To add to this dynamic, it's worth keeping in mind that the

speaker is a woman of the 19th-century society, making it quite likely that she is subject to especially restrictive views when it comes to sex and sexuality. Indeed, 1800s society did not celebrate female sexuality, especially the kind with which this poem concerns itself, since the poem explores the topic of sex in terms of pleasure, freedom, and possibility, not in terms of reproduction or other patriarchal approaches.

Accordingly, it makes sense to see the town as a representation of the ways in which society limits the speaker's sexuality. In fact, it's even possible that society's domineering influence is the reason that the speaker tried to leave the ocean in the middle of her sexual awakening in the first place (if, of course, it's true that she cut off the encounter, though, as previously discussed, it's arguable that she reached sexual completion before leaving). If she did indeed decide to leave mid-sexual experience, this would suggest that the speaker feels as if she must adhere to her society's narrow-minded approach to sex, despite her desire to explore her sexuality.

This, however, is only one interpretation, and the poem doesn't provide quite enough information about the speaker's thoughts or emotions to say with any certainty why she retreats to the town. What *is* clear, though, is that the ocean doesn't want to leave the speaker alone. In the end, though, it is forced to go its own way upon reaching the town.

On a more technical level, it's worth noting that the assonant long /ee/ sound repeats several times throughout these lines:

> Until We met the Solid Town –
> No One He seemed to know –
> And bowing – with a Mighty look –
> At me – The Sea withdrew –

This assonance knits the lines together, giving them a feeling of unity they might otherwise lack. Indeed, the poem's ABCB rhyme scheme falters somewhat in this stanza, since the words "know" and "withdrew" hardly even qualify as slant rhymes. As if to make up for this, the /ee/ sound echoes itself throughout the stanza, even creating a strong internal rhyme in the final line between the words "me" and "Sea." This, in turn, allows the speaker to end the poem with the subtle suggestion that she and the ocean are still connected in certain ways even though they have separated from one another, thereby implying that this experience will have a lasting influence on her.

SYMBOLS

THE DOG

Because the speaker's dog appears at the beginning of the poem but is never mentioned again, one could argue that the dog itself represents the speaker's loss of innocence. In the opening of the poem, the speaker goes out of her way to mention this dog, making it seem as if the entire poem will be about walking the dog along the shore. However, the importance of the dog fades from the poem as soon as the speaker gets caught up in talking about the alluring ocean. Then, when the speaker withdraws from the sexual encounter she has with the ocean, she walks back to town but never says whether or not her dog is still with her. Given that her interaction with the ocean constitutes a sexual awakening, then, the dog's apparent disappearance becomes a symbol of how the speaker's life has changed: the innocent things that mattered to her earlier that day (like dog ownership or friendly companionship) no longer seem significant.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Took my Dog –"

THE SEA

The sea is clearly symbolic in the poem, and can be interpreted in a few different ways. Mostly broadly, it seems to represent desire and freedom, two things that appear to be missing from the speaker's life on land. As such, it is a place that seems foreign to the speaker, and is all the more alluring for its unfamiliarity. The speaker tries to describe the sea using more familiar language of domestic life—calling its various depths the "Basement" and "Upper Floor"—but it becomes clear soon enough that the sea is something wholly different from the "Solid Town" the speaker flees to at the end of the poem.

Whereas the land is firm and solid, water flows unobstructed. Beautiful mermaids gaze at the speaker as if *she* were the strange and/or beautiful one, and even the warships on the water seem inviting. As such, the speaker is allured by the sea—and, as such, by its promise of freedom, excitement, and adventure. Perhaps, to her, it represents an escape from the boredom or social norms of her daily life.

Of course, the sea is also connected to sexuality. The speaker personifies it as a man, and describes the rising tide as suggestively moving past her shoes, clothing, and undergarments. The speaker seems to enjoy this at first, with being devoured by the sea coming to symbolize the speaker giving in to her desires—sexual or otherwise.

In the end, the sea is a place filled with beauty but also danger; the speaker is "moved" by its powerful embrace yet also fears being engulfed, of drowning, and retreats back to solid ground. This reflects the way that freedom and desire may be exhilarating but also scary and overwhelming.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-6
- Lines 9-13
- Lines 17-24

THE SOLID TOWN

If the sea in the poem represents freedom, temptation, and desire (especially sexual desire), then the "Solid Town" mentioned in line 21 effectively symbolizes the opposite: safe, regular, familiar life—and, perhaps, the norms and responsibilities the speaker faces when not wandering along the shore. The speaker's return to the town at the end of the poem is a return to a world that is more familiar to her. The adjective "Solid" suggests she feels steadier, more secure in this town than she does in the slippery water that threatens to consume her. At the same time, though, it suggests a rejection of the temptation of the water—of freedom and of sex.

The town thus might also represent the restrictive society in which the speaker lives. Dickinson was writing in the 1800s, when women were expected to be chaste and pure. The kind of sexual desire she seems to reference throughout the poem thus would have no place in town. The water doesn't even "know" anyone in town, implying that the two have nothing in common, no connection.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 21:** "the Solid Town"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration calls attention to certain words and contributes to the poem's overall musicality. This use of alliteration also interacts with the poem's meter, since it often increases the bouncy feeling that already exists because of the speaker's use of iambs, which are metrical feet that include an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM).

This is clear in line 6, as the /h/ sound repeats twice in quick succession: "Extended Hempen Hands." In and of itself, this repetition of the /h/ sound is satisfying. Its gentle sound might urge readers to adopt the positive attitude that the speaker has toward the warships and their ropes, since she feels like these ropes are reaching out and beckoning to her in an alluring way. But this instance of alliteration also sounds appealing because it enhances the iambic bounce of the line, subtly carving out the line's last two stressed syllables ("Hempen Hands").

Elsewhere, alliteration is even more apparent, as is the case in line 9 with the repetition of both the /m/ and /t/ sounds:

> But no Man moved Me – till the Tide

This use of alliteration is especially noteworthy because this line is arguably the most important one in the entire poem, considering that it is the moment in which the speaker's desirous feelings for the ocean become explicitly sexual. In this way, alliteration encourages readers to slow down and spend more time with the words in this important line. What's more, the repetition of the /m/ and /t/ sounds accentuate the poem's musicality, ultimately reflecting the speaker's pleasure in the midst of her sexual awakening.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Frigates," "Floor"
- **Line 6:** "Hempen," "Hands"
- **Line 7:** "Me," "Mouse"
- **Line 9:** "Man," "moved," "Me," "till," "Tide"
- **Line 11:** "Belt"
- **Line 12:** "Boddice"
- **Line 13:** "He"
- **Line 14:** "wholly," "Dew"
- **Line 15:** "Dandelion's," "Sleeve"
- **Line 16:** "started"
- **Line 17:** "He," "He," "followed"
- **Line 18:** "felt," "Heel"
- **Line 20:** "Would," "with"
- **Line 22:** "No," "know"
- **Line 23:** "Mighty"
- **Line 24:** "me"

ANAPHORA

The speaker uses anaphora in the third stanza when describing the way that the ocean gradually envelops her body. To do this, she repeats two different formulations of the phrase "past my," beginning by saying, "Went past my," and then going on to repeat, "And past my" at the beginning of the next two lines. The effect of this anaphora is quite noticeable, and is even observable on a visual level, as the three iterations of "past my" are stacked one on top of the other:

> Went past my simple Shoe –
> And past my Apron – and my Belt
> And past my Boddice – too –

To that end, this moment also makes use of polysyndeton, as the speaker repeats the word "And" at the beginning of lines 11, 12, and 13. In combination with the use of anaphora, this heightens the drama and intensity that comes along with the ocean's progression up the speaker's body. At first, the ocean only swirls around the speaker's feet, but then it creeps beyond the apron on her dress, then beyond her waistline, and finally past her bodice, which is an undergarment women wore in the

19th century on their torsos.

The unrelenting repetition of the words "and" and "past" underscores the significance of this moment, allowing readers to recognize the speaker's feeling of venturing into something new—or, more specifically, venturing into new sexual territories. Without these forms of repetition, it seems, readers might not sense just how monumental this moment is, as the speaker's sexual awakening overtakes her in a gradual but determined way.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "Went past my"
- **Line 11:** "And past my"
- **Line 12:** "And past my"
- **Line 13:** "And"

ASSONANCE

The assonance in this poem often gives the lines a sing-song quality that ultimately aligns with the fact that "I started Early – Took my Dog –" is a ballad, a poetic form often set to music. Right away, the assonance comes to the forefront of the poem, as the long /ee/ and /ay/ sounds work alongside each other in the first stanza:

> I started Early – Took my Dog –
> And visited the Sea –
> The Mermaids in the Basement
> Came out to look at me –

The way that these sounds weave through this stanza enhances the musicality of the poem, giving it the pleasing and somewhat lofty sound of a religious hymn (a form often associated with the ballad). Part of this effect has to do with the small moments of rhyme that the assonance creates. Indeed, an internal rhyme occurs between the words "Mermaids" and "Basement," knitting the third line together satisfyingly.

Similarly, the /oo/ sound that appears in line 9 prepares readers for the end rhyme that occurs between lines 10 and 11:

> But no Man moved Me – till the Tide
> Went past my simple Shoe
> And past my Apron – and my Belt
> And past my Boddice – too –

It is in these subtle but effective ways that the speaker uses assonance to complement the musical qualities of the poem that already exist on their own. To that end, the speaker creates a unified, almost reverent sound simply by putting assonance to work and allowing it to accentuate the rhyme scheme and the poem's other notable sonic characteristics.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Early"
- **Line 2:** "Sea"
- **Line 3:** "Mermaids," "Basement"
- **Line 4:** "Came," "me"
- **Line 6:** "Extended," "Hempen"
- **Line 7:** "Me," "be"
- **Line 8:** "Sands"
- **Line 9:** "Man," "moved"
- **Line 10:** "Shoe"
- **Line 12:** "too"
- **Line 13:** "He," "eat," "me"
- **Line 14:** "wholly," "Dew"
- **Line 15:** "Sleeve"
- **Line 16:** "too"
- **Line 17:** "He," "He," "followed," "close"
- **Line 18:** "His," "Silver," "Heel"
- **Line 21:** "We"
- **Line 22:** "No," "He," "seemed," "know"
- **Line 23:** "Mighty"
- **Line 24:** "me," "Sea"

CAESURA

Emily Dickinson famously used dashes quite often in her poetry, but the meaning of these dashes isn't always clear. In fact, readers debate whether the dashes are meant to *connect* certain elements of a line or *isolate* them. One interpretation, however, is that they create pauses, or caesuras, whenever they appear. This makes sense, since the dashes visually disrupt the flow of a line and, at least in this poem, frequently divide clauses from one another.

This is most apparent in line 16, when the speaker pauses before and after delivering the phrase "I started":

> And then – || I started – || too –

These caesuras create small moments of hesitancy, thereby hinting that the speaker is sheepish about delivering this phrase. This aligns with the interpretation that the phrase "I started" refers not to the speaker's surprise or to her sudden decision to leave the ocean, but to the possibility that she has just had an orgasm. At the same time, though, the hesitancy conveyed by the caesuras would also go along with the idea that she is simply surprised or has undergone a sudden realization, as if she has abruptly come to her senses and realized that she doesn't actually want to continue her sexual encounter with the ocean. Either way, these caesuras heighten the drama inherent to this important moment.

On the other hand, though, it's worth acknowledging that some dashes that appear in the middle of a given line might not actually create very prominent caesuras. This, of course,

depends upon how readers hear the overall pace of the poem, but there is certainly a valid argument to be made that dashes like the one in line 19 ("Opon my Ancle – Then My Shoes") don't build much of a pause. In the end, though, this is a subjective matter, and readers must ultimately decide for themselves how they think the idiosyncratic dashes in "I started Early – Took my Dog –" function.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Early – Took"
- **Line 5:** "Frigates – in"
- **Line 8:** "Aground – opon"
- **Line 9:** "Me – till"
- **Line 11:** "Apron – and"
- **Line 12:** "Boddice – too"
- **Line 16:** "then – I," "started – too"
- **Line 17:** "He – He," "followed – close"
- **Line 19:** "Ancle – Then"
- **Line 23:** "bowing – with"
- **Line 24:** " me – The"

CONSONANCE

"I started Early – Took my Dog –" is full of consonance, which adds a feeling of contour or shape to the poem. This is most evident in the third stanza, in which almost every word features a repetition of a consonant sound, since the stanza contains so many. In particular, the /m/, /t/, /s/, /p/ and /n/ sounds are quite clear:

> But no Man moved Me – Till the Tide
> Went past my simple Shoe –
> And past my Apron – and my Belt
> And past my Boddice – too –

Readers will perhaps notice in passages like this that some consonant sounds combine with alliteration, making alliterative moments even *more* noticeable. This is the case in the line "But no Man moved Me – Till the Tide," as the /t/ sound in the word "But" prepares readers for its recurrence in the alliterative phrase "Till the Tide."

It's also significant that the most densely packed instance of alliteration comes in this (the third) stanza, when the speaker describes the ocean sliding up her body and fully embracing her. That the words in this portion of the poem are so musically consonant is no mistake, since this ultimately helps the speaker portray her feelings of sexual pleasure and excitement. In comparison, the fifth stanza, which focuses on the speaker's retreat from the ocean, is one of the *least* consonant stanzas in the entire poem. In this way, it becomes clear that one of the reasons the speaker uses consonance is to call attention to her feelings of pleasure—feelings that are mostly absent from the poem after she cuts off her sexual embrace with the ocean.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "started," "Early," "Took"
- **Line 2:** "visited"
- **Line 3:** "Mermaids," "Basement"
- **Line 4:** "Came," "me"
- **Line 5:** "Frigates," "Upper," "Floor"
- **Line 6:** "Hempen," "Hands"
- **Line 7:** "Presuming," "Me," "Mouse"
- **Line 8:** "Aground," "opon," "Sands"
- **Line 9:** "But," "no," "Man," "moved," "Me," "till," "Tide"
- **Line 10:** "Went," "past," "my," "simple"
- **Line 11:** "And," "past," "my," "Apron," "and," "my," "Belt"
- **Line 12:** "And," "past," "my," "Boddice," "too"
- **Line 13:** "up"
- **Line 14:** "wholly," "Dew"
- **Line 15:** "Opon," "Dandelion's," "Sleeve"
- **Line 16:** "started," "too"
- **Line 17:** "followed," "close"
- **Line 18:** "felt," "Silver," "Heel"
- **Line 19:** "Ancle"
- **Line 20:** "overflow," "Pearl"
- **Line 21:** "Until," "met," "Solid," "Town"
- **Line 22:** "No," "One," "seemed," "know"
- **Line 23:** "bowing," "with," "Mighty"
- **Line 24:** "me"

METAPHOR

The poem is extremely metaphorical. In fact, the only lines that can be taken at face value or read in a literal way are the first two, since they merely set up the premise of the poem (namely, that the speaker goes for a walk to the ocean with her dog in the morning). Beyond that, though, almost every assertion the speaker makes is in some way figurative, and she even uses an extended metaphor to depict her sexual encounter with the ocean.

To begin, though, the speaker uses smaller metaphors to describe what it's like to look out at the sea. For instance, she suggests that the mermaids she sees have emerged from the ocean's "Basement," thereby referring to the sea as if it's a house. This is significant because it tells readers something noteworthy about the speaker: that she processes the things that exist beyond the confines of her own life by associating them with that which is familiar to her. Instead of trying to envision the mysterious lower depths of the ocean, then, she thinks about the mermaids' environment in terms that resonate with her own life, likening the bottom of the ocean to a house on land.

Of course, it's also worth mentioning that some readers might view the mere *mention* of mermaids as metaphorical, since mermaids themselves are mythical creatures. According to this viewpoint, the mermaids would represent the allure of the sea,

which is as beautiful and mysterious as the mermaids. At the same time, though, some might argue that the speaker's mention of mermaids should be taken literally, since there's nothing in the poem to suggest that the speaker doesn't actually see them; in other words, the fantastical world of the ocean should be interpreted as the speaker's reality, even if this reality is also deeply metaphorical.

Similarly, the speaker's interaction with the ocean can be seen as an extended metaphor that plays out over the course of the entire poem. Indeed, the events that take place between the speaker and the sea create a metaphor for what it's like to open oneself up to a sexual experience for the first time. At first, the speaker welcomes the idea of this new possibility, but something happens once the sea begins to overwhelm her, and she appears to cut the encounter short (though, as discussed elsewhere in this guide, there are other ways to interpret this moment). In this regard, the speaker's entire experience with the ocean becomes a metaphor for how challenging it can be to embrace one's own sexuality, especially if doing so means giving up control, which can be frightening and daunting.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-24

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker of "I started Early – Took my Dog –" uses personification to vividly portray her surrounding environment and, more importantly, to clarify how the things around her make her feel. This is clear as early as the second stanza, when she suggests that the warships on the horizon actively reach out to her with their "Hempen Hands" and assume that she is a mouse. Both of these actions (reaching out and "presuming") suggest that the ships themselves have some kind of personal agency. In this way, the speaker personifies the boats, making it seem not only like they're alive, but like they are interested in her, wanting to take her away from her life onshore.

The speaker's personification of the ocean as a man is similar in this way, at least insofar as both the frigates and the ocean are—apparently—extremely interested in her. To that end, the ocean takes on the qualities of a lust-filled man who can't get enough of the speaker. Indeed, the ocean wraps around the speaker's body as if it (or, rather, *he*) wants to fully consume her. And then, when the speaker tries to break away, the ocean is unwilling to simply let her go. The fact that the ocean ends up following her is especially important, since this illustrates the extent to which it has become attached to her, as if it is an actual person who has developed a fondness or sexual obsession with her.

By personifying the ocean, then, the speaker is able to present it as a voracious, somewhat threatening presence in her life. This, in turn, shows readers how she relates to her surrounding environment, which she feels is quite interested in her in a way that is both exciting and frightening, as evidenced by the fact that she embraces the ocean's adoring attention at first but then seems to back away as soon as this interaction becomes too intense or overwhelming. As a result, personification enables the speaker to more thoroughly convey this interaction, which feels very personal.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-7
- Lines 9-24

SIBILANCE

The sibilance in "I started Early – Took my Dog" is one of the poem's most consistent poetic devices. In fact, most of the poem's lines contain some kind of hissing sound, which mimics the noise of waves crashing on the shore. In this way, it makes perfect sense that the speaker uses sibilance throughout, since it is thematically appropriate and brings to mind exactly what the poem describes—namely, the ocean fizzling and swirling all around the speaker.

Although sibilance can be found in most of the poem's lines, some moments are *especially* sibilant. For instance, lines 10 through 12 contain a number of /s/ sounds:

> Went past my simple Shoe –
> And past my Apron – and my Belt
> And past my Boddice – too –

The fact that the /s/ sound appears five times in just three lines is notable because this section of the poem describes what it's like for the speaker to let the ocean travel up her body. In this way, the sound created by the speaker's use of sibilance perfectly matches the hissing sound that the water makes as it washes over her body.

Of course, it's also worth mentioning that the poem is even *more* sibilant if readers expand their definition of sibilance to include the /sh/, /z/, /th/, and /f/ sounds, all of which create soft, lulling noises that have a very similar effect as the /s/ sound. According to this viewpoint, lines like 19 and 20 are quite sibilant even though they don't actually contain any true /s/ sounds:

> Opon my Ancle – Then My Shoes
> Would overflow with Pearl

Here, the speaker makes up for the lack of /s/ sounds by using many other soft sounds that can be counted as sibilant: /th/, /sh/, /z/, and /f/. In this way, she manages to subtly infuse the sound of the ocean into the poem itself, ultimately making it easier for readers to imagine their way into the speaker's

experience as she walks through the swirling, fizzing water.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "started"
- **Line 2:** "Sea"
- **Line 3:** "Mermaids," "Basement"
- **Line 5:** "Frigates"
- **Line 6:** "Hands"
- **Line 7:** "Mouse"
- **Line 8:** "Sands"
- **Line 10:** "past," "simple"
- **Line 11:** "past"
- **Line 12:** "past," "Boddice"
- **Line 15:** "Sleeve"
- **Line 16:** "started"
- **Line 17:** "close"
- **Line 18:** "Silver"
- **Line 21:** "Solid"
- **Line 22:** "seemed"

ENJAMBMENT

In general, the poem's frequent use of end-stop adds to its steady, measured pacing—reflecting the idea that the speaker is in control, that she is keeping the lid on her desires, as it were. And because the poem has *so* many dashes that either create caesuras or end-stopped lines, the moments of enjambment are quite noticeable.

For instance, the enjambment that appears between lines 3 and 4 is somewhat glaring because the first two lines of the poem are, in contrast, so obviously end-stopped with dashes that signal the conclusion of a clause. Line 3, on the other hand, tips over into line 4, since the phrase "The Mermaids in the Basement" lacks a verb and therefore cannot stand on its own as an independent clause.

Similarly, the phrase "till the Tide" that appears at the end of line 9 is enjambed because it isn't clear what the speaker is actually *saying* about the tide until she continues in the next line with the phrase "Went past my simple Shoe." These moments add a burst of tension and anticipation as the reader rushes to complete the line, perhaps reflecting moments of the speaker's excitement bursting through her calm exterior.

To that end, the most heavily enjambed stanza is the fifth—not coincidentally, the stanza in which the speaker retreats and the sea doggedly follows her, the water lapping at her heels. Enjambment ramps up the pace of this stanza, reflecting the hurry with which the speaker attempts to escape the sea's embrace. By contrast, the next stanza is heavily end-stopped as the speaker reaches the "Solid Town."

Dickinson is known for her idiosyncratic use of punctuation, so readers shouldn't rely solely on punctuation to determine whether a line is end-stopped or enjambed. Instead, always consider the syntax and pacing of a given clause. For instance, line 11 is arguably end-stopped even though there's no punctuation at its end. This is made clear by the fact that line 12 begins with the phrase "and past," which effectively begins a new clause. The speaker lists the various pieces of the speaker's clothing that the ocean passes, and it is because of this list-like sentence construction that the phrase "and my Belt" seems to stand on its own even though it doesn't actually contain a verb. After all, the verb that applies to this particular clause is the word "went," which appears at the beginning of line 10. Indeed, the verb "went" applies to each of the clauses in lines 10 through 12, making it possible to read each one as independent. Consequently, line 11 reads as if it is end-stopped rather than enjambed, since "and my Belt" doesn't depend upon "And past my Boddice" to make sense.

Similarly, the presence of a dash at the end of a line doesn't always mean that the line is end-stopped. To the contrary, it's possible for a line to be enjambed even though it ends with a dash. For instance, line 23 ("And bowing – with a Mighty look –") has a dash at the end, but it is very clearly connected to the phrase "At me," which appears at the beginning of the next line. With this in mind, it's obvious that the phrase "with a Mighty look" wouldn't make much sense without the clarification that this look is directed *at* somebody. In this case, the speaker means that the ocean takes a long look at her before retreating, which is why it's clear that line 23 is enjambed with line 24.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Basement / Came"
- **Lines 5-6:** "Floor / Extended"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Tide / Went"
- **Lines 14-15:** "Dew / Opon"
- **Lines 18-19:** "Heel / Opon"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Shoes / Would"
- **Lines 23-24:** "look – / At"

VOCABULARY

Basement (Line 3) - The lowest level of a house, typically underground or at least partially lowered into the earth. In this context, though, the speaker uses the word to metaphorically refer to the lower depths of the ocean.

Frigates (Line 5) - Large warships. The word is also the name of a large seabird.

Upper Floor (Line 5) - In this context, the speaker uses the phrase to refer to the surface of the sea.

Hempen Hands (Line 6) - Hemp is a fibrous material. The speaker here metaphorically referring to the ropes hanging off of the warships in the bay.

Presuming (Line 7) - Assuming or supposing that something is

the case.

Aground (Line 8) - In this case, the speaker uses the word "aground" to clarify that she is on the shore. The word also subtly suggests that she feels stranded or stuck, since for a ship to run aground is for it to unexpectedly stop because it has struck land.

Opon (Line 8, Line 15) - Upon.

Moved (Line 9) - The meaning of "moved" in this context is ambiguous, but it most likely refers to the fact that the speaker has never been *moved*—or brought—to sexual pleasure before.

Apron (Line 11) - A piece of clothing worn over a dress either as a decorative accent or as a protective layer. Aprons were particularly popular in the 1800s in New England.

Boddice (Line 12) - An undergarment that resembles a vest and covers the torso. Bodices were often worn by women in the 1800s.

Made (Line 13) - In this context, the word "made" suggests that the ocean gave the speaker the impression that something might happen.

Wholly (Line 14) - Completely.

Dew (Line 14) - Small drops of water that form on any given surface overnight.

Dandelion's Sleeve (Line 15) - The stem of a dandelion.

Started (Line 16) - The most simplistic interpretation of the word "started" in this context is that the speaker simply begins to walk away from the ocean. However, the word could also suggest that she startles to attention, surprised at what's happening between her and the ocean. Finally, the word could be interpreted as a euphemistic way of saying that the speaker orgasms.

Silver Heel (Line 18) - A metaphorical way of describing the foam that bubbles and fizzes when the ocean strikes the shore.

Ancle (Line 19) - An alternate spelling of "ankle."

Pearl (Line 20) - The word "pearl" either suggests that the speaker's shoes are decorated with pearls (which are small white balls often used to adorn jewelry), or it is a way of describing the whitish foam created by the breaking water. Alternatively, it could be a subtly employed sexual image meant to evoke the color of semen.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem adheres to the form of a lyrical ballad. This means that it is made up of quatrains (four-line stanzas), that it is written in common meter, and that it follows a rhyme scheme in which the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme with one another.

Originally, ballads were meant to be set to music, which is why they tend to have a sing-song quality that is emphasized by the use of meter and rhyme. These musical poems also often tell a story of some kind. "I started Early – Took my Dog –" adheres to this convention, as the speaker recounts her journey to the ocean, the subsequent sexual awakening that takes place on the shore, and her eventual retreat back to town.

It's also worth noting that Dickinson was heavily influenced by religious hymns, which are similar to the ballad form, especially insofar as they are meant to be set to music. By using this form to narrate the poem, then, the speaker imbues the story of her sexual awakening with an extra sense of significance.

METER

"I started Early – Took my Dog –" is written in common meter, meaning that its lines alternate back and forth between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. This, in turn, means that the rhythm of each line is based on the rhythm of the iamb, which is a metrical foot consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. Accordingly, a line of iambic tetrameter is made up of four iambs (four da-DUMs), whereas a line of iambic trimeter is made up of three iambs (three da-DUMs).

To see this more clearly, consider the scansion of the first two lines:

> I star | ted Ear- | ly – Took | my Dog –
> And vis- | ited | the Sea –

Even with the caesura that appears in the middle of the third foot ("ly – || Took"), these two lines are perfect examples of common meter.

However, the poem doesn't always adhere to the rules of this meter. For instance, line 9 differs from the other lines of iambic tetrameter:

> But no | Man moved | Me – till | the Tide

There are still four feet in this line (with a caesura appearing in the third), but there are *five* stressed syllables instead of the standard four that are normally found in lines of iambic tetrameter. Indeed, the second foot is a spondee, meaning that both syllables are stressed ("Man moved"). The fact that the words "no Man moved" all receive stresses ultimately places extra emphasis on the notion that a man has never "moved"—which is to say embraced—the speaker in the way that the ocean does. And though this use of a spondee varies from the conventions of iambic tetrameter, it is only a passing substitution that calls attention to the speaker's inexperience, not something that completely throws off the poem's use of common meter.

RHYME SCHEME

Like most ballads, "I started Early – Took my Dog –" follows a rhyme scheme in which the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme with each other. To see this a bit more tangibly, consider the following way of mapping the poem's first two stanzas:

ABCB DEFE

For the majority of the poem, this rhyme scheme is very straightforward, as the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme very obviously with one another. For example, note the full, perfect rhyme between "hands" in line 6 rhymes and "sands" in line 8.

Interestingly enough, the rhymes that appear in the third stanza also appear in the fourth stanza. In both cases, the rhyme scheme centers around the assonant /oo/ sound that appears in the words "shoe," "too," and "dew." The effect of this prolonged rhyme ties these two stanzas together, which is significant because both stanzas detail the ocean's sexual embrace of the speaker. As such, the two stanzas come together to describe a single moment that defines the rest of the poem.

However, the last two stanzas feature slant rhymes instead of perfect rhymes, as the speaker rhymes "heel" with "pearl" in the fifth stanza and "know" with "withdrew" in the final stanza. Neither of these count as true rhymes in the traditional sense, but they both contain the traces of rhyme, thereby succeeding in upholding the rhyme scheme.

At the same time, it's worth noting that the rhyme scheme becomes imperfect only when the speaker breaks away from her sexual encounter with the sea. This, in turn, suggests that the perfect rhymes that appear in the first four stanzas create a satisfying sound that is supposed to reflect the speaker's pleasure—a pleasure that comes to an end when her sexual interaction with the ocean concludes.

SPEAKER

Although the poem doesn't contain all that much in the way of identifying information about the speaker, most readers believe that the speaker is a woman. This is because the speaker mentions pieces of clothing—an apron and a bodice—that were strictly considered women's clothes in the 19th century, which was when the poem was written. Taking the gender dynamics of the mid to late 1800s into account, then, it's widely accepted that the speaker of "I started Early – Took my Dog –" is, in fact, a woman.

In addition, some readers choose to view the speaker as Emily Dickinson herself. This is partly due to the fact that Dickinson owned a dog (a Newfoundland named Carlo) whom she frequently walked. Furthermore, some readers believe that this poem aligns with Dickinson's rather individualistic lifestyle, but this viewpoint superimposes meaning onto the poem that might not actually exist within the lines themselves.

For that matter, it's rather unnecessary to try to guess whether Dickinson is the speaker, since the poem functions perfectly well—from an analytical standpoint—on its own. Suffice it to say, then, that the speaker is simply a woman living in the 19th century who walks her dog to the sea.

SETTING

The poem takes place by the sea, as the speaker stands on shore and looks out at the water. Other than these contextual details, there is very little information to clarify the setting of the poem. The speaker eventually adds to the general scene by mentioning a nearby town, to which she flees when her encounter with the ocean becomes too intense.

Because the poem was written in the early 1860s, it's logical to assume that it takes place around the same time, meaning that the sexual norms of 19th century society would bring surely bring themselves to bear on the speaker—a fact that is worth keeping in mind, since "I started Early – Took my Dog –" is largely about sex and, more specifically, female sexuality. The speaker also mentions an apron and bodice—two articles of clothing that were popular during the 19th century. This, in turn, makes it even more likely that the speaker does indeed live in 1800s society.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson wrote feverishly in the early 1860s, producing a large portion of her entire output between the years 1861 and 1865. This is the period during which she composed this poem, which exemplifies the style that characterizes the majority of her work. Indeed, "I started Early – Took my Dog –" includes the idiosyncratic use of dashes that appears in almost all of her poetry and that set her apart from other poets writing in the mid to late 1800s.

"I started Early – Took my Dog" also uses the ballad form that Dickinson frequently employed. Her fondness for this form can be attributed to her experience as a churchgoer, where many of the hymns were written (like much of Dickinson's poetry) in common meter. In fact, Dickinson's ballads (including "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," "Hope is the thing with feathers," and "Success is counted sweetest" can be sung using the melodies of popular hymns like "Amazing Grace."

Dickinson was also heavily influenced by the Romantic movement, which is another possible reason that she wrote so many ballads—after all, Romantics like Samuel Taylor Coleridge

wrote many lyrical ballads. In addition, Dickinson also took cues from the American Transcendentalist movement, finding influence in writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Considering her respect both for the Transcendentalists and the Romantics, then, it's no surprise that "I started Early – Took my Dog –" features a speaker who has an intimate interaction with nature, since both the Transcendentalist and the Romantic literary movements highly valued nature and its beauty.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It's worth considering that the United States was in the throes of the Civil War during Emily Dickinson's most fruitful poetic period. Despite the country's upheaval, though, her poetry remains largely uninfluenced by the war, at least in any directly observable way. Rather than writing political poems, Dickinson wrote mostly about beauty, wonder, and surprise in ordinary life, tending toward introspection instead of political commentary that would have been relevant to the Union's fight to end slavery.

This is in keeping with the way Dickinson lived her personal life, since she mostly stayed away from the public eye. When her mother became chronically ill in the 1850s, Dickinson started spending more and more time at home, and this ultimately led to a very sequestered lifestyle in which she rarely ventured far from the family home in Amherst, Massachusetts.

This, of course, is one of the reasons that "I started Early – Took my Dog –" is so compelling: it presents a simple walk to the beach as a momentous occasion, something that would have been true for Dickinson herself. This isolated lifestyle, though, is one of the reasons that Dickinson wrote so many poems, which she often included in letters to close acquaintances. But despite her prolific output, she only published a small handful of poems during her own lifetime, only becoming famous for her work after her death.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ktP8SeNu1Qs)
- Dickinson's Dog — Dickinson may or may not be the speaker of "I started Early – Took my Dog," but she did have a dog named Carlo, whom you can read about here! (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/carlo-1849-1866-dog/)
- The Original Manuscript — Take a look at the handwritten manuscript of the poem. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/75315)
- The Poet's Life — Read more about Emily Dickinson's work and life in this brief biographical overview. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)
- Meter in Dickinson's Poetry — If you're looking for more information about how Emily Dickinson used meter in her poetry, check out this helpful overview. (https://poemshape.wordpress.com/2009/01/18/emily-dickinson-iambic-meter-and-rhyme/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- A narrow Fellow in the Grass
- As imperceptibly as grief
- 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 -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- Success is counted sweetest
- There's a certain Slant of light
- This is my letter to the world
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

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