

The Listeners



POEM TEXT

1 'Is there anybody there?' said the Traveller,
 2 Knocking on the moonlit door;
 3 And his horse in the silence champed the grasses
 4 Of the forest's ferny floor:
 5 And a bird flew up out of the turret,
 6 Above the Traveller's head:
 7 And he smote upon the door again a second time;
 8 'Is there anybody there?' he said.
 9 But no one descended to the Traveller;
 10 No head from the leaf-fringed sill
 11 Leaned over and looked into his grey eyes,
 12 Where he stood perplexed and still.
 13 But only a host of phantom listeners
 14 That dwelt in the lone house then
 15 Stood listening in the quiet of the moonlight
 16 To that voice from the world of men:
 17 Stood thronging the faint moonbeams on the dark
 18 stair,
 18 That goes down to the empty hall,
 19 Harkening in an air stirred and shaken
 20 By the lonely Traveller's call.
 21 And he felt in his heart their strangeness,
 22 Their stillness answering his cry,
 23 While his horse moved, cropping the dark turf,
 24 'Neath the starred and leafy sky;
 25 For he suddenly smote on the door, even
 26 Louder, and lifted his head:—
 27 'Tell them I came, and no one answered,
 28 That I kept my word,' he said.
 29 Never the least stir made the listeners,
 30 Though every word he spake
 31 Fell echoing through the shadowiness of the still
 32 house
 32 From the one man left awake:
 33 Ay, they heard his foot upon the stirrup,
 34 And the sound of iron on stone,
 35 And how the silence surged softly backward,
 36 When the plunging hoofs were gone.



SUMMARY

An unnamed figure, the Traveller, knocks on the door of a house in the moonlight and asks if there is anyone inside. The Traveller's horse grazes in the quiet forest while the Traveller waits for a response. A bird flies out of a small tower on the house and over the Traveller's head. The Traveller knocks again, more forcefully, and repeats his question. No one comes down from the house to meet him, however. No one even leans out of the window, the sill of which is covered in leaves, to look at him. He stands in place, puzzled by the lack of an answer.

Inside the house is a group of ghostly beings. These "listeners" stand in the moonlight as they listen to the human voice coming from outside. The ghostly beings crowd around the staircase, onto which moonlight streaks, as the quiet atmosphere in the empty house is disturbed by the sound of the Traveller's lonely voice.

Outside, the Traveller senses a strange presence in the silence that meets his question. His horse, undisturbed, continues to graze in the dark forest, the sky above full of stars and obscured by trees. The Traveller suddenly beats on the door once again, even more loudly than before. He then calls out, asking whoever is listening to pass on a message: that no one answered him when he came to the house, but he kept his promise.

The listeners don't make any motion in response to this. The Traveller's words reverberate through the dark, empty house, coming from the only living person around. The phantom listeners hear him jump up onto his horse, and then the sound of the horseshoes on the stone path as the Traveller rides away. The silence of the forest quickly returns as the sound of the horse's forceful riding fades away.



THEMES



MYSTERY, UNDERSTANDING, AND THE UNKNOWN

"The Listeners" draws much of its eerie quality from the fact that its meaning is rather opaque; the poem in many ways defies interpretation precisely because it is about the unknown and the unknowable. Somewhat paradoxically, "The Listeners" acknowledges people's desire to seek understanding while also asserting a certain insurmountable mystery of the world around them. In short, the poem suggests that people cannot always find the answers they seek, regardless of how hard they look.

The subject of the poem, the Traveller, arrives to the house in the woods clearly in search of something (though what, exactly, is never specified). He repeatedly knocks on the door to ask if anybody is there, and seems increasingly agitated by the lack of response. That his second knock is described using the word “smote” suggests a sense of urgency, his initial call having gone unanswered. Indeed, the third time he “smote on the door, even / Louder, and lifted his head:—”

He is further described as “perplexed,” and views the silent landscape as filled with “strangeness.” This illustrates his confusion about the situation in which he has found himself and reflects the air of mystery that pervades the poem in general. The essential creepiness of the poem comes from the fact that the Traveller—and the reader—doesn’t know what does or does not reside behind the door, a conceit that links the unknown with anxiety and fear.

The house also is notably situated deep within a forest and suffused by the natural world, implicitly connecting that world to the unknown. The door is “moonlit,” for instance—under the influence of the moon, which is often linked in literature to the supernatural. The forest floor is also “ferny,” suggesting that no one has walked there for some time: this is a world cut off from that of human beings. A bird flies “up out of the turret” of the house, and the house itself has a “leaf-fringed sill,” further revealing nature’s encroachment on the man-made structure. The connection of the mysterious house with nature, and the Traveller’s clear inability to communicate with those within the house, illustrates the separation of this world from “the world of men,” as the poem calls it. This, in turn, suggests that there are certain mysteries beyond the realm of humankind that people simply cannot access.

That the Traveller declares to the ostensibly absent house that he has “kept [his] word” suggests that, despite holding up his end of some bargain, he is not rewarded with any acknowledgement of his efforts. Instead, “no one answered,” and the Traveller rides away. The poem thus concludes without leaving the reader any wiser about who its subject is, or what he came to look for at an abandoned house in the middle of the night. Nor does it offer the reader a sense of who resides (or once resided) in the house. Its “conclusion,” as it were, offers no catharsis at all, reflecting the same sense of unknowability that so disturbs its subject. People may ask for answers as much as they like, the poem seems to say, but the mystery of the world comes from that fact that it will not respond. It will only listen.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 7-12
- Lines 21-22
- Lines 25-32



ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

Beyond underscoring the innate unknowability of the world, “The Listeners” seems to reflect the existential loneliness that results from such mystery. The poem creates a distinction between its isolated human subject, the natural world surrounding the abandoned home, and the spirits who do not answer the Traveller’s call.

On an immediate level, this could reflect the general isolation of human beings, or their despair in the absence of some guiding purpose. Although de la Mare never explained “The Listeners” explicitly, he did allegedly say before his death that the poem is “about a man encountering a universe.” Taken allegorically, the poem’s opening line “Is anybody there?” could be read as an echo of humankind’s call to an absent god. Ultimately, through the poem’s evocation of human loneliness, it suggests the indifference of the universe to people’s search for connection and meaning.

The Traveller is distinctly human, and his physical efforts stand in contrast to the ghostly stillness of the listeners. His attempts to make contact (speaking and knocking) are met with a limited natural response (the bird flying up from the turret). As a living person, he is able to make his presence known by knocking and shouting. However, he’s aware of another presence that doesn’t respond to these signals. On the other side of the door stand a group of phantoms—or spirits—who hear the Traveller but cannot or choose not to answer him. The collective immobility of the listeners heightens the Traveller’s loneliness; he is one person, trying to make an impression on a world that absorbs his actions without reacting.

In one sense, the poem is thus about a failure of connection. The Traveller does not find the people he came to meet, and while the listeners are conscious of him, they are either unable or unwilling to answer his questions. The Traveller is on an errand, which he cannot complete without the presence of the people he expected to find. His human purpose, then, meets with an unexpected spiritual intrusion. Instead of talking to living people, he is forced to leave a message with ghosts.

The listeners, whoever they are, cannot or will not interact with the living, human world. To them, the Traveller is simply a “voice from the world of men,” a representative from the other side of mortality. This suggests a world in which people are alone, and cannot count on one another, dead or alive, to answer an urgent call.

Within the poem, the supernatural presences remain silent as the Traveller calls out to them. Their “stillness” responds to his words in a way that demonstrates their presence to him: it is the intentional silence of someone listening, not the silence of no one being there. The poem can thus also be interpreted as presenting a human relationship with the mysteries of religion; a human being might imagine a god as a conversation partner that never answers, except by motionless, ghostly presence.

The Traveller's opening question, "Is anybody there?" reflects a human anxiety about the guiding forces of the universe, which may hear the desperate calling of sufferers on earth but do not answer.

The Listeners—which may represent a god, or even simply the idea of guidance or community itself—are indifferent. The Traveller's pursuit of meaning in his errand goes unsatisfied, as the listeners' silence forces him to ride away with the excuse that he "came and no one answered." The human attempt to make meaning, the poem suggests—to reach out into mystery for answers—meets only a calm refusal to engage.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 13-22
- Lines 25-32



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*'Is there anybody there?' said the Traveller,
Knocking on the moonlit door;
And his horse in the silence champed the grasses
Of the forest's ferny floor:*

The opening lines of "The Listeners" introduce the poem's main character, set the scene, and pose the question that is central to the mystery of the story. The subject of the poem is called simply "The Traveller," which implies that his journeying is the most important thing to know about him. He has come on horseback from some unknown location into the scene of the poem, and immediately makes his presence known by knocking on the door of a house and asking if anyone is there.

The fact that the Traveller knocks on a "moonlit door" establishes the poem's setting as a house at night, while the "ferny floor" of a forest reveals that this house is located in a wood. The presence of ferns further suggests that the forest has grown wild around the house, implying that it hasn't been cared for: the inhabitants may have been absent for a while.

The Traveller's question opens the poem with a sense of urgency. If he is knocking at a door in the middle of the night and asking if anyone is home, he must have a compelling reason. The reader is encouraged to read on in order to find out what his errand entails, and what kind of response he'll get.

In these lines, de la Mare uses two devices to contribute to the effect of the woodland scene. The onomatopoeia of "champed" makes the sound of the horse's grazing stand out vividly, in contrast with the "silence" that fills the wood. In the next line, the alliteration of "forest's ferny floor" creates a softness that

mimics the texture of the overgrown forest.

LINES 5-8

*And a bird flew up out of the turret,
Above the Traveller's head:
And he smote upon the door again a second time;
'Is there anybody there?' he said.*

The next lines do bring some sort of response to the Traveller's question, but not the one he was looking for. A bird flies "up out of the turret," ostensibly having been disturbed from its nest by his knocking. The fact that a bird has been living in the tower of the house furthers the impression that this place is abandoned; nature has begun to take over the human home, making the space its own.

This might contribute to the increased urgency with which the Traveller repeats his knocking and his question. In this case, de la Mare uses the verb "smote" to describe the knocking. This is a violent striking action, and shows that the Traveller is knocking with a great deal of force. He repeats his first question, now even more desperate for someone to answer him.

Line 7 extends beyond the others, implying a longer period of knocking. The repetition of the action is emphatic: de la Mare uses not only "again" but also "a second time," a tautology draws attention to the repeated knocking. It also suggests that the Traveller's attempts are useless: more knocking does not produce the effect he wants.

The unchanged repetition of the opening question in line 8, again, heightens the urgency of the moment. The Traveller wants an affirmative "yes" in answer to his question.

LINES 9-12

*But no one descended to the Traveller;
No head from the leaf-fringed sill
Leaned over and looked into his grey eyes,
Where he stood perplexed and still.*

The next lines tell the reader what *doesn't* happen in the poem. The Traveller expects that someone will emerge from the house to speak to him, or at least lean out of the window and acknowledge his presence. Neither of these things happen, however. The reversal of his expectations confuses the Traveller, and momentarily stops him in his tracks.

The language of these lines focuses on absence and negation: "no one" descends to meet the Traveller, and "no head" leans over the sill to look at him. Paradoxically, describing the lack of these things makes the reader imagine them happening; it is difficult to talk about something *not* existing without conjuring up an image of it existing. The Traveller becomes so confused that for a while stops his attempts to make himself known, meaning that the silence and stillness of the wood absorb even him for the moment.

The Traveller's eyes are described as "grey," which is the most specific thing the reader knows about him. This detail isn't necessary to the story, which makes one wonder why it might be included. Grey is an achromatic color, meaning that it has no actual color: it is composed from black and white. The Traveller's eyes, being in between black and white, might represent a meeting point of two states: for example, the living and the dead. In the course of the poem, he is able to come close to the world of ghosts, but he is also definitively a representative of the human world.

LINES 13-16

*But only a host of phantom listeners
That dwelt in the lone house then
Stood listening in the quiet of the moonlight
To that voice from the world of men:*

These lines introduce the other characters in the poem: the "listeners" referred to in the title. The reader is allowed into the silent house, as the poem shifts perspective from the Traveller on the outside to the listeners within.

The inhabitants of the house are described as "a host of phantom listeners," which implies that there is a large number of them (a "host" meaning, in this case, a large group of people or things). This description also underscores their supernatural nature: they are "phantom" presences, not living people. They may be ghosts, or some other kind of spirit. In either case, they are of a different world from the Traveller, who appears as a "voice from the world of men." They are definitely *not* living human beings, though the reader isn't told exactly what they are.

The reader also finds out that the listeners "dwelt in the lone house then." They are inhabiting the house, but it is unclear how long they have been there. The use of "then" implies that their tenancy might be temporary. They might be the original inhabitants of the house, who are now ghosts, or they might be spirits who have come from somewhere else. The mysterious introduction of the listeners withholds more information than it gives, encouraging the reader to continue reading in search of answers—much like the Traveller himself continues knocking in the hopes of a response.

Again, the moonlight appears here as a signal of the paranormal. The moon has many traditional associations and uses, but "The Listeners" uses its connection to the occult and otherworldliness. The fact that the listening beings in the poem stand among the rays of the moon in the dark house emphasizes their mysterious nature.

LINES 17-20

*Stood thronging the faint moonbeams on the dark stair,
That goes down to the empty hall,
Harkening in an air stirred and shaken
By the lonely Traveller's call.*

These lines add to the image of the listeners in the house, honing in on their experience of the Traveller's voice. A brief instance of anaphora appears with the repetition of "Stood" in line 15 and line 17. This has the effect of a kind of incantation, reinforcing the strange, occult-like atmosphere of the poem.

De la Mare's use of "thronging" again emphasizes the large number of the listeners, since the word refers to people or things being tightly packed into a space. These beings are crowded together, filling the staircase. There is something disturbing about imagining such a large collection of spirits, and the reader is left with more questions about who these phantoms are and what purpose they have for gathering in the house.

The listeners are further described as "hearkening" to the Traveller. To hearken is to listen: more particularly, it means to listen with attention. For the listeners, the Traveller's call is thus worth paying attention to. The sound of his call physically shakes up the air around them and the stillness of the forest house in which they have been dwelling, but it notably does not provoke movement in the listeners themselves. They alone remain unaffected by "the world of men," underscoring humanity's ultimate solitude.

Indeed, the Traveller's call comes from a "lonely" source. This focuses the reader back in on the singleness of the Traveller, and his division from the other beings in the poem. He is the only living human present. His shout can vibrate in the air, but the forest quickly returns to stillness.

LINES 21-24

*And he felt in his heart their strangeness,
Their stillness answering his cry,
While his horse moved, cropping the dark turf,
'Neath the starred and leafy sky;*

At this point, the Traveller recognizes the presence of the listeners and understands that they are not human beings like him, but something stranger. This recognition happens "in his heart." It is not a logical understanding, then, but an emotional one. He *feels* the oddness of the listeners and their difference from him. As with a more typical ghost story, to understand what's happening requires moving beyond conventional ways of experiencing and analyzing the world.

De la Mare describes the "stillness" of the listeners as "answering" the Traveller's cry. In one sense, this is a paradox; stillness can't properly respond to anything. However, as with the non-presences noted in lines 9-11, the evocation of absence makes another kind of presence clear. The listeners' silence is not a complete lack of response to the Traveller, but an indication of their existence, their attention. The Traveller senses the difference between nobody being there, and someone who is there but only listens without speaking.

Meanwhile, the Traveller's horse continues to behave as if

nothing is abnormal about this situation. Either the horse is unaware of the supernatural presences that the Traveller senses, or ghosts do not distress the animal. This suggests that the horse, unlike its human rider, blends easily into the landscape of the forest. Its motion, while contrasting with the stillness of the listeners, is ordinary and unremarkable. It has simply become part of the woodland scene, grazing on the grass under the leaves and the stars. Again, this highlights the loneliness of the Traveller himself. He is the only being in the scene who does not fit in this scene.

LINES 25-28

*For he suddenly smote on the door, even
Louder, and lifted his head:—
'Tell them I came, and no one answered,
That I kept my word,' he said.*

Having reached some sort of understanding about the occupants of the house, the Traveller makes one more effort to get through to them. Once again he bangs on the door, "even louder" than before. (The alliteration of "suddenly smote" lends extra emphasis to the action here and increases the scene's sense of urgency.) Then he lifts his head, in order to project his voice as loudly as he can into the house, and leaves a message with the listening phantoms.

Here, the reader might hope to get more information about the Traveller's errand—that is, to finally learn the reason he came to the woodland house with so much urgency. This hope is disappointed, since the poem only offers a few more details about the situation. The Traveller asks the listeners to tell an unnamed "them" that he kept his promise by coming to the house, but was thwarted by the absence of an answer.

The lack of context in the Traveller's speech makes the poem's mystery even more frustrating, and perhaps more sinister. Readers are left to wonder who the "them" the Traveller came to see might be, why they aren't there to meet him, and what the Traveller had promised to say or do when he reached them. The only real information is that the Traveller promised someone he would come to the house, and that keeping his word is important to him.

Leaving his message with the listeners is an act of desperation for the Traveller. He certainly can't be confident that his words will be passed on by such a silent force. However, the situation leaves him with no alternative.

LINES 29-32

*Never the least stir made the listeners,
Though every word he spake
Fell echoing through the shadowiness of the still house
From the one man left awake:*

Predictably, given their earlier behavior, the listeners do not stir in response to the Traveller's final words. His words are not insubstantial: in fact, they actually *fall*, taking on a physical

weight with this verb. In line 31, the longest of the poem, the words continue to reverberate through the quiet house. The light sibilance of "spake," "shadowiness," and "still" contribute to the sense of echoed words growing softer as the Traveller gives up in his attempt to get a response.

The length of line 31 is closest to that of line 17, which also describes the interior of the house. Stretching these two lines out gives the scene a feeling of suspended motion, as if time itself has stretched out. This suggests that the listeners live in a state beyond the urgency of the Traveller; there is nothing to stir them from their stillness. They experience an unchanging existence, even as the world around them goes through crises.

In an interesting turn of phrase, the Traveller's words are described as coming from "the one man left awake." A reader might wonder if this implies there are other humans present, simply sleeping, unawakened by the shouting and knocking. This is a possible reading. However, it seems more likely that de la Mare is using "awake" in an unconventional sense, to contrast the Traveller's living state with the ghostliness of the listeners. If he is "awake," they are somehow asleep. In art, literature, and religion, death has frequently been compared to sleep. The listeners, possibly, are in their final sleep: one that separates the living from the dead.

LINES 33-36

*Ay, they heard his foot upon the stirrup,
And the sound of iron on stone,
And how the silence surged softly backward,
When the plunging hoofs were gone.*

The final lines keep the reader firmly with the listeners as they hear the sounds of the Traveller departing. There is a sense of claustrophobia in reading these lines—of being stuck in the uncanny, motionless house as the only human gallops away. Each step of the Traveller's departure is detailed, echoing the listeners' deep attentiveness. They (and the reader) hear his foot hitting the metal riding support as he mounts his horse, then the sound of the horseshoes hitting the stone path. Finally, when the fast-moving hooves have disappeared, they hear the return of silence.

The image apparently displayed in the final lines, through sound, is that of the Traveller departing. However, once more, the presence of what is *not* described is strong. The anaphora of "And," repeated at the beginnings of lines 34 and 35, reminds the reader that these sounds are being *heard* by someone. Again, the listeners are vividly present, standing in their motionless ranks on the staircase.

These four lines display a concentrated sibilance, with "stirrup," "sound," "stone," and "silence surged softly." There is a creepiness about the concentration of these "s" sounds, a whispering that might send a shiver through the reader. Particularly in line 35, the return of silence is given a strange weight by the sibilance. The silence surges, moving like a wave

to cover the scene again. It is the atmosphere of the supernatural world, and it is stronger than any human attempt to break into it.



SYMBOLS



THE TRAVELLER

It is possible to read the central character of "The Listeners," the Traveller, as a symbol for humankind as a whole. Nameless, he is defined by his journey, which makes him easy to read as a universal figure for a person traveling through life. He approaches the house in the forest on an undefined errand, which he is desperate to complete but ultimately unable to finish in a satisfactory way. This resonates with the idea of a human search for purpose that is ultimately thwarted.

Most compelling is his repeated question of "Is anybody there?" One may read this question as analogous to the human search for divine guidance, for the presence of a force operating the universe with intention. In this reading, the poem proposes the divine force as present but unresponsive and unknowable. The listeners, thus analogous to a god/gods, pay attention to human pleas but take no action and give no answers. The Traveller, representing a searching soul, is forced to turn away alone.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Is there anybody there?" said the Traveller,"
- **Line 6:** "the Traveller"
- **Line 8:** "Is there anybody there?" he said."
- **Line 9:** "the Traveller"
- **Line 16:** "voice from the world of men"
- **Line 20:** "the lonely Traveller"
- **Lines 27-28:** "Tell them I came, and no one answered, / That I kept my word," he said."
- **Line 32:** "the one man left awake"



POETIC DEVICES

PARADOX

"The Listeners" presents two examples of [paradox](#), both of which are used to heighten the meaning of a specific moment. In line 22, the Traveller senses the presence of the listeners by their "stillness answering his cry." There is an apparent paradox here: "stillness," or lack of motion, is not an answer. The paradoxical quality of the phrase asks readers to look closer. In this case, the silence of the listeners is not an absence. What the Traveller feels is the silence of people listening, not an empty house. The stillness of the listeners becomes all the more creepy, in that it represents beings who refrain, for some

reason, from reacting to a human presence.

In line 35, de la Mare describes "the silence surg[ing] backwards" after the noise of galloping hooves disappears. A surge usually implies a wild and powerful movement that comes with a massive sound, such as that of a wave or a large crowd. In this case, the surge is that of "silence," which is the absence of sound. This juxtaposition creates a strange intensification, in which silence appears as a crashing but soundless force in which the scene is immersed once again.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Line 22:** "stillness answering"
- **Line 35:** "silence surged"

ANAPHORA

"The Listeners" contains several examples of [anaphora](#), all of which contribute to a sense of relentless incantation or a kind of warped nursery-rhyme quality. De la Mare places all of his anaphoric words at the beginning of the line, to make their presence particularly clear. The effect is measured and rhythmical, making the reader lean into the next inevitable phrase. In the opening lines, the anaphora goes along with action. The Traveller knocks on the "moonlit door," which prompts a series of inexorable, though apparently harmless, events: a bird flies up from the house, the horse grazes, and the Traveller knocks again. Something about the anaphoric repetition of "and," however, implies a deeper meaning to the actions. There is something uncanny happening in direct response (or, perhaps, lack thereof) to the Traveller's call.

In the last lines, the anaphoric repetition of "and" returns, as the listeners hear the Traveller depart. Their attention to each of his final actions is detailed by the anaphora, which lingers over the mounting, the galloping, and the return of silence. Again, the inexorable repetition of "and" implies an inevitability: the Traveller must leave, and silence must return. There is no other way for this world to operate.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "And"
- **Line 5:** "And"
- **Line 7:** "And"
- **Line 15:** "Stood"
- **Line 17:** "Stood"
- **Line 34:** "And"
- **Line 35:** "And"

ENJAMBMENT

While most of the lines in "The Listeners" are [end-stopped](#), there are a few examples of [enjambment](#). In the most interesting instance, lines 13-15 are all enjambed. These lines

introduce the listeners of the poem's title, who are described as standing in the moonlight as they listen to the Traveller.

The lack of end-stops in these lines serves a couple of purposes. First, it slightly speeds up the motion of the poem. The reader tumbles onward, suddenly unmoored by the absence of expected punctuation. This absence subtly reflects the situation the Traveller finds himself in: where he expects things to proceed a certain way, they don't. Similarly, the reader is tossed into a series of lines that move faster and are less predictably connected than they have been thus far in the poem.

It makes sense that the most sustained use of enjambment in the poem comes as the reader begins to have the most questions. Introducing the enigmatic listeners, de la Mare prompts us to read faster and with deeper interest, trying to uncover the mystery that has been presented. At this point in the poem, not knowing that our questions will go unanswered, we are easily drawn into the waterfall of movement.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "grasses"
- **Line 10:** "sill "
- **Line 13:** "listeners"
- **Line 14:** "then"
- **Line 15:** "moonlight"
- **Line 19:** "shaken"
- **Line 25:** "even"
- **Line 30:** "spake"
- **Line 31:** "house"

SIBILANCE

"The Listeners" is filled with instances of [sibilance](#). Contributing to a whispery, ethereal atmosphere, these phrases encourage the reader to encounter the poem as a ghost story. The hissing "s" sounds send a shiver up the spine. The words "silence," "still/stillness," and "listen/listeners," all of which repeat, are the touchstones of the poem. These quiet words mimic what they describe. They are supported by multiple other instances of sibilance, which keep the entire poem at the level of a whisper.

The most intense example of sibilance comes in line 35, almost at the end of the poem, with the phrase "silence surged softly." This description, while initially somewhat [paradoxical](#) (can silence surge? can surging happen softly?), is intensely sensory. The whispering quality overwhelms the meaning of the words, and makes it clear that this is a description of atmosphere. The image is of a quiet, gentle movement that is nevertheless extremely powerful: the wavelike return of silence to a scene that was momentarily disturbed.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "s," "s," "s," "ss," "s"
- **Line 4:** "s," "s"
- **Line 7:** "s," "s"
- **Line 10:** "s"
- **Line 11:** "s," "s"
- **Line 12:** "s," "s"
- **Line 13:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 14:** "s"
- **Line 15:** "s," "s"
- **Line 16:** "c"
- **Line 17:** "s"
- **Line 19:** "s," "sh"
- **Line 21:** "s," "ss"
- **Line 22:** "s," "ss," "s," "s"
- **Line 23:** "s," "s"
- **Line 24:** "s," "s"
- **Line 25:** "s," "s"
- **Line 29:** "s," "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 33:** "s"
- **Line 34:** "s," "s"
- **Line 35:** "s," "s," "s"

IMAGERY

"The Listeners" relies heavily on [imagery](#) in order to communicate the atmosphere of the story. Visual imagery is important in setting the scene, as shown by the use of moonlight, foliage, and wildlife. However, the most interesting imagery in the poem is aural: what is heard (or not heard).

In the last lines of the poem, the Traveller's departure is described exclusively by the sounds that the listeners hear. First of all, they hear his words echoing through the house, continuing to disturb their collective stillness. Then, as he leaves, they hear his "foot upon the stirrup" (the support for mounting and riding a horse). They hear the sound of the iron horseshoes on the stone of the path away from the house. Then they hear the absence of those sounds, the silence returning back over them in an inexorable surge.

While these images describe specific sounds, they manage to create broad, complete impressions: that of the Traveller mounting his horse and riding away, and that of the listeners standing motionless, waiting for silence to return.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "the moonlit door; / And his horse in the silence champed the grasses / Of the forest's ferny floor:"
- **Line 5:** "And a bird flew up out of the turret, "
- **Line 10:** " leaf-fringed sill "
- **Line 15:** "the quiet of the moonlight "
- **Lines 17-19:** "faint moonbeams on the dark stair, /

That goes down to the empty hall, / Harkening in an air stirred and shaken"

- **Lines 23-24:** "cropping the dark turf, / 'Neath the starred and leafy sky;"
- **Line 31:** "Fell echoing through the shadowiness of the still house"
- **Lines 33-34:** "his foot upon the stirrup, / And the sound of iron on stone,"
- **Lines 35-36:** "And how the silence surged softly backward, / When the plunging hoofs were gone."

CAESURA

Most of the lines in "The Listeners" are complete, unbroken by punctuation. The few examples of [caesura](#) stand out by contrast. In line 7, the Traveller's repetition of his question interrupts the flow of the line with a question mark. The effect of this interruption in the steady flow of the lines is a disturbance, reflecting the Traveller's uncertainty and growing desperation.

Lines 26-28 each contain a caesura as well. They represent the Traveller's last effort to break through the stillness of the world he has encountered, which then collapses back into unbroken, even lines. Line 26 comes out of the [enjambéd](#) line 25, and is already off-balance because of this. The sheared-off quality makes "Louder" stand out more intensely, separated both from its own clause and the rest of the sentence. The Traveller's message is similarly cut up, suggesting the labored breath of desperation. His lines are emphatic in their fragmentation. They cannot affect the world of the poem, though, which retreats into unbroken smoothness as he leaves.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "?"
- **Line 8:** "?"
- **Line 23:** ;
- **Line 25:** ;
- **Line 26:** ;
- **Line 27:** ;
- **Line 28:** ;
- **Line 33:** ;

ALLITERATION

In addition to its many moments of [sibilance](#), the poem contains a few points of [alliteration](#). The strongest of these comes in line 4, as the speaker describes the setting surrounding the house. The phrase "forest's ferny floor" suggests that the wood in which the Traveller has found himself is overgrown. This, in turn, reveals that the house is abandoned, because no one has come or gone for some time—at least for long enough for ferns to take over the surrounding grounds. The alliteration in this line pulls the reader's attention to the encroachment of nature

on this manmade structure, as the forest seems poised to overtake the house itself. This place is not of the "world of men," and the lonely Traveller is distinctly out of place.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "h," "h"
- **Line 4:** "f," "f," "f"
- **Line 10:** "l"
- **Line 11:** "L," "l"
- **Line 26:** "L," "l"



VOCABULARY

Champed (Line 3) - "Champing," like "chomping," refers to chewing, particularly by horses and similar animals. It's an [onomatopoeic](#) word, mimicking the action with its sound. It can also signify impatience, as in the phrase "champing at the bit." In this poem, its presence is simpler, only serving to place the horse as a representative of the natural world doing a mundane thing.

Ferny (Line 4) - "Ferny" means full of ferns or overgrown. In this case, the "forest's ferny floor" indicates that the wilderness has grown up around the house. There are ferns all around, a signal that no one has been tending to the grounds of the house.

Turret (Line 5) - A turret, in architecture, is a small tower. It is a decorative structure, usually at the top or at an angle of a larger structure. A house that has a turret is presumably a large, grand house. The fact that the house in "The Listeners" has a turret gives the reader a little information about the kind of people who might have lived there, but not much.

Smote (Line 7, Line 25) - To smite is to strike, violently and heavily. It can refer to hitting a thing or a person. It also has an emotional sense, meaning "to affect intensely." The Traveller is hitting the door - with a great deal of force, communicating the urgency of his errand.

Perplexed (Line 12) - To be perplexed is to be confused, or unable to think rationally about a situation. In this poem, the Traveller finds himself perplexed by a situation he didn't expect, and forced to understand something beyond his usual conception of the world.

Dwelt (Line 14) - To dwell is to remain in a place for a period of time, or to live somewhere. The listeners have "dwelt" in the house for an undisclosed period.

Thronging (Line 17) - To throng is to crowd in, jamming a space with things or people. The listeners in this poem are crammed together on the staircase, a strange idea to apply to insubstantial beings. The point is that there are many of them, crowded together to listen to the Traveller.

Harkening (Line 19) - To harken to something is to listen to it. It is sometimes used to indicate listening with particular attention. This emphasizes that the listeners can indeed hear the Traveller's call, and are paying close attention, yet cannot or will not respond.

Cropping (Line 23) - Cropping refers to cutting or shortening. It most frequently describes the trimming of hair or grass. In this case, the Traveller's horse is "cropping the dark turf" of the forest, meaning the animal is cutting it short by grazing.

Ay (Line 33) - Ay, or aye, is an archaic or regional word of affirmation, basically meaning "yes." It also carries a sense of endurance, sometimes being used to mean "always." It can also be an expression of regret and woe, as in the phrase "ay me." While its primary meaning in "The Listeners" is a rhythmic "yes," it also brings in these secondary resonances.

Stirrup (Line 33) - In horse-riding, stirrups are a pair of footrests for the rider to use, both as leverage for mounting the horse and for support while riding.

Iron (Line 34) - In this case, "iron" refers to the metal shoes of the horse. The horseshoes are the iron that the listeners hear striking against stone as the rider leaves.

Plunging (Line 36) - Plunging refers to a violent thrusting or diving. In this case, it is used to highlight the intensity of the Traveller's departure. In his anxiety to get away, he rides his horse hard away from the house, causing its hooves to plunge at the ground.

Even this line is slightly undercut by the possibility of reading "every" with three syllables, however, with one stressed and two unstressed. Most of the other even lines are rougher, such as this one:

Knocking on the moonlit door;

Meanwhile, the odd lines of the poem are metrically wild, covering various types of feet with no apparent reason. For example, take line 15:

Stood thronging the faint moonbeams on the dark stair

This line is metrically confused and nonspecific, and could be scanned in various ways. De la Mare allows the odd lines to vary widely, without any strict reference to meter, which is kept somewhat in check by the even lines. The effect of this constant deviation is destabilizing, mirroring the poem's swing between reality and strangeness.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme is the most stable formal element of "The Listeners." Consistently, the even lines of the poem rhyme in pairs. The odd lines don't rhyme at all. Each [quatrain](#) thus follows this format:

ABCB

Nearly all of the rhymes in the poem are perfect, single-syllable rhymes. Once, de la Mare repeats a rhyme: "head/said" in lines 6-8 and lines 26-28. This precise repetition loops the poem around on itself like clockwork: there is only one thing the Traveller can do, which is to knock on the door, lift his head, and speak. He must repeat this several times, and then leave when his actions produce no response.

The poem's final rhyme is its only example of [slant rhyme](#). "Stone" and "gone," although they are perfect [eye rhymes](#), do not have the same vowel sound. This small discrepancy reflects the uncertain, unresolved nature of the poem's ending. The Traveller has left with his errand incomplete. The poem does not end in a satisfying way, and the slight deviation in rhyme reflects this dissatisfaction.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Listeners" is a poem of 36 lines that does not follow a specific form. It operates primarily as one structural unit, though it could be broken up into 9 quatrains with an alternating rhyme pattern. It is made up of only five sentences, which are extended with clauses separated by commas, colons, and semicolons. The overall effect of the form is, for the reader, like being led into a winding passageway that seems endless. The reader gets no rest from the progress of the action, no time to take a breath. The form of "The Listeners" thus reflects the fact that it is a kind of poetic ghost story. Formally, it relies on a slow but relentless pace, a grim progression, building up to an ending which leaves the reader trapped in a house of spirits as the Traveller rides away.

METER

While "The Listeners" does not adhere to a strict metrical pattern, the even-numbered lines of the poem do stick *roughly* to [iambic](#) trimeter. For example, take line 30:

Though every word he spake



SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Listeners" is a disembodied storyteller, at a distance from the action of the piece. The intention of the speaker is to tell a story—specifically, to relate a mysterious episode in the life of the Traveller who encounters a ghostly world. As a personality, the speaker seems neutral and detached from the action of the poem. The poem's narrative is simply descriptive, offering neither judgment nor much insight

into the thoughts of the poem's characters.

The closest the reader gets to a character in the poem is in line 21, when the Traveller feels "in his heart" that there are supernatural presences listening to him from the silent house. The speaker doesn't offer us any information about the Traveller's thought process, but only what the Traveller does in response to those thoughts. This storytelling stance increases the sense that the poem is a tale concerned with the mysterious and unknowable, told in order to bring a chill to its listeners.



SETTING

The setting of "The Listeners" is a house in a forest at night. Clues to the setting are revealed subtly at the beginning of the poem, as the Traveller arrives. He knocks on a "moonlit door," showing both that it is nighttime and that he has arrived at a house. Meanwhile, his horse grazes on "the forest's ferny floor," which demonstrates that the house is in a wood, and that the area around it has become overgrown.

The setting of the poem never changes, although the reader is allowed to shift perspective, going from the Traveller outside the house to the listeners inside. There is a description of a "turret," implying that the house is a grand one. Otherwise, the prevailing characteristic of the setting is stillness and silence. The Traveller's presence disturbs this stillness, but his retreat allows it to return, bringing the setting back to its timeless state.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Listeners" was published in 1912 as the title poem of Walter de la Mare's second collection. A bookkeeper who lived a relatively unremarkable life, de la Mare had begun publishing poetry and fiction in 1895. By the time he wrote "The Listeners," he had received a government pension in recognition of his work, which allowed him to retire from his job and write full-time. Over his lifetime, he published a stunning amount of literature for children and adults, including novels, short story collections, poetry collections, works of nonfiction, and one play.

De la Mare is known as a writer of the imagination. He was fascinated by children's view of the world, which he saw as more emotionally true, intuitive, and visionary than adult life allows for. In his writing, he sought to achieve a dream-like atmosphere, with the implication of other worlds that can't be understood by human reason. As a poet, he is often compared to his older contemporary Thomas Hardy, whom he admired and was acquainted with. Hardy's visionary poetic sensibility

was a great influence on de la Mare, who even wrote a poem about his 1921 visit to Hardy's home. Hardy himself allegedly asked his wife to read him "The Listeners" towards the end of his life, remarking, "That is possibly the finest poem of the century."

De la Mare is also associated with several poets anthologized in a series called "Georgian Poetry," referring to the reign of King George V. The poets of this school come at a point between the classicism of Victorian poetry and the Modernist rejection of sentimentality. The anthologies include poems notable for their emotion, aestheticism, and even self-indulgence. The most well-known poets of the school are Robert Graves, Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, D.H. Lawrence, and de la Mare himself.

Later writers like W.H. Auden, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Robert Frost expressed admiration for his imaginative and technically masterful poetry, but most of de la Mare's poems are relatively little known today. "The Listeners" remains the most famous of his works, and certainly his most well-known poem. However, his fiction has continued to influence writers of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. Writers such as Richard Adams and Joan Aiken have praised his work, and H.P. Lovecraft considered him a master of "fear-studies," or writings about the uncanny.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

De la Mare published "The Listeners" in 1912, two years before the start of World War I. Some of his younger contemporaries, such as Siegfried Sassoon and Rupert Brooke, would go on to fight and die in the war, writing and publishing about their experiences. Too old to be obliged to serve, de la Mare continued to live a quiet, domestic life.

De la Mare lived to see the massive changes that the world wars brought to England, from broader industrialization to the destabilization of class. His poems, however, continued to operate in his private world of romantic fantasy, Gothic castles, and forests. De la Mare was never a political poet, in that he did not explicitly address the forces that govern people's lives. He preferred instead to focus on the internal experience of emotion and to envision the world as seen through an imaginative child's eyes. However, one important element of his poems is the progress of time, and the loss it inevitably leads to. The poet outlived most of his friends, his wife, and his reputation as a great writer, dying in 1956.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [BBC Radio Performance of "Seaton's Aunt"](#) — One recording of Walter de la Mare's ghost story, "Seaton's Aunt," among readings of his other tales of the

supernatural. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5VOod2kZCo>)

- [Walter de la Mare's Biography](#) – An overview of de la Mare's life, including a brief analysis of his poetry and fiction. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/walter-de-la-mare>)
- [Anthony Hecht on Walter de la Mare](#) – A brief introduction to Walter de la Mare's life and work by American poet Anthony Hecht, followed by a selection of de la Mare's poems. (<http://archive.wilsonquarterly.com/essays/walter-de-la-mare>)
- [Critical Essays on de la Mare](#) – A small online collection of essays about de la Mare's work and his literary context, hosted by the Walter de la Mare Society. (<http://www.walterdelamare.co.uk/15.html>)
- [Listen to "The Listeners"](#) – A reading of "The Listeners," and another poem by Walter de la Mare, hosted by the

Poetry Archive. (<https://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/walter-de-la-mare>)

- [Georgian Poetry](#) – One overview and analysis of the school of Georgian Poetry, of which de la Mare was a part. (<http://mural.uv.es/tasenfe/georgianpoets>)



HOW TO CITE

MLA

O'Brien, Liam. "The Listeners." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 23 Jan 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

O'Brien, Liam. "The Listeners." LitCharts LLC, January 23, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/walter-de-la-mare/the-listeners>.