Immortality (Do not stand at my grave and

POEM TEXT

Do not stand
By my grave, and weep.
I am not there,
I do not sleep—

I am the thousand winds that blow
I am the diamond glints in snow
I am the sunlight on ripened grain,
I am the gentle, autumn rain.
As you awake with morning's hush,
I am the swift, up-flinging rush
Of quiet birds in circling flight,
I am the day transcending night.

Do not stand
By my grave, and cry—
I am not there,
I did not die.

SUMMARY

The poem's speaker urges their loved ones not to mourn at their gravesite because they're not there. In fact, they're not asleep (a euphemism for being dead) at all.

Instead, the speaker says, they now exist in the countless breezes and in the glitter of snow. They're the sunlight falling on ripe crops and they're also the soft rain in autumn. When their loved ones wake up on still, quiet mornings, the speaker exists in the birds that quietly dart upward and circle around each other. The speaker is the daytime as it drives out the night.

The speaker again tells their loved ones not to bother coming to their tomb in tears; they don't lie there, because they aren't dead.

THEMES

DEATH, TRANSFORMATION, AND IMMORTALITY

"Immortality" argues that death isn't the ending that people think it is. The poem's speaker, who has died, tells their loved ones not to weep at their gravesite because they aren't there. In fact, they didn't really "die" at all; instead, the speaker says, death merely changed them into the "winds," "sunlight," "rain," "birds," and so on. In other words, though death means the end of their *human* form, the speaker lives on in the natural world. In this way, the poem suggests that death is a transformation rather than an ending—and as such, that human beings are essentially immortal.

Though the speaker's body has been laid to rest in a physical "grave," they want their loved ones to know that this isn't where their spirit resides. "Do not stand by my grave, and weep," the poem begins, with the speaker explaining that they're "not there" nor do they "sleep" (a euphemism for death). Though their *body* might be in the ground, their true essence lives on.

The speaker then lists the various shapes their spirit now takes, illustrating how they've found a kind of freedom and immortality through death. Now that their spirit has left their body, the speaker says, they've become "the thousand winds that blow." This suggests that the speaker exists everywhere at once. Like "the thousand winds," they move across the world in every direction, invisible yet always present.

They're also "the diamond glints in snow," "sunlight on ripened grain," and "gentle, autumn rain." These sweet, pleasant images imply that the speaker has become part of the natural world and its cycles. Just as "the day transcend[s] night," the speaker has, through dying, "transcend[ed]" their individual, finite human form and become something much richer and lasting.

Because of this, the speaker sees no reason why their loved ones should grieve—after all, they haven't *really* been parted. The speaker encourages their loved ones to pay attention to the world around them, as it contains endless proof of their "immortality." When their loved ones wake up in the still of the "morning[]," the speaker says, "the swift, up-flinging rush / of quiet birds in circling flight" is a reminder that the speaker is still present in every moment.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Do not stand
By my grave, and weep.
I am not there,
I do not sleep—

The poem begins with the speaker telling the reader "not [to]

stand" next to their "grave, and weep." Right away, then, the reader knows that the speaker is someone who has died and been buried but doesn't want their loved ones to mourn at their gravesite.

That's because, the speaker continues, they're "not there" and they "do not sleep." "Sleep" is a euphemism for death here. The speaker is saying that while their *body* might be in the ground, their true self (their soul, essence, spirit, etc.) is not—and, indeed, is still awake and alive.

The use of anaphora in these opening lines (the repetition of "I") creates a sense of momentum that carries the reader forward. It also makes the speaker's statement sound more insistent and confident.

Note that this poem has been published in various forms throughout its history. We're using the earliest known published version, which includes line breaks after "stand" and "there." Later versions often omit these line breaks, however, which makes sense when readers consider that they sound like two iambic tetrameter couplets when read aloud:

> Do not stand by my grave, and weep.
> I am not there, I do not sleep—

Iambic tetrameter means the lines consist of four iambs (poetic units with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern). Right away, though, the poem uses some variations on this meter. The first foot here scans most naturally as a spondee (two stressed beats in a row) and the second as a trochee (the opposite of an iamb, stressed-unstressed). As a result, that opening "Do not stand" sounds much more forceful and emphatic:

> Do not | stand by | my grave, | and weep.
> I am | not there, | I do | not sleep—

The general iambic rhythm, meanwhile, lends the poem a steady, familiar sound that's appropriate for a poem meant to offer comfort.

LINES 5-8

I am the thousand winds that blow
I am the diamond glints in snow
I am the sunlight on ripened grain,
I am the gentle, autumn rain.

In lines 5-8, the speaker lists all the ways they live on within the natural world. Using anaphora, the speaker says:

> I am the thousand winds that blow
> I am the diamond glints in snow
> I am the sunlight on ripened grain,
> I am the gentle, autumn rain.

Anaphora gives the poem momentum and makes the speaker's tone feel confident and insistent. It also calls repeated attention to the speaker's continued existence; all those "I am"s reflect the fact that the speaker still *is*, that they're still present in the world. The speaker hasn't really died, because their spirit lives on in everything around them.

On the one hand, the imagery here can be read literally. That is, the speaker believes they really have become part of the "winds" and "snow" and so on in much the same way that a dead animal becomes part of the earth when it dies. In this way, death is *literally* transformed into new life.

Then again, these statements can also be read as a metaphor for the way the speaker will live on in their loved ones' memories; every beautiful moment, the poem implies, is a chance for people to reconnect to their memories of those they have lost.

The sonic devices in these lines make the poem more musical and lyrical. For instance, a mix of muted /n/ and /d/ consonance and short /ih/ assonance ("thousand winds," "diamond glints in snow," etc.) makes these lines sound gentle and soft, as if encouraging the reader to listen closely.

Likewise, the poem's continued use of iambic tetrameter and rhyming couplets creates a calming rhythm. For example, here are lines 5-6 scanned, with the end rhyme italicized for emphasis:

> I am | the thou- | sand winds | that *blow*
> I am | the dia- | mond glints | in *snow*

Clear, simple rhymes like this are part of what makes this poem so successful at comforting people in times of sorrow. The rhythm created by meter and rhyme feels familiar and soothing.

LINES 9-11

As you awake with morning's hush,
I am the swift, up-flinging rush
Of quiet birds in circling flight,

The speaker varies their language a bit while still making their point that death has transformed them into part of the natural world. Instead of describing the elements, however, the speaker now describes something vibrant and free: "birds" soaring upward and circling around each other on a quiet morning. This new image suggests that the speaker hasn't simply become *part* of the natural world; they are still very much *alive* in it, in some form or other.

These lines also feature the poem's clearest enjambment:

> I am the swift, up-flinging rush
> Of quiet birds in circling flight,

This enjambment pushes readers swiftly past the line break, evoking the "up-flinging rush" of those birds.

Notice, too, the use of /w/ consonance and /ing/ consonance/assonance throughout these lines. The /w/ sounds ("awake," "swift," "quiet") seem to simultaneously evoke the stillness of daybreak and the quick flapping of birds' wings. Meanwhile, /ing/ consonance/assonance (a result of all those gerunds—"morning's," "up-flinging," "circling") emphasizes the ongoing *action* of this stanza: nothing is "stand[ing]" still. Instead, life carries on.

LINE 12

I am the day transcending night.

In line 12, the speaker says they are "the day transcending night." The speaker is comparing themselves to daybreak—to the way the sunrise seems to overcome the darkness of night. Symbolically, this image might also reflect the way that the speaker transcends the darkness of death.

The word "transcending" further implies that the speaker is something *more* than they were before being transformed in death. Where before they were *only* human, limited to a small, singular existence, now they are *all* of the various things they've described—"winds" and "rain" and "birds"—at once. Like the words "up-flinging" and "circling" in earlier lines, "transcending" is a gerund, signaling that the verb is ongoing; this process of transcendence never ends.

Line 12 benefits from all the anaphora leading up to it; that final repetition ("I am the day transcending night") feels triumphant. Indeed, the repetition of "I" all down the left margin of the poem emphasizes the speaker's continuous presence in the world: death hasn't erased them. Quite the opposite: the speaker is now "immortal."

LINES 13-16

Do not stand
By my grave, and cry—
I am not there,
I did not die.

The final stanza of the poem mirrors the first. (Reminder that in some versions of the text, these stanzas aren't separate, and the lines are regular couplets instead of being broken into quatrains). The speaker repeats their initial advice, saying:

> Do not stand
> By my grave, and cry—

These lines are exactly the same as lines 1 and 2 except that the word "cry" has replaced "weep." This variation keeps the poem from feeling dull, yet the overall repetition makes it easy to remember and emphasizes the speaker's point.

Once again, they explain that their loved ones need not grieve because the speaker is "not there" and "did not die." Notice that they replace the word "sleep"—a euphemism for death—with the word "die." It's as if, now that they have explained that they will never really disappear, they don't have to sugarcoat the word "die." If death is not an ending, then there's no reason to fear it.

They also switch from present tense ("I do not sleep") to past tense: "I did not die." This suggests that death is firmly behind them, a phase they passed through. Finally, the thudding /d/ alliteration and consonance ("did not die") in the poem's closing moment evokes a heartbeat—further evidence that the speaker's spirit lives on.

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

The poem uses quite a lot of anaphora (and general parallelism), which lends rhythm and insistence to the speaker's argument.

The speaker starts more than half of the poem's lines with the word "I," in fact, calling readers' attention again and again to their presence. Take lines 3-4:

> I am not there,
> I do not sleep—

The poem's end then choices these lines:

> I am not there,
> I did not die.

All this repetition conveys the fact that the speaker hasn't disappeared from the world in death. They're just as present on the earth as they are in this poem.

The speaker repeats the longer phrase "I am the" in lines 5-8, 10, and 12. Again, this emphasizes the idea that the speaker still exists, that they still "are." All of this repetition also simply makes the poem feel very declarative and confident. Listen to the anaphora in lines 5-8, for example:

> I am the thousand winds that blow
> I am the diamond glints in snow
> I am the sunlight on ripened grain,
> I am the gentle, autumn rain.

The speaker is emphatic about their transformation. Thanks to all this anaphora, the poem feels powerfully self-assured.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "I am"
- **Line 4:** "I"
- **Line 5:** "I am the"
- **Line 6:** "I am the"

- **Line 7:** "I am the"
- **Line 8:** "I am the"
- **Line 10:** "I am the"
- **Line 12:** "I am the"
- **Line 15:** "I am"
- **Line 16:** "I"

CONSONANCE

Subtle consonance adds music and emphasis to the poem. Listen to all the muted /n/ sounds in lines 5-8, for example, which create a soft, gentle rhythm:

> I am the thousand winds that blow
> I am the diamond glints in snow
> I am the sunlight on ripened grain,
> I am the gentle, autumn rain.

Assonance adds to the effect, with the short /ih/ sounds of "winds" and "glints in." Overall, the lines have a soothing, lulling rhythm designed to comfort the listener.

The soft /w/, /m/, and /sh/ sounds in the following lines work similarly, evoking the stillness and quiet of the morning as well as the soft flapping of birds' wings:

> As you awake with morning's hush,
> I am the swift, up-flinging rush
> Of quiet birds [...]

Note, too, how lines 10-12 feature a slew of /ing/ words: "up-flinging," "circling," and "transcending." All those gerunds draw attention to the ongoing nature of life.

Finally, the consonance (and alliteration) of line 16 closes the poem on a firm, forceful note:

> I did not die.

Those thudding /d/ sounds convey the speaker's steadfast assurance in their continued existence.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "thousand winds"
- **Line 6:** "diamond glints in snow"
- **Line 7:** "sunlight on ripened grain"
- **Line 8:** "gentle," "rain"
- **Line 9:** "awake with"
- **Line 10:** "swift," "flinging"
- **Line 11:** "circling"
- **Line 12:** "transcending"

IMAGERY

The poet uses simple yet powerful imagery throughout. This imagery presents death as a peaceful, beautiful, and above all natural transformation. It also makes the speaker's argument more visceral and specific. Rather than saying something abstract like, "when we die, we become part of the natural world," the speaker use imagery that brings this sentiment to vivid, imaginative life.

For instance, in line 5, the speaker says "I am the thousand winds that blow." This image suggests the freedom that death offers; the speaker is no longer a single human tied to a certain time and place, but now exists as all the "winds that blow," free to roam in every direction at once (and to surround their loved ones).

The speaker also says that death has turned them into "the diamond glints in snow," "sunlight on ripened grain," and "gentle, autumn rain." All of this imagery not only conveys the glistening beauty of the natural world that the speaker has become part of. It also suggests that those left behind can sense the speaker's presence simply by paying attention to the beauty of the earth itself.

Finally, the speaker says that they are "the day transcending night." This triumphant imagery suggests that death, like the night, is only temporary—part of a cycle that never ends.

Note that each of these phrases might also be read as a general metaphor for the speaker's continued existence after death. That said, the speaker is also being quite literal. After all, as one's body decomposes, it does *actually* become part of the earth. On a more spiritual level, the speaker is saying that their soul/essence/true self/etc. survives after death.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-12

END-STOPPED LINE

The poem consists almost entirely of end-stopped lines. This, combined with frequent anaphora, creates the sense of a steady, confident, self-assured speaker. This isn't someone who's freaking out about death; on the contrary, they're calm and collected, tenderly but firmly asserting their continued existence after their physical burial.

Because there are so many end-stops in a row, the poem develops a slow, emphatic rhythm. Each line is a clear, concise statement; the reader is invited to pause and appreciate each new form the speaker takes. Overall, the prominence of end-stopped lines throughout the poem gives it a certainty and confidence that may feel soothing to the reader/the speaker's loved ones.

That said, there are either one to three enjambments in the poem, depending on which version readers are looking at. The

one enjambment that occurs in all publications of the poem occurs across lines 10-11:

> I am the swift, up-flinging rush
> Of quiet birds in circling flight,

That the enjambment happens after the phrase "up-flinging rush" feels very intentional. Breaking the line in half allows for the rhyme between "rush" and "hush," and it also enacts the forceful, propulsive motion of the birds' flight.

The original, 1934 publication of "Immortality" enjambs the opening lines, as well as the near-repetition of those lines towards the end of the poem:

> Do not stand
> By my grave, and weep.
> [...]
> Do not stand
> By my grave, and cry—

This break at once separates the speaker from their loved ones by placing them on two different lines (the loved ones "standing" above the speaker's "grave"), and it suggests their continued connection by not creating any pause *between* those lines. That is, there's no punctuation to disrupt the flow from lines 1-2 to lines 13-14, which reflects the speaker's point that they still exist all around those who survive them.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "weep."
- **Line 3:** "there,"
- **Line 4:** "sleep—"
- **Line 5:** "blow"
- **Line 6:** "snow"
- **Line 7:** "grain,"
- **Line 8:** "rain."
- **Line 9:** "hush,"
- **Line 12:** "night."
- **Line 14:** "cry—"
- **Line 15:** "there,"
- **Line 16:** "die."

VOCABULARY

Diamond glints (Line 6) - The speaker is comparing themselves to the glitter of snow in the sunlight.

Swift (Line 10) - Quick; the speaker is saying that the "quiet birds" rush upwards quickly.

Up-flinging rush (Line 10) - The speaker is describing the way a flock of birds soar swiftly and forcefully upwards.

Transcending (Line 12) - Surpassing or going beyond; overcoming.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Immortality" consists of eight rhyming couplets, each of which uses iambic tetrameter (a meter consisting of eight syllables per line written in da-DUM stress pattern):

> I am the thousand winds that blow
> I am the diamond glints in snow
> I am the sunlight on ripened grain,
> I am the gentle, autumn rain.

That said, there are various versions of "Immortality" floating around that format the poem somewhat differently on the page. This guide uses the 1934 version of the poem, which is its earliest known publication and is attributed to Clare Harner.

This version breaks the poem into three distinct stanzas: the lines beginning with "Do not stand [...]" are set apart from the body of the poem ("I am the [...] transcending night."), acting as bookends for the speaker's descriptions of the natural world.

The 1934 version also breaks the opening and closing couples apart, stretching these stanzas across four lines instead of two:

> Do not stand
> By my grave, and weep.
> I am not there,
> I do not sleep—

Of course, the poem is very often printed as follows, collapsing those to reflect how they sound when actually read aloud:

> Do not stand by my grave, and weep.
> I am not there, I do not sleep—

Formatting aside, these clear, steady couplets make the poem feel predictable and soothing, like a lullaby for the broken-hearted. It also makes it easy to memorize, which has undoubtedly contributed to its popularity as a bereavement poem.

METER

The poem is written in iambic tetrameter. An iamb is a metrical foot containing an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM), and tetrameter means there are four of these feet per line. For example, here's line 5:

> I am | the thou- | sand winds | that blow

Iambic tetrameter infuses the speaker's words with a soothing, predictable rhythm.

Most of the poem's lines are in perfect iambic pentameter, although there are a couple of exceptions, such as line 7, which has an extra stressed syllable in the second foot:

> I am | the sunlight | on ri- | pened grain,

This extra syllable throws off the rhythm of the line slightly, but not enough to impact the overall musicality of the poem.

Note that while lines 1-4 and 13-16 *look* like quatrains (at least in this particular printed version of the poem), they *read* as tetrameter couplets, just like the rest of the poem. If readers were to compress lines 1-4 into two lines and then scan them, for example, they would look like this:

> Do not | stand by | my grave, | and weep.
> I am | not there, | I do | not sleep—

As readers can see, the lines then fall into rhyming, mostly iambic, tetrameter. The only exceptions are the first two feet, which consist of a spondee ("Do not") followed by a trochee ("stand by") rather than iambs.

This starts the poem on an emphatic note—the speaker is *commanding* their loved ones not to grieve for them.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem consists of rhyming couplets: AA BB CC and so on.

This steady rhyme scheme adds to the poem's comforting, predictable music. The rhymes themselves are all clear and simple; the poet uses full, single-syllable rhymes ("blow" and "snow," "grain" and "rain," etc.) rather than more subtle slant rhymes. This makes the poem more melodic and memorable.

Again, the rhyme scheme looks a little different on the page depending on which version of the poem readers have in front of them. In the 1934 text, lines 1-4 and 13-16 *appear* to follow an ABCB rhyme scheme; it takes reading the poem out loud to discover that these lines are really just two tetrameter couplets broken in half:

> Do not stand
> By my grave, and weep.
> I am not there,
> I do not sleep—

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is someone who has died and been buried (given that they tell their listener not to stand at their "grave"). The poem doesn't offer any specifics about this person's life; those specifics, now that the speaker has died, seem rather beside the point. The speaker's anonymity makes the poem less about *them* and more about the nature of death itself. (The speaker's anonymity is also a big reason why this poem has become such a popular reading at funerals; its message can apply to anyone.)

The speaker insists that they didn't really "die" at all. This is because, though their *body* has ceased to exist, their true essence—their *soul*—has transformed into "winds," "glints in snow," "sunlight on ripened grain," and so on. In other words, this speaker believes that death isn't really the end; they have simply become part of the natural world. For this reason, the speaker doesn't want their loved ones to mourn their passing.

SETTING

The poem doesn't have a specific setting. Though the speaker has died and been buried, their "grave" could be anywhere, at any time. And as the speaker describes the transformation they've gone through—death transforming them into "winds," "birds," etc.—the poem avoids any concrete locations.

The poem's lack of setting is fitting, as the poem essentially argues that through death, people "transcend[]" their human lives and become part of the natural world. They are no longer small and individual; they are everything and everywhere.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The first known version of "Immortality" was published in a 1934 issue of *The Gypsy*, a poetry journal based in Ohio. The poem was submitted by Clare Harner, a journalist and poet from Kansas.

However, the poem's authorship and origins have been widely disputed in the years since. In 1983, Mary Elizabeth Frye, a florist from Baltimore, Maryland, claimed to have written the poem, under the title "Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep"; Harner died in 1977 and thus couldn't dispute Frye's claim. Frye is still commonly cited as the poem's author, though the poem is also often attributed to an anonymous writer. It's even been misattributed to Emily Dickinson! Harner, however, remains the most credible source, given that she wrote and published other poems that bear a resemblance to "Immortality."

There are various *versions* of the poem out there as well, featuring different line and stanza breaks as well as slightly different wording ("at my grave" vs. "by my grave" and "a thousand winds" vs. "the thousand winds"). You can read a few of these versions here, here, and here.

In any case, "Immortality," in some version or another, remains a common bereavement poem. John Wayne famously recited it

at the 1977 funeral of the director Howard Hawkes. The father of a soldier killed in Northern Ireland also read the poem on BBC radio in 1995, having found the text among his son's belongings.

Other famous bereavement poems include "Because I could not stop for Death" by Emily Dickinson, "Funeral Blues" by W.H. Auden, and "To Sleep" by John Keats. In content, theme, and even imagery, "Immortality" bears a resemblance to Christina Rosetti's "When I am dead, my dearest."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Because the poem's origins are so uncertain, there's no saying exactly what was going on when and where it was written. There's nothing in the poem to tie it to one place or time, which is what makes it so enduringly popular.

That said, Clare Harner likely wrote the poem (or at least the first published version of the poem) after her brother's death in 1932. This would have been right in the middle of the Great Depression, a time of immense economic hardship for millions of people across the U.S. and the world. Those who lived in the Dust Bowl (including Kansas, where Harner was from) were particularly impacted by the effects of the Depression due to a series of terrible droughts in the 1930s.

Though the poem doesn't reference any of this, it's worth thinking about how these conditions might have impacted the public's reception of such a simple and comforting poem about death.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of the Poem — Listen to a slightly different version of the poem read aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6w5nBPGNSoM)
- The First Publication of the Poem — View the issue of The Gypsy in which "Immortality" was first printed. (https://www.newspapers.com/image/?clipping_id=54389037&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVlLXZpZXctaWQiOiJlYzI1V4Fb74NZhToEmc9wW3cvstMtyFIuCmVUC-mM)
- The Mysterious Origins of "Immortality" — An article about the poem's contested authorship. (https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/arts-and-books/the-mystery-of-britains-most-famous-funeral-poet)
- Who Was Clare Harner? — A whole blog dedicated to Clare Harner, the Kansas journalist to whom authorship of the poem was attributed in 1934. (https://clareharner.blogspot.com)

HOW TO CITE

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