

# One need not be a Chamber — to be Haunted



## POEM TEXT

- 1 One need not be a Chamber — to be Haunted —
- 2 One need not be a House —
- 3 The Brain has Corridors — surpassing
- 4 Material Place —
- 5 Far safer, of a Midnight Meeting
- 6 External Ghost
- 7 Than its interior Confronting —
- 8 That Cooler Host —
- 9 Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,
- 10 The Stones a'chase —
- 11 Than Unarmed, one's a'self encounter —
- 12 In lonesome Place —
- 13 Ourselves behind ourselves, concealed —
- 14 Should startle most —
- 15 Assassin hid in our Apartment
- 16 Be Horror's least —
- 17 The Body — borrows a Revolver —
- 18 He bolts the Door —
- 19 O'erlooking a superior spectre —
- 20 Or More —



## SUMMARY

Rooms and houses aren't the only things that can be haunted. The mind, too, has passageways that are much bigger and more mysterious than any physical place.

It would, in fact, be much safer to meet an actual ghost in the middle of the night than it would be to confront the colder ghosts that exist within you.

It'd also be much safer to run through an old church while stones are being hurled at you than to run into the dark parts of yourself alone and unprepared.

The parts of ourselves that exist hidden behind our external, conscious selves should be the most frightening things of all. Finding a murderer hiding in your apartment is, by comparison, not all that scary.

The body protects itself from external threats by getting a gun and locking all the doors, while at the same time failing to notice

an even more powerful ghost, or worse.



## THEMES



### THE DARKNESS AND MYSTERY OF THE MIND

Emily Dickinson's "One need not be a Chamber to be Haunted" is about grappling with one's inner demons. The poem's speaker says that the "brain" can be just as "haunted" (that is, full of secrets and threats) as any old house and that no "External Ghost" is quite as scary as people's own deepest, darkest thoughts and feelings. The poem ultimately suggests that people never fully know themselves and explores the anguish and fear that result from feeling at odds with one's own mind.

The speaker compares the mind to a haunted house, a place filled with hidden nooks and crannies that possess dark and mysterious secrets. "The Brain has Corridors," the speaker says, as though the mind were filled with long, twisty hallways. And it's within these creepy corridors that the most terrifying "ghost" might lurk—that is, those unwanted or repressed thoughts or feelings that people are afraid to confront.

The speaker argues that these inner, mental threats are more dangerous than any outer, physical threats because people can't hide from or fight them. In fact, the speaker says that it would be more dangerous for a person to confront their own hidden thoughts and feelings than it would be to meet an *actual* ghost in the middle of the night! Likewise, it'd be scarier to ride a galloping horse through a church with rocks thrown at you than to be alone "Unarmed" with your thoughts. That's because people have no way of escaping from or defending themselves against things that exist within their own minds—that are simply a part of who they are.

The fact that the speaker thinks people need to be "armed" against their minds also implies that there are parts of people beyond their own understanding and control. As such, the speaker says that what people really should be frightened of is "Ourselves behind ourselves, concealed"—that is, the shadowy, hidden, alien selves that exist beneath one's conscious, controlled mind. People might ready a "revolver" or lock the door to keep out known threats, but they can't defend themselves against something they can't see or predict. The speaker thus calls the hidden parts of one's identity a far "superior," or more powerful, "spectre" than any regular old ghost.

The speaker's final, vague "Or More" is a nod to this essential unknowability of people's inner ghosts. As opposed to a single

"Assasin" hidden "in our apartment," the demons within people might take many different, unpredictable forms in order to "startle" their "hosts." The complete unknowability of oneself turns out to be the scariest thing of all.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-4

*One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted –  
One need not be a House –  
The Brain has Corridors – surpassing  
Material Place –*

The poem's opening stanza sets up its argument: the speaker declares that it's not necessary to be a room or a house to be "Haunted." People would typically link haunting to a *physical* space filled with lurking ghosts, but the speaker argues that hauntings can, in fact, happen right within the *mind*.

To support this point, the speaker presents the mind as a mysterious and complex place that, like a house, has "Corridors" (or passageways). In fact, the speaker finds the passageways of the mind to be even longer, darker, and more mysterious than any *real*, physical corridor (than any "Material Place")! This description suggests that it's easy to get *lost* in the mind.

Dickinson uses various poetic devices throughout these lines in order to emphasize the poem's point. Lines 1 and 2, for example, feature [anaphora](#)—repeating the phrase "One need not be a" to hammer home the idea that it's not necessary to be a physical house or room to be plagued by ghosts.

These lines also feature clear [sibilance](#), as in:

The Brain has Corridors – surpassing  
Material Place –

Note how those hissing /s/ sounds add a sinister hush to the speaker's description of the mind.

Finally, this opening [quatrain](#) establishes the poem's iambic rhythm. An [iamb](#) is a poetic foot with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern. As readers can see here, the first and third lines of each stanza are much longer than the second and fourth:

One need | not be | a Cham- | ber – to | be Haunted  
–  
One need | not be | a House –  
The Brain | has Cor- | ridors | – surpassing

Material Place –

Dickinson often uses something called [common measure](#) in her poetry: lines of iambic tetrameter (four iambs per line) alternating with lines of iambic trimeter (three iambs per line). However, the [meter](#) in this poem isn't steady:

- line 1 has *five* iambs (making it iambic *pentameter*) plus a dangling unstressed beat;
- line 2 as three iambs (making it iambic *trimeter*);
- line 4 has four iambs (iambic *tetrameter*) with another dangling unstressed beat;
- and line 4 is actually an iamb followed by an [anapest](#) (a poetic foot that goes unstressed-unstressed-stressed).

It's like the poem is nodding toward a common measure but stumbling, as if the meter is itself lost and disoriented.

### LINES 5-8

*Far safer, of a Midnight Meeting  
External Ghost  
Than its interior Confronting –  
That Cooler Host –*

In the poem's first stanza, the speaker declared that the windy passageways of the mind surpass (or are more extraordinary/longer/windier) than those of any house. The speaker builds on that idea here, saying that it would be more dangerous to meet the hidden parts of one's own mind than it would be to meet a ghost in the middle of the night.

The [alliteration](#) of "Midnight Meeting" calls readers' attention to this phrase and conjures up a dark, creepy atmosphere. These lines also rely on [juxtaposition](#), as the speaker contrasts an "External Ghost" (or ghost that exists *outside* of oneself) and one's "interior"—one's inner self. The "Cooler Host" most likely refers to the mind itself, with the word "Cooler" connoting an icy detachment and suggesting that the ghosts of the mind are more chill-inducing than any "External" threat. (It's also possible to read these lines as saying that the *body* is that "Cooler Host," the thing that houses the "interior"—the mind. Either way, there's a sharp, frightening disconnect between the body and mind here.)

The word "interior" also nods back to the speaker's opening [analogy](#): one might typically use the word to refer to the inside of a *house*, yet here the speaker uses it to refer to one's inner *self*. Similarly, in line 8 the word "host" has connotations of the home, and yet the speaker uses the word in the context of the mind. In both instances, the speaker uses [figurative language](#) that relates to houses in order to develop the idea of the mind as a *space* full of mystery and darkness.

## LINES 9-12

*Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,  
The Stones a'chase —  
Than Unarmed, one's a'self encounter —  
In Lonesome Place —*

The speaker again uses [anaphora](#) here, repeating "Far safer" at the start of line 9. Through this [repetition](#), the speaker drives home just how much *more* dangerous it would be to confront the ghosts of the mind than it would be to confront any outside threat.

The speaker then introduces another unnerving scene: a vision of running desperately through "an Abbey" while being chased by "Stones" (in other words, while having rocks thrown at you!). The mention of an abbey (a large church that houses monks or nuns) adds to the poem's spooky, foreboding atmosphere. Having rocks thrown at you would of course be terrifying, but, as the speaker notes here, one can at least run away from physical threats. By contrast, there's no getting away from the threats within one's own mind.

The speaker thus goes on to say that meeting "one's a'self" (that is, oneself) alone and "Unarmed" is worse than that stone-filled chase. In these lines, the speaker begins to hint at the idea that there are multiple *versions* of oneself. Readers might think of the separation between one's *conscious* self and one's *unconscious* (or repressed) self.

The strange construction of the phrase "one's a'self" actually mirrors that separation, the apostrophe and extra syllable ("a") effectively *distancing* "one" from "self." Also note the echo between line 10's "a'chase" and line 11's "a'self" here: through this [parallel](#) phrasing, the speaker [juxtaposes](#) being chased by outside forces with encountering one's self in "Lonesome Place"—that is, alone. The phrase "Lonesome Place" might also refer to the mind more general, again comparing it to a physical space.

Finally, the word "Unarmed" brings to mind weaponry (something that will return in the final stanza of the poem). This hammers home the speaker's point: it's far safer to be chased through an abbey than to encounter the hidden parts of ourselves because it's impossible to "arm" ourselves against our own frightening thoughts and feelings.

## LINES 13-16

*Ourself behind ourself, concealed —  
Should startle most —  
Assassin hid in our Apartment  
Be Horror's least —*

There are versions of "ourself," the speaker says here, that exist "**behind** ourself"—that is, behind the conscious, external self that people present to the world. The [diacope](#) of "ourself" in line 13 ("**O**urself behind **o**urself") mirrors what's being described: that there are *multiple* versions of "ourself." Not only

are there unknown, mysterious *parts* (or "Corridors") of the mind, but there are also entire *identities*, entire *selves*, existing within us.

The phrasing in line 13 further suggests that what's keeping this other self hidden is, in fact, "ourself": our own *conscious* or *external* self is actively *hiding* that other version of "ourself." In other words, people repress or bury this other self (perhaps because it represents people's darkest thoughts, desires, etc.). Being confronted with that hidden self would be terrifying, the speaker says. In fact, that hidden self is what "should startle" people the "most." In comparison to this terror, some murderer hiding "in our Apartment" is the "least" horrifying thing around!

These lines are an example of [antithesis](#), with the speaker using [parallel](#) phrasing to emphasize the vast *difference* in how scary these things are. Also note the intense [sibilance](#) of the stanza:

Ourself behind ourself, concealed —  
Should startle most —  
Assassin hid in our Apartment  
Be Horror's least —

All those /s/ sounds fill the poem with a hushed, sinister hiss.

## LINES 17-20

*The Body — borrows a Revolver —  
He bolts the Door —  
O'erlooking a superior spectre —  
Or More —*

The speaker continues to [juxtapose](#) physical, external threats with the horrors of the mind. "The Body," the speaker says in this final stanza, might borrow a gun and lock the door to keep out a threat (such as the "External Ghost" from stanza 2, the stone-throwers from stanza 3, or the assassin from stanza 4). But in doing so, the "Body" doesn't notice the "superior spectre"—the even more terrifying/dangerous ghost—*lurking within*.

The speaker is essentially [personifying](#) the body here, treating it as an independent being with its own will and agency. In doing so, the speaker once again implies that people have multiple "selves." The speaker also suggests a certain *disconnect* between the body and the mind, and that the body can't sense or control what the mind is up to.

Referencing "the Body" also emphasizes the *physicality* of these attempts at self-protection: locking the door and carrying a gun would only work against outer, physical threats. By contrast, neither a gun nor a lock can stop *internal* threats weaving through the "Corridors" of the mind. Earlier, the speaker declared that encountering oneself "Unarmed" would be scarier than being chased through an old church. Here, the speaker returns to that idea: people in fact *can't* "arm" themselves against "one's a'self," which is why meeting that

hidden self is so frightening.

The final "Or More" then ends the poem on an ambiguous, unnerving note. The speaker says that the body overlooks not just a single "superior spectre," but potentially even "More" horrifying dangers. The vagueness of that "Or More—" suggests that the speaker can't know or name the dangers that exist within one's own mind.



## POETIC DEVICES

### EXTENDED METAPHOR

The poem relies on a complex [extended metaphor](#) to make its point: that some of the most terrifying things of all lurk within people's own minds. Within this metaphor, the speaker conceives of the mind as a vast space filled with mysterious passageways ("Corridors") in which people's inner demons, repressed selves, and unsavory thoughts/feelings/etc. lurk.

Of course, all this might also be considered a kind of *anti*-metaphor: though the speaker uses language related to houses throughout the poem, the speaker also insists that the mind is emphatically *not* a physical house or "Chamber" in order to emphasize just how much more unknowable, uncontrollable, and terrifying it is.

Indeed, while thinking of the mind as a house of horrors helps readers visualize what the speaker is talking about, the speaker also says that what makes one's inner demons so scary is the fact that they *aren't* external or physical threats (unlike the ghosts of a haunted house or a murderer in an apartment). While the physical "Body" might get a gun or lock the door to protect itself from such threats, there's no such arming oneself against one's own mind. The metaphor thus unravels as the speaker comes to the conclusion that the mind, unlike any house, is haunted by things entirely invisible and unknowable.

#### Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "The Brain has Corridors — surpassing / Material Place —"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Than its interior Confronting — / That Cooler Host —"
- **Lines 11-14:** "Than Unarmed, one's a'self encounter — / In lonesome Place — / Ourselves behind ourselves, concealed — / Should startle most —"
- **Lines 17-20:** "The Body — borrows a Revolver — / He bolts the Door — / O'erlooking a superior spectre — / Or More —"

### PARALLELISM

[Parallelism](#) appears throughout the poem and sharpens the contrast between the body and the mind, internal and external threats, and the different "selves" that exist within people.

Much of this parallelism is specifically [anaphora](#). Take lines 1-2, where the speaker repeats the phrase "One need not be a." The repetition here emphasizes the connection between the words that follow this phrase: "Chamber" and "House." Both of these words, of course, refer to a *physical* space. Line 3 then breaks with this pattern, and, in doing so, emphasizes the fact that the brain is *not* a physical space—yet is "haunted" nonetheless.

The next two stanzas also rely on parallelism, repeating the same "Far safer to do X than Y" structure: it would be "Far safer" to confront some external danger (meeting a ghost or being chased by stones) "Than" it would be to meet one's internal, hidden self. The repetition of the phrase "Far safer [...] Than" adds some rhythm and momentum to the poem while also simply emphasizing the speaker's point.

The poem uses another specific kind of parallelism known as [antithesis](#) in stanza 4, placing two opposing sentiments side by side using similar grammar: "Should startle **most**" in line 14 vs. "Be Horror's **least**" in line 16. The antithesis again calls attention to the contrast between external and internal threats: our inner selves should be the "most" frightening thing of all, and a hiding murderer the "least."

#### Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "One need not be a Chamber"
- **Line 2:** "One need not be a House"
- **Line 5:** "Far safer"
- **Line 7:** "Than"
- **Line 9:** "Far safer"
- **Line 11:** "Than"
- **Line 14:** "Should startle most —"
- **Line 16:** "Be Horror's least —"

### ALLITERATION

There are several instances of [alliteration](#) in this poem, which draw attention to certain images and ideas and also simply make the poem sound more interesting. In line 5, for example, the alliteration of "Midnight Meeting" makes this phrase stand out to the reader's ear. This emphasis allows the reader to rest on the image implied by these words: a dark, scary encounter in the middle of the night.

More alliteration pops up in lines 17-18, where the bold /b/ sound repeats in the words "Body," "borrows," and "bolts." The clunkiness of all those /b/ sounds might evoke a sense of panic as one's "Body" tries to defend itself against external threats. The thudding /b/s are also perhaps like pounding footsteps approaching, drowning out the sneaky "superior spectre" that people *really* need to worry about. This phrase is alliterative too (and, more specifically, [sibilant](#)): the hushed, hissing /s/ sounds creep into the poem on the heels of those loud /b/s, evoking the way that the ghosts of the mind undermine the body's attempts to protect itself from threats.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 5:** "Midnight Meeting"
- **Line 7:** "Confronting"
- **Line 8:** "Cooler"
- **Line 15:** "Assassin," "Apartment"
- **Line 17:** "Body," "borrows"
- **Line 18:** "bolts"
- **Line 19:** "superior spectre"

**JUXTAPOSITION**

The entire poem is built around [juxtaposition](#) as the speaker contrasts the horrors of the physical world with those of the mind.

First, the speaker introduces a juxtaposition between the physical structure of a house and the internal structure of the brain. In line 3, the speaker figuratively describes the brain as possessing "Corridors," or hallways. But in lines 3 and 4, the speaker clarifies that the mind in fact *surpasses* any physical location; it's even bigger and more mysterious than any "Material Place."

In the second, third, and fourth stanzas, the speaker juxtaposes a typically terrifying scene involving an external threat with a description of confronting one's inner self:

- In the second stanza, for instance, the speaker juxtaposes meeting an actual ghost at midnight with a confrontation with one's own mind (the dark parts of which are more chilling than any late-night ghostly encounter).
- In the third stanza, the speaker juxtaposes galloping through an abbey while being chased by stones with encountering one's own hidden self "Unarmed."
- And in the fourth stanza, the speaker juxtaposes the image of a murderer hidden in one's apartment with meeting "Ourself behind ourself."

All this juxtaposition emphasizes just how frightening one's own mind can be by contrasting meeting one's internal self with descriptions of more conventionally scary scenarios.

**Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-16

**DIACOPE**

There's just one example of [diacope](#) in the poem, but it's important. This appears in line 13:

Ourself behind ourself, concealed —

In repeating the word "ourself" here, the poem seems to

cleverly enact just what the speaker describes. That is, the speaker is saying that there are (at least) two versions of ourselves: that conscious version people show to the outside world, and that version that exists hidden ("concealed") behind that outer self. There is quite literally an "ourself" coming "behind" (in a temporal sense) a previous "ourself" in this line of the poem. Diacope thus emphasizes the speaker's point.

**Where Diacope appears in the poem:**

- **Line 13:** "Ourself," "ourself"

**SIBILANCE**

The [sibilance](#) in this poem—all those hissing, slithering /s/, /z/, and /sh/ sounds—makes things feel all the more mysterious and frightening. This is a poem *about* haunting, so it makes sense that it features a slew of hushed, whispery, even ghostly sounds.

Note, for example, the hisses of "surpassing / Material Place" in the opening stanza, which makes the mind sound very creepy indeed. The same can be said of the phrase "lonesome Place" in line 12 and basically all of stanza 4:

Ourself behind ourself, concealed —  
Should startle most —  
Assassin hid in our Apartment  
Be Horror's least —

The stanza feels hushed and tense thanks to all that sibilance. The hiss of "superior spectre" in the second to last line seems to evoke the way that this "spectre," this ghost of the mind, creeps up on the "Body" when it's not looking.

**Where Sibilance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 3:** "surpassing"
- **Line 4:** "Place"
- **Line 10:** "Stones a'chase"
- **Line 11:** "one's a'self"
- **Line 12:** "lonesome Place"
- **Line 13:** "Ourself," "ourself, concealed"
- **Line 14:** "Should startle most"
- **Line 15:** "Assassin"
- **Line 16:** "Horror's least"
- **Line 19:** "superior spectre"

**PERSONIFICATION**

The speaker [personifies](#) the mind (or, at least, the deepest, darkest parts of it) in the poem, describing it as an individual entity that operates independently of the body. Personification lends the mind a sense of agency and is essential to the speaker's broader point: the speaker argues that confronting one's own inner self, one's own mind, is frightening and

dangerous precisely because it's something that exists beyond people's conscious understanding and control.

In a sense, the speaker personifies the body as well, treating it as capable of locking doors and arming itself. What's important is that the poem makes a clear distinction between the body and the mind, as well as between one's conscious and deeper, hidden "self." Treating these things as independent entities with their own agency is a way of capturing the sense of disorientation, confusion, and fear that the speaker feels *within*.

#### Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "Than its interior Confronting — / That Cooler Host —"
- **Lines 11-14:** "Than Unarmed, one's a'self encounter — / In lonesome Place — / Ourselves behind ourselves, concealed — / Should startle most —"
- **Lines 17-20:** "The Body — borrows a Revolver — / He bolts the Door — / O'erlooking a superior spectre — / Or More —"



## VOCABULARY

**Chamber** (Line 1) - A room, typically a bedroom.

**Surpassing** (Line 3) - Greater than.

**Material Place** (Line 4) - A physical building or location.

**Midnight Meeting** (Line 5) - An encounter in the middle of the night.

**External ghost** (Line 6) - A ghost that exists outside of oneself. In other words, a regular old ghost rather than a ghost of the mind.

**Abbey** (Line 9) - A monastery or a convent. Here, it has connotations of being a big, very old building.

**A'chase** (Line 10) - Chasing.

**A'self** (Line 11) - Oneself.

**Assassin** (Line 15) - A murderer.

**Revolver** (Line 17) - A type of handgun.

**Superior** (Line 19) - Of greater quality or amount. Here, the word could mean that the hidden parts of the mind are more powerful than regular ghosts and/or that there are also many *more* inner demons than there are external ghosts.

**Spectre** (Line 19) - A ghost.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

This poem consists of 20 lines broken up into five [quatrains](#), a.k.a. four-line stanzas.

Dickinson often writes using [ballad](#) stanzas, a form in which longer and shorter lines alternate and follow an ABAB or ABCB [rhyme scheme](#). This poem *looks* a lot like it's using ballad stanzas, but actually isn't! The rhymes are mostly [slant](#) (more on that in the Rhyme Scheme section of this guide) and the [meter](#), while indeed going back and forth between longer and shorter lines, deviates from that of a ballad in significant ways (more on that in Meter).

As a result, something might seem a little off-kilter or unpredictable throughout the poem. The poem's strange, ballad-ish form feels uncomfortable and tense, adding to the poem's eerie, disorienting atmosphere.

### METER

At first glance, the lines in this poem *look* a lot like the [ballad meter](#) that Dickinson often uses. In this meter, lines of iambic tetrameter and trimeter alternate. In other words, odd-numbered lines have four [iambs](#) (poetic feet with a da-DUM rhythm) while even-numbered lines have just three, creating a movement in each [quatrain](#) from long to short to long to short.

Yet Dickinson tweaks things here. The rhythm is iambic and longer and shorter lines do indeed alternate, but the odd-numbered lines have up to 11 syllables instead of the expected eight of tetrameter and also tend to end with dangling unstressed beats (something called a feminine ending). Take line 1, which has 11 syllables:

One need | not be | a Cham- | ber — to | be Haunted  
—

Line 3 then has 9 syllables and features another feminine ending:

The Brain | has Cor- | ridors — | surpassing

Nearly all the odd-numbered lines throughout the poem close with unstressed beats like this: "Meeting," "Confronting," "gallop," "encounter," etc. This isn't what readers expect when a poem is written using mostly iambs (which, again, end on stressed beats, da-DUM). As a result, the poem feels a little unsteady, topsy-turvy—as if the speaker is struggling to find their footing.

The even-numbered lines, meanwhile, usually use iambic dimeter (two iambs in a row, as in "Exter- | nal Ghost"), but there are also some lines of trimeter (as in "One need | not be | a House") and even monometer (a single iamb, as in "Or More"). Those very short lines feel abrupt, as though the speaker has been cut off or suddenly gone quiet.

Altogether, this mixture of feminine endings, unpredictable syllable counts, and abruptness adds to the poem's tense, anxious atmosphere.

## RHYME SCHEME

As is the case with most of Dickinson's poetry, each [quatrain](#) here has the following [rhyme scheme](#):

ABCB

In other words, lines 2 and 3 rhyme but lines 1 and 2 do not. Some of the rhymes here are perfect ("Ghost"/"Host," "a'chase"/"place," "Door"/"More") while others are [slant rhymes](#) ("House"/"Place," "most"/"least"). Dickinson often uses slant rhymes in her poetry, and these tend to keep her poems interesting and unpredictable. Here, the use of slant rhymes might point to the speaker's sense of inner turmoil and confusion and/or the sense that something is amiss.



## SPEAKER

The speaker of "One need not be a Chamber — to be Haunted" is anonymous. The poem never uses the first person, identifies the speaker's gender, or provides any evidence that Dickinson herself is the speaker. That said, Dickinson wrote often about mental health, anxiety, and what we'd now call depression, and it's fair to assume that she drew at least in part from her own experiences when writing this poem.

Dickinson's choice to use an anonymous speaker makes sense when readers consider that the poem is talking about humanity *in general*. The use of the plural pronoun "ourselves" reflects the fact that the speaker believes the poem's message applies to everyone.

The speaker seems confident in their knowledge that the human mind is a dark, foreboding place full of secrets. But in the end, the speaker has as much reason to be afraid as everyone else: they can't safely make their way through the mind's dangerous corridors any more than the reader can.



## SETTING

One might argue that the poem takes place within the mind—or, at least, an imagined version of it that resembles a haunted house. To the poem's speaker, the mind is a place filled with mysterious "Corridors" and lurking ghosts. The poem also [juxtaposes](#) the mind with a series of literal, physical settings, such as a house and an abbey. But the poem doesn't really take place in these settings; the speaker only invokes them in order to emphasize the comparative *immateriality* of the mind—something that is far scarier than any "real" place.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) wrote this poem around 1862,

during an era sometimes referred to as the American Romantic period. Romanticism first emerged in Europe in the late 18th century as a response to the Enlightenment's intense devotion to science and rationality. Romantic writers, by contrast, more often looked inward, focusing on the self and the imagination in their work.

The influence of European romantics is clear in Dickinson's poetry, as is that of American Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose work she deeply admired. Of course, Dickinson was also a wholly unique writer whose poetry featured idiosyncratic diction, imaginative [imagery](#), and immense psychological depth.

Like many of Dickinson's poems, "One need not be a Chamber" grapples with mental anguish and feelings of internal disconnect. "[I felt a Funeral, in my Brain](#)," "[I heard a Fly buzz—when I died](#)," and "[The Brain—is wider than the Sky](#)" similarly demonstrate her preoccupation with the mind's depths and demons.

With its mention of ghosts, chambers, and creepy churches, "One need not be a Chamber" also draws on Gothic imagery. Dickinson was an avid reader of Gothic fiction, major writers of which include Mary Shelley and Horace Walpole.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While Dickinson's most productive years overlapped with the American Civil War—a bloody conflict that split the United States in two—her work rarely makes direct reference to the outside world. This poem's preoccupation with internal rather than external threats fits right in with her characteristic explorations of the mind and the soul, especially in their darker corners.

Dickinson was fascinated by death, illness, and anxiety. This poem, like many of her others, might well have been influenced by her struggles with her own physical and mental health: she struggled with a number of chronic illnesses, and likely suffered from what modern-day doctors would call depression, anxiety, and agoraphobia (though Dickinson herself wouldn't have thought in those terms).

In this suffering, she wasn't alone. Nightmares, melancholy, and [madness](#) were common themes in 19th-century women's literature in particular; see the work of [Charlotte Brontë](#), one of Dickinson's heroes, for just one famous example! The pressures of being a woman in the 19th century might have exacerbated many writers' own inner struggles. Emily Dickinson lived at a time when the literary world was not especially friendly to female poets; she chose not to publish much during her lifetime in part because she knew that male editors would try to interfere with her characteristic style.

This poem, therefore, might be inward-looking and personal—but it's also very much influenced by the world Dickinson lived in.



## MORE RESOURCES

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Emily Dickinson and Gothic Literary History](#) – Learn more about the Gothic literary genre and some of the ways it influenced Dickinson's poetry. (<https://readingemilydickinson.weebly.com/introduction.html>)
- [About Emily Dickinson](#) – Learn more about the poet's life and work. (<https://poets.org/poet/emily-dickinson>)
- [Original Manuscript of "One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted"](#) – Check out a scan of the poem in Dickinson's own hand, written around 1862. ([https://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image\\_sets/8512](https://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/8512))
- [Major Characteristics of Emily Dickinson's Poetry](#) – An overview of some of the most prevalent characteristics of Dickinson's poetry, such as her use of common meter and choice not to identify the speakers of her poems. (<https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/emily-dickinson/poetry/tips-for-reading/major-characteristics-of-dickinsons-poetry/>)
- [1855-1865: The Writing Years](#) – A more in-depth description of Dickinson's most prolific creative period, during which she wrote "One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted." (<https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/emily-dickinson/biography/emily-dickinson-the-writing-years-1855-1865/>)

## 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](#)
- [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](#)
- [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 is no Frigate like a Book](#)
- [There's a certain Slant of light](#)
- [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

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## CHICAGO MANUAL

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