Fame is a fickle food

POEM TEXT

Fame is a fickle food
Upon a shifting plate
Whose table once a
Guest but not
The second time is set
Whose crumbs the crows inspect
And with ironic caw
Flap past it to the
Farmer's corn
Men eat of it and die

SUMMARY

Celebrity, the speaker says, is an unreliable source of sustenance served on an equally unreliable dish. One may find oneself a welcome visitor at its table one moment only to find one's seat has been taken the next. Even scavenger birds look closely at fame's leftover morsels and scoff, then fly away in search of simple, hearty food instead. People taste fame, the speaker says, and then they die.

THEMES

THE FLEETING, UNRELIABLE NATURE OF FAME

"Fame is a fickle food" presents fame as an unhealthy and unreliable source of sustenance. To be "fickle" is to be volatile and inconstant. In comparing fame to "fickle food," then, the speaker argues that celebrity may *taste* good but is prone to suddenly disappearing. As such, even crows turn up their noses at its crumbs, preferring the reliable nourishment of "Farmer's corn." The humble products of hard work and dedication, the poem implies, are far more valuable than the fleeting excitement of fame.

The poem treats "fame" and celebrity as unpredictable and ultimately out of people's control. "Fame is a fickle food" in the sense that it can change in an instant. People may get a taste for fame only to return to the "table" to find that no place has been "set" for them because fame has latched onto a new target. In fact, the very "plate" that fame is served on is also "shifting," or unstable. This suggests that something that's popular one moment might no longer be in favor the next. As such, one can only ever be a "Guest" when it comes to eating at celebrity's table—there are no guarantees of having a seat.

Given that food is essential to life, the speaker's metaphor implies that fame isn't worth much in the first place. It's essentially junk food: tasty and exciting but devoid of actual, lasting nourishment. Even crows, scavengers of the animal world who will eat just about anything, are too smart to mess with the remains of this "fickle" food. They may fly in to "inspect" the "crumbs" of fame, yet, with an "ironic caw" (or a mocking cry), they'll go seek "Farmer's corn" instead. This implies that humble yet consistent nourishment is better than the fleeting treat of fame.

The speaker goes on to say that "Men eat of [fame] and die," implying that celebrity is outright toxic. (This would certainly explain why the crows steer clear of it!) That's not to say fame literally kills the person who tastes it, but rather that it makes them crave something they can never have again. Fame, once tasted, only results in a feeling of absence, a deep longing to have it again. In this way, the poem suggests that it is perhaps better never to taste fame at all. While its excitement may be tempting, in the long run, fame will only cause misery.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Fame is a fickle food
Upon a shifting plate

The speaker wastes no time in stating exactly how they feel about "fame." Using a metaphor, they compare fame to a "fickle" (unpredictable or volatile) "food." Given that food is essential to life, this metaphor implies that people mustn't rely on fame for any sort of soulful nourishment.

Notice how the thick /f/ alliteration of this opening line makes the speaker's declaration all the more emphatic and memorable:

Fame is a fickle food

The first line reads like an aphorism: short, clever, and quotable, it has the feeling of bearing some profound truth in just a few words.

The speaker builds on the idea of "fame" as "food" in the next

line, saying that this metaphorical meal is served "Upon a shifting plate." Not only is fame *itself* unpredictable, then, but the *context* in which fame exists is also inconstant. That is, what's in one day might be out the next; fame is "shifting" in the sense that people can never get a firm grip on it.

These first two lines are written mostly in iambic trimeter, a meter consisting of three iambs in a row, with a variation in the first foot of line 1:

> Fame is | a fick- | le food
> Upon | a shift- | ing plate

That opening foot ("Fame is") is a trochee (a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable), which is a common variation in iambic meters and starts the poem off on a rousing, forceful note. After this, the poem follows a steady da-DUM rhythm that grants its lines a familiar, musical cadence.

LINES 3-5

> *Whose table once a*
> *Guest but not*
> *The second time is set*

The speaker continues to build on the metaphor introduced in the first line of the poem. Now, they focus on the "table" where this shifting plate of fame might be served.

A person might be a "Guest" at this table one day, the speaker says, only to find that no place has been "set" for them the next. Not only is the "food" itself always changing, then, but the people invited to eat it are changing too.

Listen to the sibilance, /t/ consonance, and short /eh/ assonance here, which encourage the reader to slow down and really pay attention to some pretty slippery syntax:

> Whose table once a
> Guest but not
> The second time is set

The phrasing actually implies that this "table" *belongs* to fame; fame is *both* the food and the host of the party where it's served! The recipients of fame are truly powerless to control it.

That sibilance also adds a sinister hiss to these lines, evoking the slippery, treacherous, and tempting nature of fame.

Notice how the sharp enjambment between lines 3-4 messes with the iambic meter established by the poem's opening lines:

> Whose table once a
> Guest but not

On the page, things look suddenly confusing: line 3 ends with an unstressed beat, while line 4 opens with a stress and has just three syllables total. Yet, read aloud, there's no pause between lines 3-4; if readers were to combine these lines on the page to reflect the way they sound to the ear, they'd create a single line of iambic tetrameter (a line of four iambs):

> Whose ta- | ble once a | Guest | but not

There's also a slant rhyme between "plate" at the end of line 2 and "set" at the end of line 5. Combining lines 3-4 thus also creates a much more traditional quatrain stanza with an ABCB rhyme scheme, which would look like this:

> Fame is a fickle food
> Upon a shifting plate
> Whose table once a / Guest but not
> The second time is set

Of course, this *isn't* how the poem actually appears on the page. Having that would-be line of tetrameter enjambed across *two* lines gives the poem a much more unstable feel, echoing the instability of fame itself.

LINES 6-7

> *Whose crumbs the crows inspect*
> *And with ironic caw*

The speaker continues with the extended metaphor of "fame" as a volatile and unreliable "food." Now, the speaker says that "crows" examine the leftover "crumbs" of fame, then give an "ironic caw" and fly away. In other words, even nature's most unscrupulous scavengers (crows are known for being opportunists who will eat essentially anything) know better than to bother with fame.

The fact that they scoff at these "crumbs" suggests that nature looks down on the human desire for celebrity, something the poem implies doesn't offer meaningful or sustaining nourishment. Fame isn't just *unreliable* then; even when it *is* available, it's is so lacking in metaphorical nutrients that it isn't worth the time it would take to gather up its "crumbs."

Harsh /c/ and /r/ alliteration and consonance help to evoke the derisive laughter of the crows as they skim over fame's worthless "crumbs":

> Whose crumbs the crows inspect
> And with ironic caw

The word "caw" is also an example of onomatopoeia, as it evokes the shrieking sound it describes. The reader can vividly imagine the comparison the speaker is making. The speaker is of course personifying the crows here, given that they can't literally scoff at or mock anything. This personification implies that the speaker is using this metaphor to express their *own* disdain of fame.

LINES 8-9

Flap past it to the
Farmer's corn

These crows pass over fame's "crumbs," the speaker continues, and go on to nibble the "Farmer's corn" instead. In other words, they recognize that fame isn't going to sustain them; they need something filling and nutritious to satisfy their hunger. "Corn" might be common and unexciting, but it's real, reliable food—predictably planted, tended, and harvested. Corn is the product of hard work and dedication, not to mention humility: the "Farmer[]" here is anonymous, yet their crop feeds countless others.

Listen to the /f/ alliteration, /p/ and /r/ consonance, and /ah/ assonance in these lines:

> Flap past it to the
> Farmer's corn

These sounds again add music and intensity to the poem, and they also subtly evoke the crows' swift movements as they go in search of more nourishing food.

Also notice that lines 8-9, like lines 3-4, *sound* like a single line of iambic tetrameter (a line of four iambs) that's been split in two. There's also arguably a spondee, or two stressed beats, on the first foot here, adding yet more emphasis to the crows' flight:

> Flap past it to the / Farmer's corn

The sharp enjambment after "the" in line 8 means there's no pause between these lines when read aloud. As such, there is once again a disconnect between how the poem *sounds* and how it *looks* on the page. This disconnect again highlights the capriciousness of fame.

LINE 10

Men eat of it and die

In the poem's final line, fame goes from being merely "fickle" to outright deadly: "Men eat of it and die," the speaker says.

The speaker isn't saying that people literally keel over after getting a taste of fame, but that fame is metaphorically poisonous. This line suggests that once someone gets a taste for fame, nothing else can compare (thus why the "crows" wouldn't even bother with its "crumbs"). One bite of fame leads to a desire for more. And since fame is an inconsistent "food," they might never be able to get their hands on it again; they'll starve.

The poem's first half nodded to the common ABCB rhyme scheme, and it does so again here—but just barely. There's a *very* subtle slant rhyme between "caw" in line 7 and "die" in line 10, more an *echo* of rhyme than an actual rhyme. This near disappearance of rhyme in the second stanza perhaps suggests the disappearance of fame. Fame simply can't be counted on, not the way that something real like "corn" can.

Listen, too, to the spondee at the beginning of this final line:

> Men eat | of it | and die

The double stress of that first foot emphasizes that "Men" (i.e., human beings) who unwisely do what the "crows" would not—gobble up those tasty "crumbs" of fame—are bound to pay a steep price for it. Fame may be tantalizing, the poem argues, but it's a temptation one is better off resisting.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration adds musicality and rhythm to the poem, and it also calls readers' attention to key moments. The first line, for instance, is particularly memorable thanks to all the /f/ alliteration:

> Fame is a fickle food

Alliteration emphasizes the importance of this opening line, which encapsulates the speaker's argument and has the clever concision of an aphorism.

Elsewhere, alliteration affects the speaker's tone. Take lines 6-7, where sharp /cr/ and /c/ alliteration makes the speaker's descriptions of nature's disdain for "fame" all the more emphatic:

> Whose crumbs the crows inspect
> And with ironic caw

The harsh sounds here evoke the "caw[ing]" sound that crows make (as does the more straightforward onomatopoeia of "caw"). The consonance of "inspect" adds to the effect as well.

There's more alliteration in the next two lines, as the speaker says that the crows "Flap past it [fame] to the / Farmer's corn." Once again, this sonic repetition adds memorable music to the poem and highlights the image of scavenging crows swiftly flapping past the worthless crumbs of celebrity.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Fame," "fickle," "food"
- **Line 5:** "second," "set"
- **Line 6:** "crumbs," "crows"
- **Line 7:** "caw"
- **Line 8:** "Flap"
- **Line 9:** "Farmer's"

CONSONANCE

In addition to alliteration, the poem also uses consonance to create music, rhythm, and emphasis. This consonance often overlaps with alliteration: take the /f/ sound in "shifting" in the second line, which echoes all the /f/ alliteration in the first. Similarly, the sharp /c/ sounds in "second" and "ironic" echo and reinforce the alliteration of "crumbs," "crows," and "caw." These subtle instances of consonance don't stand out much on their own, but they help the poem feel more memorable and musical overall.

In lines 2-6, there are also quite a bit of /t/, /s/, and /z/ sounds:

> Upon a shifting plate
> Whose table once a
> Guest but not
> The second time is set
> Whose crumbs the crows inspect

Some of these sounds are more deliberate than others ("but," "not," and "is" are very common words and their consonance can be considered somewhat incidental). Still, all this consonance encourages the reader to slow down and really enunciate each syllable of the poem. The specific combination of crisp and hissing sounds might also evoke nature's (and the speaker's) distaste for celebrity.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Fame," "fickle food"
- **Line 2:** "shifting plate"
- **Line 3:** "table," "once"
- **Line 4:** "Guest"
- **Line 5:** "second time," "set"
- **Line 6:** "crumbs," "crows inspect"
- **Line 7:** "ironic caw"
- **Line 8:** "Flap past"
- **Line 9:** "Farmer's," "corn"

ASSONANCE

Assonance works alongside alliteration and consonance to make "Fame is a fickle food" all the more sonically interesting and memorable. Listen to the /ay/ sounds that weave throughout the first three lines ("Fame," "plate," "table"), for instance, which add some subtle, pleasing music to the poem.

The next three lines then feature insistent /eh/ sounds that work similarly: "Guest," "second," "set," "inspect." Note how there's consonance at work here too, in the repetition of those /s/, /t/, and sharp /c/ sounds. And in line 8, the more nasal /ah/ sounds of "Flap past" subtly evoke the quick "Flap[ping]" motion of the birds' wings as they fly in search of more nourishing food.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Fame"
- **Line 2:** "plate"
- **Line 3:** "table"
- **Line 4:** "Guest"
- **Line 5:** "second," "set"
- **Line 6:** "inspect"
- **Line 8:** "Flap," "past"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The speaker uses an extended metaphor comparing fame to food in order to make their argument about the unhealthy and unreliable nature of celebrity. The speaker begins the poem by declaring that "Fame is a fickle food," meaning that fame can't be counted on; it might be there one moment and gone the next.

Building on this initial metaphor, the speaker says this food is served "Upon a shifting plate." In other words, the *circumstances* in which celebrity exists aren't predictable either; something that's in favor now might not be in favor in the future, and just because a person is a "Guest" at fame's metaphorical "table" today doesn't mean that there will be a place "set" for them tomorrow.

The terms of the metaphor might be a little murky at this point, as "Fame" seems to now be at once food and host for this imagined dinner party. Still, the message remains clear: fame is slippery unpredictable, and it doesn't stick with one person for long.

The speaker then says that even "crows" aren't interested in this fame-food. They scoff at its "crumbs," choosing "Farmer's corn" instead. Fame isn't just fickle, this metaphor suggests, but unhealthy—or at least lacking in lasting nourishment. As such, crows would prefer the reliable sustenance of a "Farmer's corn."

Finally, the speaker says that "Men eat of [fame] and die." In this final metaphor, fame becomes outright dangerous: once people get a taste for it, the speaker implies, they just want more and more. Metaphorically, they starve.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10

ENJAMBMENT

Nearly the entire poem uses enjambment, creating swift, slippery momentum that evokes the quickly "shifting" nature of fame.

The poem doesn't use any punctuation (though various editors over the years have inserted some where it seems to make sense). As such, readers must pay attention to the syntax to

really whether a line is enjambed or not. For instance, the first line is syntactically complete in and of itself:

> Fame is a fickle food

This *could* be a stand-alone sentence. However, once the reader moves to the second line of the poem it becomes clear that the sentence isn't actually finished in line 1:

> Upon a shifting plate

Line 1 is thus enjambed. Readers might then think that the sentence ends here in line 2, but there's again no punctuation to indicate a pause. As such, readers are pushed onto the poem's third line, which extends the sentence further:

> Whose table once a

Readers might argue that there's an *implied* pause before "Whose," given that this word begins a secondary clause. As such, it's open to readers' interpretation as to whether line 2 here is *truly* enjambed or not. Lines 3-4 are then quite obviously enjambed, however, as they break off right in the middle of an incomplete phrase:

> Whose table once a
> Guest but not
> The second time is set

Already, readers can see how shifty and, indeed, "fickle," the poem's lines are. It's hard to know where they're going next or when to pause. In this way, enjambment adds tension and anticipation to the poem and evokes the same unpredictability the speaker attributes to "fame."

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "food / Upon"
- **Lines 2-3:** "plate / Whose"
- **Lines 3-4:** "a / Guest"
- **Lines 4-5:** "not / The"
- **Lines 6-7:** "inspect / And"
- **Lines 7-8:** "caw / Flap"
- **Lines 8-9:** "the / Farmer's"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem personifies the "crows" who refuse to eat "crumbs" of "fame," saying that they give "ironic caw[s]" before flying away to eat "corn" instead. In other words, they mockingly squawk at fame's crumbs before flying off to a more nourishing, reliable food source.

This reflects the fact that nature has no use for fame; the animal world is about survival, not popularity, and as such the crows scoff at the pitiful "crumbs" human beings long for. Since "crows" are famously scavengers, the fact that they pass over these crumbs suggests that fame lacks *substance*. It doesn't nourish crows (or, the poem implies, people) in a meaningful, lasting way.

Of course, crows can't really mock anything. The speaker is projecting their *own* disdain for fame onto the natural world. It's really the *speaker* who finds the human desire for fame foolish.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-9:** "Whose crumbs the crows inspect / And with ironic caw / Flap past it to the / Farmer's corn"

VOCABULARY

Fickle (Line 1) - Unreliable or unpredictable.

Shifting plate (Line 2) - *Shifting* means changing unpredictably, so here the speaker is just saying that the metaphorical dish the "fickle food" is being served on is also unreliable.

Ironic (Line 7) - Mocking or scoffing.

Caw (Line 7) - The sound a crow makes.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Fame is a fickle food" is made up of 10 lines. The poem is sometimes broken into two stanzas, with a stanza break between lines 5 and 6 (it's often difficult to know for certain what Dickinson intended due to the handwritten nature of her poems, most of which weren't discovered until after her death).

Dickinson usually wrote using quatrains, or stanzas of four lines, often using common or ballad meter (meaning the lines would alternate between iambic trimeter and iambic tetrameter—three da-DUMs and four da-DUMs—and follow and ABCB rhyme scheme; more on this in the Meter and Rhyme Scheme sections of this guide).

Listening to the poem aloud, it actually *sounds* like a pretty standard Dickinson poem. The main difference on the page is that she's broken what would typically be each quatrain's third line in half. That is, metrically, lines 3-4 scan like a *single line of iambic tetrameter*. Note, too, that there's a slant rhyme between "plate" and "set"—what would normally be the second and fourth lines of the quatrain, had Dickinson not split that third line:

> Fame is a fickle food

Upon a shifting *plate*
Whose table once a / Guest but not
The second time is *set*

The sharp enjambment after "a" (visible in Dickinson's handwritten version of the poem) adds a bit of shiftiness to this poem about the "shifting" nature of fame. The same thing happens in the second half of the poem. What would typically be the third line of the stanza gets split in two, with another sharp enjambment:

Whose crumbs the crows inspect
And with ironic *caw*
Flap past it to the / Farmer's corn
Men eat of it and *die*

Again, there's a (very, very faint) slant rhyme in what would normally be the second and fourth lines of a quatrain ("caw"/"die"), and again the third line feels like it's been cut off in its middle.

Of course, Dickinson didn't actually write the poem like this! In breaking up the expected quatrains, she made the poem itself more "fickle."

METER

"Fame is a fickle food" is a bit of an odd Dickinson poem in terms of meter: read aloud, its rhythms stick close to the iambic trimeter found in many of her poems (meaning lines have three iambs, poetic feet with a da-DUM rhythm), but the text is broken up at unpredictable places on the page.

Take a look at lines 1-2:

Fame is | a fick- | le food
Upon | a shift- | ing plate

Line 1 is mostly in iambic trimeter, though it begins with a trochee (a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable). This is a minor variation that emphasizes the word "Fame," which is, of course, what the poem's about! Line 2 is then in perfect iambic trimeter.

These first two lines set up an expectation that the *whole poem* will be written in iambic trimeter, but lines 3-4 quickly undermine that expectation:

Whose tab- | le once | a
Guest but not

Here, the poem is still following an iambic rhythm, but the syllable count for each line is off thanks to the enjambment after "a." Note, however, that if you were to *compress* these two lines, you'd have a line of perfect iambic tetrameter (a line of four iambs):

Whose tab- | le once / a Guest | but not

After this, the poem moves back to regular iambic trimeter:

The sec- | ond time | is set
Whose crumbs | the crows | inspect
And with | iron- | ic caw

Lines 8-9 feature the same pattern as lines 3-4: they're essentially one line of iambic tetrameter broken in half:

Flap past | it to / the Farm- | er's corn

Readers might scan that first foot as a spondee (two stressed beats in a row, "Flap past"), granting extra emphasis to the crows' swift movement away from the crumbs of fame. Still, the overall iambic rhythm remains intact.

In essentially breaking the third line of each stanza in half, Dickinson has made a predictable meter a little shiftier. That is, the poem's slippery meter mirrors the poem's argument that fame is "fickle" and "shifting." Just as one can't ever predict "fame," one can't really get one's footing in this poem.

The final line then returns to iambic trimeter, though it's again possible to hear a spondee in that opening foot:

Men eat | of it | and die

This extra stress in an otherwise metered line adds weight to the speaker's pronouncement about the dangers of fame.

RHYME SCHEME

Reading the poem aloud, one can hear an echo of Dickinson's typical ABCB rhyme scheme—though this rhyme scheme doesn't actually appear on the page.

As noted in the Form and Meter sections of this guide, Dickinson has essentially chopped lines 3 and 8 in half. There's no pause between the ends of these lines and the starts of the next; read aloud, they simply sound like *continuous* lines. If one were to *combine* them on the page with lines 4 and 9, respectively, they'd each become complete lines of iambic tetrameter and the rhyme scheme would *look* more like it *sounds*. Take a look at how this would work:

Fame is a fickle food
Upon a shifting plate
Whose table once a / Guest but not
The second time is set
Whose crumbs the crows inspect
And with ironic caw
Flap past it to the / Farmer's corn
Men eat of it and die

Of course, Dickinson didn't actually write the poem this way! The dissonance between what the ear hears (mostly regular meter and rhyme) and what the eye sees contributes to the poem's own "fickle[ness]." That is, things feel as slippery and unpredictable as the "fame" the speaker so distrusts.

Even laid out like this, though, the poem's rhymes are far from perfect. Dickinson is known for her use of slant rhyme, and the first rhyme, between "plate" and "set" in lines 2 and 5, is a great example of this. The /t/ sound at the end of each word gives just enough resonance for the reader to recognize it as a rhyme, but not so much that it sounds sing-songy. The imperfection of the rhyme keeps the reader feeling a little unsteady, evoking the uncertainty of "fame."

What's really interesting is the near *lack* of rhyme between "caw" and "die" in lines 7 and 10. There's only the very faintest of slant rhymes here, and the speaker has thus messed with readers' expectations once again. The near disappearance of rhyme echoes the inevitable disappearance of "Fame."

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is anonymous, providing no information about their gender, age, or their own relationship to "fame." This anonymity makes sense, given that the speaker has no interest in being well-known!

It's worth noting that Dickinson herself was decidedly not famous in her lifetime (though she has posthumously gone on to become one of the most recognizable names in poetry). She became extremely reclusive later in life and wrote many poems about the value of anonymity, legacy, and the perils of publication. As such, readers might reasonably take the speaker's perspective to represent that of the poet herself.

SETTING

The poem doesn't have a clear setting, and its argument about the nature of fame could apply to any context. The speaker describes a "shifting plate" upon set "table," but there's no actual dinner party happening: instead, this is part of the speaker's metaphorical comparison of fame to "food." The next few lines conjure images of "crows" turning up their beaks at the "crumbs" of fame left behind on this imagined table, and instead flapping off to find some "Farmer's corn." Again, though, this image is metaphorical, a way for the speaker to convey fame's "fickle," unhealthy nature.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), one of the world's most influential and beloved poets, might never have been known at all. She published only a handful of poems during her lifetime, preferring to keep much of her writing private. Dickinson only became widely known after her death, when her sister Lavinia discovered a cache of nearly 1,800 secret poems and brought them to publication with the help of a (sometimes combative) group of Dickinson's family and friends.

That said, it would be a mistake to view Dickinson *only* as a literary recluse or to think that she didn't intend for her poetry to be read in the future. She ordered many of her poems into sequences that she then sewed together into fascicles (or booklets), saving many others as unbound sheets.

"Fame is a fickle food" is far from the only poem Dickinson wrote on the subject of celebrity (see: "Fame is a bee," "Fame is the one that does not stay," "Fame is the tint that Scholars leave," and "The Clover's simple Fame"). She also argued for the value of anonymity in one of her best-known poems, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?"

Dickinson was inspired both by contemporary American Transcendentalists (such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose essays on self-reliance she deeply admired) and by the work of earlier English writers like Charlotte Brontë and William Wordsworth. All these authors shared an interest in the lives of ordinary people and struggled for inner freedom in a 19th-century world that often demanded conformity.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson lived in small-town Amherst, Massachusetts all her life. She grew up in a strict Protestant environment that placed great emphasis on religious rules and social codes (in fact, her family line can be traced back to the 16th-century Puritan settler John Winthrop). Though she ultimately rejected organized religion, her poems remain preoccupied with theological concerns (including the existence of an afterlife and competing ideas about the ways in which people ought to serve God). Dickinson's religious upbringing also manifests in the hymn-like rhythms of her poetry.

Dickinson wrote most of her poetry during the American Civil war, which ran from 1861 to 1865. She was firmly on the Union side of that bloody conflict; in one of her letters, she writes with delight about the ignominious defeat of Confederate president Jefferson Davis, who was reportedly trying to make his escape disguised in a woman's skirt when he was finally captured. She even contributed three anonymous poems—some of only a handful she published during her lifetime—to a fundraising magazine in support of the Union army.

However, Dickinson rarely addressed the political world around her directly in her poetry, preferring either to write about her immediate surroundings or to take a much wider philosophical perspective. And by all accounts, Dickinson's life was extremely unusual for the time. Most women were expected to marry and have children, but she never did; in fact,

towards the end of her life, she barely spoke to anyone but a small circle of close friends and family. She spent most of her time shut up in her room, relatively immune to what was taking place outside in the wider world.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Look at Dickinson's Life — A Poetry Foundation biography of one of the world's most beloved, and mysterious, poets. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)
- Dickinson's Personal Thoughts on Publication and Fame — A letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson in which Dickinson famously says, "If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her." (http://archive.emilydickinson.org/correspondence/higginson/l265.html)
- The Emily Dickinson Museum — An online database of precious artifacts from Emily Dickinson's lifetime. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/collections/)
- The Poem in Dickinson's Handwriting — An archive of the original, handwritten poem. (http://www.emilydickinson.org/manuscripts/fame-1)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- A Bird, came down the Walk
- After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
- A narrow Fellow in the Grass
- An awful Tempest mashed the air—
- As imperceptibly as grief
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- Before I got my eye put out
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I dwell in Possibility –
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- If I can stop one heart from breaking
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I like a look of Agony
- I like to see it lap the Miles
- I measure every Grief I meet
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- I started Early — Took my Dog —
- I taste a liquor never brewed
- It was not Death, for I stood up
- I—Years—had been—from Home—
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- One need not be a Chamber — to be Haunted
- Publication — is the Auction
- Safe in their Alabaster Chambers
- Success is counted sweetest
- Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
- The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
- There came a Wind like a Bugle
- There is no Frigate like a Book
- There's a certain Slant of light
- There's been a Death, in the Opposite House
- The saddest noise, the sweetest noise
- The Sky is low — the Clouds are mean
- The Soul has bandaged moments
- The Soul selects her own Society
- They shut me up in Prose –
- This is my letter to the world
- We grow accustomed to the Dark
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Mottram, Darla. "*Fame is a fickle food.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 22 Mar 2022. Web. 27 Mar 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mottram, Darla. "*Fame is a fickle food.*" LitCharts LLC, March 22, 2022. Retrieved March 27, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/emily-dickinson/fame-is-a-fickle-food.