There's a certain Slant of light

POEM TEXT

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are –

None may teach it – Any –
'Tis the Seal Despair –
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air –

When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death –

SUMMARY

There's a particular angle of sunlight that comes through the window on winter afternoons and weighs down on me, much like the heaviness of hearing organ music in a big church.

It prompts a feeling of divine pain in people. This pain doesn't leave any visible marks, but rather a sense of inner confusion about the very meaning of things.

No one can teach other people this feeling, nor does the feeling itself have anything to learn: it's the mark of Despair itself, which is a punishment sent from the air, like an order sent by an emperor.

When this feeling comes, the landscape is so still it's as if it's listening, as if shadows are holding their breath; when this feeling lifts, one feels as distant as the look in the eyes of a corpse.

THEMES

THE NATURE OF DESPAIR

"There's a Certain Slant of Light" can be thought of as a meditation on the nature of despair—where it comes from, what it feels like, and how it affects the mind, soul, and even the landscape. The poem begins with the speaker noticing "a certain Slant of light" that appears on "Winter Afternoons." While light is usually associated with positive things (hope, warmth, and so forth), *this* "Winter" light "oppresses" the speaker. In other words, seeing this cold sunlight makes the speaker feel down, unhappy, and constricted. The poem goes on to explore the origins and effects of this mysterious, melancholy feeling—a feeling that the poem ultimately implies is an unavoidable part of being human.

This feeling is first described as heavy, like a weight pressing down on the speaker's soul. This, the speaker says, is much like the heaviness a person may feel when listening to "Cathedral Tunes," or somber church organ music. This is an interesting comparison: going to church might remind people of their tenuous, temporary place in the world, and of the fact that they are subject to forces beyond their control (that is, to the will of God). Perhaps, then, the despair that the speaker feels is connected to a feeling of helplessness or smallness in relation to the rest of the universe.

Taking this a step further, and building on the common symbolic associations between winter and death, maybe the speaker's despair is tied to an understanding of the inevitability of death. That is, maybe the winter sunlight filtering down to the speaker as the day wanes makes the speaker think about the fleeting nature of life, and this *awareness* is what causes the speaker to feel both pained and trapped. (For more on this, see this guides theme discussion of "Truth and Transformation.")

Adding to this idea, the speaker says this "Slant of light" brings "Heavenly Hurt." This seems like an oxymoron, because heavenly things are supposed to be pleasant—to feel good, not to hurt. But the poem might be suggesting that if God breathed life into human beings, then God *also* created this sensation of despair, because with that life comes death. This despair then can be thought of as a poignant mix of joy and fear, of gratefulness and pain.

The speaker goes on to emphasize the deeply personal and inescapable nature of this feeling, saying that "None may teach it"; instead it is an "imperial affliction" "Sent" to people from "the Air." Heaven was often described as an empire during Dickinson's lifetime, and these lines again suggest that the

"affliction"—the despair—the speaker feels comes from God, or at least something far greater than the speaker themselves. This, in turn, again emphasizes the speaker's powerlessness in the face of despair, which, like an emperor's order, cannot be countered. The use of "us" here and throughout the poem further implies that this despair is shared by all of humanity—indeed, it's just part of being alive. At the same time, however, it is only ever experienced individually, suggesting a sense of isolation and loneliness even within this broadly-felt emotion.

Overall, this gives a sense of hopelessness to the poem: nothing that the speaker, or indeed any human being, does can temper this despair. The response to this grim idea is a sense of passivity: even the landscape can do nothing except "listen" while "Shadows - hold their breath." It is as if the world can only wait for God's/the universe's will to be done. And even when despair lifts, it is compared to the expression in a corpse's eyes; just as death is unavoidable, so is any hope of combating this despair.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 2-3
- Lines 3-8
- Lines 9-11
- Line 12
- Lines 13-16

RELIGION AND NATURE

The poem begins with a natural image—"a certain Slant of light" on "Winter Afternoons." This leads the speaker to a kind of religious reflection, as the speaker attempts to understand the strange feeling the sunbeam evokes and what its presence means. Though the message of the "Slant of light" itself remains vague and mysterious, the poem does suggest that, whatever this message/feeling is, it *comes* from God. What's more, the poem seems to imply that religion *needs* nature, because God's will cannot be expressed directly; instead it filters down to humanity through the natural world, which acts as a heavenly messenger of sorts.

Light is often associated with religious truth (think of the phrase, "I saw the light"), and the speaker makes this divine connection explicit in the first stanza by comparing the sensation this light evokes to the "Heft / of Cathedral Tunes." This simile evokes the deep resonance of organ music, which is strong enough to fill up an entire cathedral—just as, perhaps, God's truth encompasses the whole world.

The phrase "Heavenly Hurt" in the second stanza further implies that this message—and the pain it causes—is coming from God. The third stanza is then even more concrete about the idea of nature as God's messenger. Here God is presented a kind of emperor, sending messages to subjects from afar. The idea of nature as a messenger of religious truths is reinforced by the word "Seal," which refers to wax used to seal envelopes, as well as by the phrase "Sent us of the Air," in which the "Air" delivers, so to speak, heaven's "imperial" decree. To describe heaven as "imperial" is to imagine it as an empire, with God its emperor, which was commonplace in the 19th century and earlier. The "Despair" God sends the speaker in the form of a sealed message is therefore like an emperor sending an order to one of the empire's subjects.

The final stanza returns to the natural imagery with which the poem opens. As a good messenger should, "the Landscape listens" and "Shadows - hold their breath"; in other words, they don't speak. However, this personification also conveys a sense of nature being *afraid* of heaven's decrees, since both listening and holding one's breath are actions undertaken by someone who is afraid. As such, the poem as a whole depicts the relationship between heaven and nature as one of co-dependence, but also of "Distance"—since heaven has far greater power than nature.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Line 9
- Lines 10-14
- Lines 15-16

TRUTH AND TRANSFORMATION

The poem is ambiguous and multiple interpretations when it comes to why, exactly, this angle of light feels so oppressive to the speaker. What is clear, however, is that this strange, unnerving sensation is utterly transformative, shaking up all "the Meanings" inside the speaker's mind. If this light is thought of as representative of truth or knowledge, as light so often is, then the poem might be saying that truth has the power to change the way the people see and understand the world itself.

The speaker begins by focusing on the heavy, painful feeling evoked by seeing a certain angle of sunlight on "Winter Afternoons." Sunlight, as previously noted in this guide, is typically something associated with pleasantness and warmth, while winter is associated with coldness, darkness, and death. As such, this unnerving, paradoxical *winter* light prompts strange, uncomfortable feelings in the speaker.

But light is *also* closely tied to knowledge and truth; it *illuminates* things and brings people out of the metaphorical darkness of ignorance. The speaker's discomfort, then, might be related to a sudden moment of clarity afforded by this winter light. That is, perhaps this winter light reveals an essential truth to the speaker, and this *truth* is what unravels the speaker's world.

What exactly *is* this truth revealed by this "Slant of light"? It's open to interpretation, but we'd argue there are plenty of clues in the poem that it is related to human helplessness and the fleeting nature of life. Winter, again, is closely associated with death—the year is ending, trees are bare, animals hibernate—and winter *light* thus might suggest being forced to *look at*, to confront, the reality of death directly. The winter light thus brings *knowledge*—a sudden painful clarity about life—but not *warmth* or comfort to accompany that cold, hard knowledge. (As noted in this guide's prior theme discussion, the poem further suggests that this truth is in fact a message from God, conveyed through nature.)

The speaker then continues that though the pain of this "Heavenly Hurt" leaves "no scar," it still changes people. It creates "internal difference — / Where the Meanings, are —" While this line is, like much of Dickinson's poetry, ambiguous, it might suggest how seeing this "Slant of Light"—that is, understanding the limits of being human—shakes up the "Meanings" of everything. In other words, this melancholy awareness alters how the speaker sees everything, as if a heavenly hand had reached into the speaker's soul and moved all the "Meanings" around. Perhaps this is why the speaker feels as though the very landscape is holding its breath, that even shadows remain still and silent as this light trickles down. It's like a cold splash of water, injecting the speaker with a sudden, sharp awareness that transforms the world itself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –

The poem starts with the speaker noting a "certain Slant of light" that falls during "Winter Afternoons." "Slant" refers to an angle; think of the way beams of light might angle through a window or trees on a cold afternoon. The speaker will go on to talk about the poignant emotions this light evokes, but even now there's a sense of something being off; light is often associated with life, truth, hope, and warmth, but this light is slanted, at an angle. It's also notably coming through in the winter—a time typically associated with hopelessness, barrenness, and death (the afternoon is also associated with the latter half of a day). As such, there's immediately a sense of tension here. This paradoxical image anticipates the "internal difference," or confusion, that this beam of light prompts in the poem's later stanzas.

And, as is typical with Dickinson's poetry, even this apparently simple image introduces ambiguities: who is the speaker? Are they seeing this beam *themselves*, or are they generalizing about humanity? The first question is never settled; to the second, one can answer "both," since "There's" could mean both "there it is in front of me" and "there exists out there." The capitalization of "Winter Afternoons" treats the phrase like a proper noun, further suggesting that the speaker is talking about a general experience shared across humanity.

The meter of these two lines reflect the poem's tentative tone:

There's a certain Slant of Light,
Winter Afternoons -

The meter is highly irregular. The most common foot is the trochee ("certain," "Slant of," "Winter"), which gives a jerky, stop-start rhythm to these lines, mimicking the speaker's halting thought process.

Line 2 then ends with Dickinson's characteristic dash, which she uses instead of a variety of more typical punctuation, including semi-colons and full-stops. This dash gives a sense of incompleteness to the line, akin to the speaker's urge to drill deeper and deeper into each thought and emotion being experienced. These dashes also lead the reader down and on through the poem as well.

The unusual phrase "Slant of light" recalls another Dickinson poem, "Tell all the truth but let it slant" (1263). In this poem Dickinson writes, "Success in Circuit lies." The association between light and truth is common, but Dickinson's angle, that to get at truth requires going in a "Circuit"—that is, approaching it from an angle rather than head on—is her own. This idea ties in with the way that the beam of light in *this* poem acts as a messenger from heaven, which cannot deliver its truths *directly*, but requires nature as an intermediary (in a way requiring a circuitous path to reach humanity).

LINES 3-4

That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –

Rather than begin analyzing the beam of light itself, the poem focuses first on the *emotions* it prompts. The first of those is a feeling of oppression. This is an ambiguous emotion: one can say easily what anger is or how fear feels, but it is more difficult to describe oppression. This feeling can come about for a vast number of reasons, both personal (unrequited love, envy, guilt, etc.) as well as public (social position, political, or economic powerlessness, etc.). As the poem will go on to claim, the feeling is *both* private and general.

However, despite its ambiguity, the simile "like the Heft / Of Cathedral Tunes" gives the reader a clearer picture of how this particular oppression feels. "Heft" means weight, and the colloquial metaphor "carrying the weight of the world on my

shoulders" means bearing a huge responsibility. Later stanzas will imply that this "Slant of light" comes from heaven; for it to be revealed to the speaker, then, means that the speaker is in possession of a profound and therefore burdensome message, which feels heavy to carry.

Line 4 also introduces the first explicitly religious image in the poem: the "Cathedral Tunes." This refers to organ music, played at the beginning and end of church services and during hymns. Anyone who's been in a church or cathedral while an organ has been playing will likely recall the huge resonance of the music as it echoes throughout the building. This reinforces the sizable "Heft" of the speaker's oppression, as does the word "Cathedral," which is the principal church of a diocese and typically a massive and impressive building.

The meter of lines 3-4 uses more trochees (stressed-unstressed):

That op- | presses, | like the | Heft
Of Cath- | edral | Tunes -

This may represent the speaker's feeling of oppression, the insistence of the initial stressed beats adding a sense of heaviness to the lines themselves.

LINES 5-6

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –
We can find no scar,

Line 5 begins with a seeming oxymoron that further explains the oppressive feeling prompted by the "Slant of light": "Heavenly Hurt." Typically, the adjective "Heavenly" indicates something divine and therefore perfect, pleasant, happy; "Hurt," by contrast, has clearly negative connotations relating to pain and suffering. By combining these two opposite meanings into a single phrase, Dickinson conveys the sense of confusion at the speaker's heart; the speaker feels pain, but this pain comes from Heaven, so it, in some way, must be true and good. The alliteration of "Heavenly Hurt" further binds these words together.

These lines also feature the first pronouns used in the poem: "us" and "We." The first person singular "I" never appears, despite the poem's highly personal tone. Instead, the speaker seeks to universalize from their own experience, saying that "Heavenly Hurt" is not a solitary emotion, but a general "affliction" given to the whole of humanity—in other words, that this is something *everyone* feels at some point.

Line 6 inches towards a more precise description of this "Hurt": it leaves "no scar," meaning that someone experiencing it would show no *visible* sign of their pain. This makes it difficult for anyone to help, since they wouldn't be able to see that the sufferer needed aid. This, in turn, suggests that this "Hurt" is isolating, that this mysterious pain, although perhaps experienced by all people, is still *felt* alone. That is, everyone is *subject* to this pain, but they must still *deal with it* on their own.

LINES 7-8

But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are –

Although the speaker "can find no scar" as physical proof of this "Heavenly Hurt," this feeling still transforms the speaker (and, indeed, everyone it touches) in a major way. It leaves:

... internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are –

Outwardly, the sufferer appears perfectly fine, but on the inside, there is division and confusion in the very place where the mind creates "Meanings" for itself. The capitalization of "Meanings" suggests that the "Hurt" of the "Slant of light" reaches deep inside those it touches and scrambles their most basic beliefs about the world. The comma before "are" is also interesting, and suggests a profound, fundamental change at the center of the speaker's very *being*.

The fact that this crucial word is plural ("Meanings") further hints at multiple interpretations as to what "Meanings" are being referred to. Given the religious themes and imagery throughout the poem, one of these interpretations could refer to the "meaning," or faith, provided by Christianity. Like any religion, this provides a framework with which to understand the world, and the experience of feeling doubt ("internal difference") over this framework can be extremely painful.

Another possible interpretation of "Meanings" is that it refers to the idea of *reason*. Being able to come to logical decisions—whether about things as important as science, math, and morality, or about simple problems like how to organize one's day—is a crucial part of being human. Feeling divided about your own ability to use reason would be very unnerving and destabilizing.

One final possible interpretation (though such is the ambiguity of these lines that there could be many more!) is that "where the Meanings are" refers to the capacity to create art. Under this idea, feeling "internal difference" would be a way for Dickinson to express doubt over her own poetry. Perhaps she is wondering, "What is art's value, when good Christian work is so much more important?" Or, "Compared to my poetic predecessors, does my own work matter?"

The use of assonance on the short /i/ sound in line 7 ("internal difference"), emphasizes the piercing nature of the speaker's confusion and self-division. It stands out against the longer vowel sounds on the following line, in contrast with which it sounds sharp, spiky, needle-like.

LINES 9-10

None may teach it – Any –
'Tis the Seal Despair –

The phrase "None may teach it – Any" has a couple possible meanings. The first is that no one can teach anyone *else* to feel this vague, oppressive emotion; it is something people must experience and define for themselves. The second is that no one can teach the personified truth/feeling carried by the "Slant of light" anything—it has nothing to learn because it, itself, is a truth sent from God (it is, again, a "Heavenly Hurt").

Even as this message/feeling remains mysterious and hard to define, it bears the "Seal" of "Despair." This interesting phrase might imply a few different things. Seals were made of wax and used to close letters until broken by the recipient. This line turns the "Slant of light" into a kind of metaphorical letter that is sealed shut with despair itself. Likewise, the sufferer of this "Heavenly Hurt" is closed off from contact with the outside world, because the feeling prompted by the winter light is something personally, internally felt. Put very simply, despair—meaning a feeling of hopelessness and desperation—isolates people.

In the 19th century, when Dickinson wrote the poem, despair was also considered one of two sins that could prevent salvation (being saved from evil by Christ's sacrifice), the other being presumption (the belief that one needn't behave virtuously in order to be saved). Judas was condemned not for betraying Jesus, but because he *despaired*. This would thus have been a highly charged word for Dickinson as she wrote the poem. Despair literally means "without hope" (*spes* is Latin for hope). The poem thus subtly suggests that losing hope has serious consequences for the speaker's soul (namely, eternal damnation in hell).

Line 10 might also be an allusion to the biblical book of Revelation, specifically chapters 5 to 8, in which John of Patmos has an apocalyptic vision of a scroll shut with seven seals. This scroll contains information visible only to God, and is opened at the end of time during the Second Coming of Christ. Christ divides everyone into sinners, who descend to hell, and the good, who ascend to heaven. Since the speaker suffers from despair, the speaker would be doomed to hell when the seven seals are opened. The speaker's fate, then, is *sealed*, meaning "permanently fixed or fastened."

This is a strange idea, since the speaker also implies that this "Despair" is part of a message *from* God. Perhaps the speaker is saying that the winter light causes a sudden crisis of faith—it shakes up all the "Meanings" within the speaker—and that *giving in* to that loss of faith this would result in damnation. Perhaps this sudden, sharp hopelessness and powerlessness prompted by the "Slant of light" is God testing the speaker, in a way.

LINES 11-12

An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air –

The adjective "imperial" relates to the "empire" of heaven, which has "Sent" this vague message/feeling to humankind. Heaven was often described as an empire in the 19th century, so Dickinson here employs a commonplace idea to emphasize God's power compared to the speaker's, which is similar to the power of an emperor over one of his subjects. An emperor is able to "send" commands that cannot be disobeyed, much as the speaker's despair cannot be avoided.

By calling it an "affliction," Dickinson is possibly making another biblical allusion—this time to the ten plagues which God "Sent" the Egyptians in the book of Exodus, since the word "affliction" is a common synonym for plague. Such an allusion stresses that heaven can send punishments as well as rewards; such a serious punishment as despair could only be merited by a serious sin. This sin might be the speaker's loss of faith, which causes the confusing "internal difference" over the nature of "Meaning."

Heaven does not communicate *directly* however. In line 1 the "Slant of light" acted as a messenger of these "imperial" commands, and in line 12 the "Air" performs the same function. Both light and air are aspects of nature, which, the poem suggests, God uses to deliver messages to humankind. This emphasizes the separation between people and God and the impossibility of knowing God directly. This sense of separation can easily lead, as in this poem, to faithlessness and despair.

The end-rhyme between "Despair" and "Air" is also interesting, since the second word hides *within* in the former ("Despair"). This subtly mimics the way a message is hidden from view by an envelope, stressing God's use of nature, such as "Air," to deliver heavenly messages.

LINES 13-14

When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –

The final stanza returns to nature, which is personified as waiting and, perhaps, afraid. When the beam of light "comes, the Landscape listens" like a messenger being dictated to, emphasizing nature's role as an intermediary between heaven and earth. "Shadows – hold their breath," in an image of total stillness. Normally a beam of light would disrupt existing shadows and cast new ones, but Dickinson specifies the *opposite*, since this particular "Slant of light" is supernatural. Listening and holding one's breath are also actions typical of someone who is afraid, stressing the superiority of heaven over nature.

The use of alliteration and consonance in line 13 on the /l/ and /s/ sounds—"Landscape listens"—gives a lilting quality to the line, mimicking the sense of nature's calm, to which the poem

has returned after the oppressiveness of lines 3-12. This idea of return is also echoed in the poem's form, which for the first time strictly follows the structure of a ballad stanza: a quatrain with alternating lines of 4 and 3 stresses. For the first time in the poem, the meter is also regular, being composed entirely of trochees, with the final unstressed syllable excluded in lines 14 and 16:

When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –

The overall sense of lines 13-14 is one of wholeness or completeness. The regular rhythms of nature predominate once more, the order of things—God at the top, nature below—has been firmly established. Combined with the regular structure of form and meter, the vagueness of the setting, which could be anywhere, emphasizes the universality of the poem's vision of the world.

LINES 15-16

When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death –

The poem's final two lines, for the first time, name death directly, having been discussing it obliquely since line 10 (in allusions to the sin of despair and the Last Judgement).

The speaker uses a simile to describe the "Slant of light" disappearing ("When it goes, 'tis like ..."), comparing it to the "Distance / On the look of Death." This refers to the distant look in the eyes of a corpse and is the first simile since line 3, emphasizing the idea of the final stanza as a return to the mood of the first.

The word "Distance" further suggests the separation between the speaker and the afterlife—which is a godly realm, shut off from access. It also half-rhymes with "listens," the only time that the first and third lines of a stanza have this relationship. The choice to pair these two words ("listens" and "Distance") may indicate the need for people to "listen" for God's messages, which can be difficult to understand due to the "Distance" between God and God's creation. Indeed, this idea is supported by the faint echoes of these two words elsewhere in the poem, with "affliction" and "difference."

Other echoes revolve around the consonance on the /d/ sound in "Distance" and "Death," which evokes the "Despair" of line 10. All three words connote negative ideas, which are echoed by the hard plosive /d/ sound and combine to lend the poem a rather fatalistic tone.

However, despite the despairing note on which the poem ends, with emphasis on the "distance" between humankind and God, and between the living and the dead, the regular meter of this final stanza integrates death into the trochaic rhythms of nature:

When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death –

The relative metrical regularity of this final stanza suggests that death is just as much a part of the world order as life and light are. This may provide some consolation, depending on the reader.

SYMBOLS

LIGHT

Light traditionally has many symbolic meanings: truth, knowledge, goodness, hope, purity, and so forth. In this poem, the "certain Slant of light" observed by the speaker descends from heaven and prompts a feeling of oppression, confusion, and despair; it delivers these emotions like a messenger delivering a "Seal[ed]" envelope with orders from an "imperial" power. As such, while the light here can still be thought of as a symbol of truth, as a divine messenger, and as representative of knowledge itself, this light certainly doesn't convey a traditional sense of warmth or comfort.

To help understand the seemingly contradictory nature of light in the poem, it's useful to consider the symbolic importance of light in the history of Christianity. Light is depicted as a sort of divine message in early Christian art related to the Virgin Birth: the English medieval writer John Lydgate recalls Mary being impregnated by God in the form of a sunbeam—"As the sonne beame goth thurgh the glas, / The Sonne of God thurgh the did pas" (from *Fall of Princes*), while the mosaics in the 12th century Church of the Martorana in Sicily show God impregnating Mary as a beam of light entering her ear. The ear is an organ which receives messages, and Christ's conception was not a choice made by Mary but an *order* from God. Dickinson's use of light as an "imperial affliction" from heaven reflects this tradition.

However, whereas the Immaculate Conception is considered a positive event, the beam of light in the poem prompts negative emotions—above all "Despair" (one of the two sins which prevent salvation, according to 19th century theology). This subverts the traditional positive symbolic values of light. Instead, this light is, again, called an "affliction," a possible allusion to the biblical plagues in the Old Testament. The speaker is not receiving an honorable task from God, as Mary does, but a sort of punishment or test. Perhaps the light illuminates the reality of suffering and death for the speaker, and as such represents a sort of knowledge/awareness that tests the speaker's fundamental faith (the "Meanings" at the core of the speaker's beliefs about the world).

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "certain Slant of light,"

POETIC DEVICES

SIMILE

The first simile in the poem compares the titular "Slant of light" to the "Heft / Of Cathedral Tunes," in the sense that both "oppress" the speaker. "Cathedral Tunes" refers to church music—likely to the swell of organ music as it resonates throughout a cathedral. Cathedrals, in turn, are the chief churches in a diocese, massive structures built as monuments. Hearing such grand music in this setting might cause a deeply emotional response in the listener— perhaps from a sense of closeness to God, or from a sensation or smallness and powerlessness in comparison to God. The "light" has the same heft—the same power and weight—as this music; it presses down on the speaker's soul, shaking the speaker to their core.

The second simile comes in the final two lines. It compares the "Slant of light" retreating to "the Distance / On the look of Death"—that is, to the distant look in a dead person's eyes. This comparison evokes one of the poem's main thematic concerns: death. The idea of distance suggests that human beings are cut off from what lies in store after death, their fate impossible to determine. Given this poem's engagement with Christianity, the significance of such ignorance is that people cannot be certain whether they will end up in heaven, hell, or purgatory; this produces intense feelings of doubt, an emotion that pervades the poem. Another significant aspect of this simile relates to the symbolic importance of light, which often is taken to represent life itself. When light disappears then, it is like life disappearing at the moment of death.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "That oppresses, like the Heft / Of Cathedral Tunes –"
- **Lines 15-16:** "When it goes, 'tis like the Distance / On the look of Death –"

METAPHOR

In a way, this whole poem is metaphorical because it uses a particular experience—seeing a "Slant of light" that falls on "Winter Afternoons"—to represent something else: the state of "Despair" into which the mysterious "We" have fallen. The three *particular* examples of metaphor all appear in the third stanza.

The first is "the Seal Despair." A seal refers to the pre-20th century method for sealing envelopes: molten wax was poured onto the flap, where it was often stamped with the sender's coat of arms. As it cooled it hardened, making it impossible to open the letter without breaking the seal. This metaphor can be interpreted a few different ways. In one, "Despair" is the "Seal" on God's message; one must thus break through "Despair" to receive the message (perhaps, to genuinely connect to God). In another interpretation, "Despair" *itself* is the message "Sent" from heaven, but it is sealed from public view: it is thus marked as a wholly private emotion, even though "We" all may experience it; it is felt alone.

The second metaphor, in line 11, refers to the feeling caused by the "Slant of light" as "An imperial affliction." The word "imperial" relates to empires, so implicitly figures God as an emperor, sending an "affliction" down upon his subjects. "Affliction" is a common synonym for plague, so it may be an allusion to the 12 biblical plagues sent by God to torment the Egyptians in the Book of Exodus. This metaphor emphasizes the power of God over human beings as similar to that of an emperor over his subjects, able to afflict them at will, and them unable to do anything about it.

The final metaphor on line 12 is a continuation of the first in line 10: this feeling is "Sent," like a letter, "of the Air." The fact that it comes from the "Air," which is insubstantial and nonhuman, stresses the fact that, like an emperor's will, it cannot be disobeyed. Human beings cannot control or communicate with the air, any more than they can control or communicate directly with God to counteract any "affliction" He sends them.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-12:** "'Tis the Seal Despair – / An imperial affliction / Sent us of the Air –"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification runs throughout the final stanza of the poem and focuses on nature. The first two instances describe nature's *response* to the unearthly "Slant of light," which add up to a moment of stillness in which the "Landscape listens" and "Shadows – hold their breath."

At first, this appears to be an image of calm; however beneath the surface hovers an air of menace, since listening and holding one's breath are also responses to fear. Like a hunted animal hiding from its pursuers, the landscape seems to want to conceal itself from the beam of light. This image emphasizes the religious nature of light in this poem, which is implied as coming from God—who is portrayed not as merciful and forgiving, but rather as an emperor sending "imperial affliction[s]" down on the imperial subjects. The difference in power between earth and heaven creates a mood of fear from the former (that is, the earthly world) towards the latter.

The second instance personifies "Death" itself, describing it as having a distanced "look" in the eyes. Abstract concepts like Death, Victory, Love and many more, have been personified in

human form since the Ancient Greeks, so Dickinson's doing so is not original. However, she *humanizes* Death, who is not godly like Hades or Pluto, but more like a person's corpse, whose eyes have recently given up their light. This creates a sense of pathos in the reader, in contrast to the fearful awe of nature in lines 13-14.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "the Landscape listens – / Shadows – hold their breath –"
- **Line 16:** "the look of Death –"

OXYMORON

There is just one use of oxymoron in the poem—"Heavenly Hurt"—in line 5. Normally the adjective heavenly refers to something divine, and therefore unambiguously good, pleasant, enjoyable. Hurt, of course, refers to pain, which most people would certainly not consider heavenly! This juxtaposition emphasizes the speaker's confused and divided mind, which is filled with "internal difference" against its own beliefs. It also suggests that this "Hurt" comes *from* "Heaven"; it's not heavenly in the sense of being pleasant, but heavenly in the sense that it literally comes down from the heavens—that is, from God.

To that end, it's also important to note that heaven in this poem does not deliver only *good* things; in fact, it uses "the Air" to send "affliction[s]" down onto human beings. In the Old Testament, God destroys several cities for disobeying his will, actions that today would be considered genocide. Dickinson evokes this idea of God, rather than the forgiving version in the New Testament. This suggests that, for her, heaven is first and foremost a seat of power. Such power uses violence to inflict "Hurt" if it needs to in order to see its will be done.

Where Oxymoron appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Heavenly Hurt,"

ALLUSION

The most definite of the poem's allusions is the mention of the "Seal Despair." Given the poem's broader religious themes, it's possible that this alludes to the Seven Seals mentioned in the Book of Revelation, Chapters 5-8. These seals secure a mysterious scroll, seen by John of Patmos in a vision, the opening of which marks the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the world. According to Christian eschatology (which is theology concerned with the "end times"), this is the point when God's Final Judgement takes place, when sinners are sorted from the good and judged for all time, either being sent to hell or to heaven. Given that "Despair" was one of only two sins in the 19th century preventing salvation (i.e., forgiveness by Christ, with the possible result of entering heaven), this gives the speaker's plight a doom-laden air: if the speaker is plagued by despair, then the speaker will, at the Last Judgement, be condemned to hell.

The second allusion is less definite, but given that a common synonym of "affliction" is plague, it may refer to the Ten Plagues of Egypt. These occur in the Book of Exodus as punishment for Pharaoh not releasing his Israelite slaves—God's chosen people—and include the Nile transforming into blood, locusts devouring crops, infectious boils, and the deaths of all first born Egyptian sons. Emphasized by the adjective "imperial," this allusion stresses God's power to harm. Just as with the Egyptians, about whom God says "They shall know I am the Lord," the reader is left in no doubt about God's authority.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "Seal Despair"
- **Line 11:** "imperial affliction"

SIBILANCE

Sibilance features in the very first line of the poem, evoking the sleepy atmosphere of "Winter afternoons" in which a "certain Slant of light" appears. It then isn't used until the third stanza, which identifies "the Seal Despair" as "Sent" from God, like an "imperial" order. In these examples, sibilance adds a hushed tone to the lines. It functions as a kind of shushing, with heaven using its tremendous power to silence the human sufferers of its "affliction[s]."

Sibilance pervades the final stanza as the poem returns to nature, which is personified as waiting in silence. This effect is bolstered by the /sh/ of "Shadows" and the soft /th/ of "breath" and "Death"—sounds that are in fact often classified as a form of sibilance as well. The technique here echoes the shushing of someone trying to keep quiet, as well as evoking the rustling sound of wind through an otherwise noiseless landscape. In line 15, when the beam of light "goes ... like the Distance / On the look of Death," sibilance mimics the final breaths of someone who's dying, the last thing that anyone around them at the time would likely hear.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "certain Slant"
- **Line 10:** "Seal Despair"
- **Line 12:** "Sent us"
- **Line 13:** "Landscape "
- **Lines 13-14:** "listens – / Shadows"
- **Line 15:** "Distance"

ALLITERATION

There are only a handful of alliterative moments in the poem. The first of these is more specifically sibilance, with the /s/

sounds in "certain Slant" in the poem's first line. Later, "Heavenly Hurt" bases itself on the /h/ sound, which typically evokes breathing. Given that at this point, the speaker is describing pain, it may be intended to evoke the heavy breathing and wincing that often accompanies physical "Hurt." This phrase is also an oxymoron, and the alliteration here also helps to connect these two very different concepts (Heaven and pain).

The second use of alliteration is based around the lilting /l/ sound in "Landscape listens." This soft sound evokes the tranquility of nature as captured in this single snapshot of it waiting, listening, for something to happen.

Finally, note the shared /d/ alliteration of "Distance" and "Death" in the poem's final two lines. These words also recall "Despair" from line 10. All three words connote negative ideas, which are echoed by the hard, plosive /d/ sound, and combine to lend the poem a fatalistic tone. They seem to lead to one another: despair leads to a feeling of distance from God, which is a form of moral death.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "certain Slant"
- **Line 5:** "Heavenly Hurt"
- **Line 13:** "Landscape listens"
- **Line 15:** "Distance"
- **Line 16:** "Death"

CAESURA

All four stanzas contain instances of caesura that break up the flow of reading. The first example on line 3—"oppresses, like"—marks the transition from a description of nature (the "Slant of light") to a focus on the speaker's mindset and emotions, beginning with the feeling of oppression. In this case, the caesura creates a pause that forces the reader to enact this change of gear.

The next two examples appear in a stanza devoted to this personal focus:

> Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –

And:

> Where the Meanings, are –

Above all, the speaker feels confusion ("internal difference") over the "Meaning" of the world and the speaker's own place in it. The halting rhythm produced by these caesuras, in combination with four end-stopped lines, mimics the speaker's faltering thought process. This is emphasized once more on line 9, where a caesura qualifies the statement that "None may teach it" with "Any" perhaps suggesting the speaker's lack of confidence in the speaker's own assertions.

The final three caesuras all come in the last stanza, which describes two points of transition: when the beam of light "comes" and when it "goes." These breaks in the middle of the lines stand like thresholds across which the light emerges and retreats. Rather than producing a smooth reading about a stable setting, they create an unstable reading suited to a shifting setting.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "oppresses, like"
- **Line 5:** "Hurt, it"
- **Line 8:** "Meanings, are"
- **Line 9:** "it – Any"
- **Line 13:** "comes, the"
- **Line 14:** "Shadows – hold"
- **Line 15:** "goes, 'tis"

ENJAMBMENT

"There's a certain Slant of light" contains far more end-stopped lines than it does enjambed lines. For the most part indicated with Dickinson's typical dash, these end-stops create a kind of stop-start rhythm, which mimics the speaker's halting thought process. The few moments of enjambment are all thus the more interesting for their smoothness and rarity.

Line 3 is enjambed, in effect illustrating the "Heft" being described; so weighty and powerful is this oppressive feeling that it spills over onto the next line:

> That oppresses, like the Heft
> Of Cathedral Tunes –

Later, the enjambment of line 11 again seems to mimic the poem's content in this moment, as the "imperial affliction" is "sent" across the white space of the page. The final moment of enjambment is in line 15, the second-to-last line of the poem:

> When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
> On the look of Death –

Again, enjambment is appropriate for the thematic content of these lines. The white space after "Distance" seems to enact that distance itself, reflecting the emptiness that comprises the "look of Death."

It's also worth taking a moment to discuss Dickinson's use of dashes to indicate end-stopped lines throughout the poem. A dash is not the same as a full-stop, a more traditional punctuation mark with which to end-stop a line; whereas a full-stop represents a decisive separation between sentences, a dash might imply a link or continuation. This is especially interesting in line 16—not just because it is the end of the

poem, but also because it refers to "Death," which is a finalizing event. Given both these facts, readers would expect the finality of a full-stop. However, this is a poem pervaded with Christian ideas, imagery, and allusions, and in Christian eschatology death is not the end, but a *transition* between life on earth and life in heaven, purgatory, or hell. Since the dash is a transitional punctuation mark, it suits this vision of an afterlife perfectly.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Heft / Of"
- **Lines 11-12:** "affliction / Sent"
- **Lines 15-16:** "Distance / On"

VOCABULARY

Slant (Line 1) - "Slant" means a sloping position, and here refers to an angled shaft of light. The beam of light acts as a messenger of truths from heaven, which remain ambiguous and must be interpreted over the course of the poem. This also recalls another Dickinson poem, "Tell all the truth but let it slant" (1263), which focuses on another aspect of the word: seeing something from an unusual point of view.

Oppresses (Line 3) - "Oppresses" refers to a feeling of anxiety and powerlessness prompted by the "Slant of light." It also has a political meaning, referring to the unjust exercise of authority to keep people in subjection, which evokes the poem's depiction of heaven as an "imperial" power.

Heft (Line 3) - "Heft" means weight.

Cathedral Tunes (Line 4) - "Cathedral Tunes" evokes the deeply resonant organ music played during church services. This must be loud enough to fill up the vast space of a cathedral, the largest church in a diocese. Many cathedrals are easily capable of seating over 1,000 people.

Internal difference (Line 7) - An ambiguous phrase, likely referring to inner psychological change.

Seal Despair (Line 10) - A "Seal" refers to a pre-20th century method of securing envelopes, in which the sender poured molten wax over the border of the flap once the letter was inside; when the wax cooled it hardened, meaning the envelope couldn't be opened without breaking the seal. (See the Poetic Devices entry on Allusion for more.)"Despair" means loss of hope. In the 19th century it was also considered one of two sins (the other being presumption) that prevented the sinner from receiving salvation—the deliverance from evil by Christ's sacrifice—and thus the possibility of going to heaven.

Imperial affliction (Line 11) - The word "imperial" is an adjective denoting anything related to an empire. "Affliction" refers to a cause of pain or harm, and is a common synonym for plague—see the Poetic Devices entry on Allusion for more.

Look of Death (Line 16) - The "look of Death" describes the expression in a dead person's eyes, which the poem depicts as one of "Distance." Given that the abstract noun "Death" is used instead of "a corpse" or "a dead body" or "the dead," it seems like the speaker imagines this "look" as emerging from the eyes of a personified "Death," such as the gods Hades or Pluto, or the Grim Reaper.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Like most of Dickinson's work, this poem resembles a ballad. It is arranged regularly into four quatrains, each of which has an ABCB rhyme scheme. This is a recognizable form closely associated with folk tales and hymns, suggesting a sort of mythic importance to what is being described in the poem. The simple consistency between stanzas also allows Dickinson to elaborate on a select group of ideas, including the nature of faith, death, the cost of despair, self-confusion, and nature. Within this limit, the poem burrows down into the depths of these ideas, rather than casting a wide net and pulling in a larger number of topics. The final quatrain emphasizes such limits by ending with the same subject matter that begun the poem: nature and the "Slant of light." When that light leaves, the poem ends.

METER

Broadly speaking, the meter follows a pattern of alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines—meaning lines contain four stressed beats, and then three stressed beats. This pattern is generally considered to be part of a "ballad stanza," although the only place this is rigidly maintained is in the final stanza:

> When it comes, the Landscape listens –
> Shadows – hold their breath –

These lines, like most in the poem, are based on a poetic foot called a trochee (DUM-da), with the final unstressed syllable on the second line excluded. As a rhythmic pattern, the use of trochees implies decisiveness, with the initial heaviness of the stressed syllable, followed by doubt, with the lightness of the unstressed syllable. As a combination this echoes the speaker's indecisive and confused state of mind.

It is vital to note that there are various ways one can read Dickinson's meter here. One reading leads to more variety in the stress patterns. According to this reading, the first line's meter is as follows:

> There's a certain Slant of light,

It begins with an anapest (da-da-DUM), followed by a trochee and ending with a stressed monosyllable. However, the stricter

reading would scan the line like this:

There's a certain Slant of light,

Here the line fits the 4-3-4-3 ballad stanza. Such dual readings are possible with many lines. To take one other example, line 5 can be scanned:

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –

Or:

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –

Neither is the correct way to read the poem, and students should be aware of each and receptive to the different effects they offer. The variety produced by the natural reading echoes the speaker's confusion, and the speaker's inability to settle the sense of "internal difference."

RHYME SCHEME

Broadly speaking each stanza follows the rhyme pattern typical of the ballad stanza form, which Dickinson often uses in her poetry. This is:

ABCB

Throughout the poem, each of the B rhymes are full, clear end rhymes. In the first stanza, for example, "Afternoons" in line 2 rhymes with "Tunes" in line 4.

However both the second and fourth stanzas *also* use slant rhymes between their first and third lines. In the second stanza, "gives us" in line 5 chimes with "difference" in line 7; similarly, "Listens" in line 13 is echoed by "Distance" in line 15. The rhyme scheme of these stanzas might thus best be thought of as:

ABAB

What's more, all of these half rhymes chime with *one another* as well—"gives us / difference / listens / Distance" all contain assonance and sibilance that makes them sound quite similar. The gentle sound of these words mimics the calm demanded of one who "listens" over a long "Distance" for a message that has been "give[n]."

Another especially interesting rhyme is that between "Despair" and "Air" in lines 10 and 12, since the word "Air" is actually contained *inside* the word "Despair." This stanza is talking about God sending a message to humanity, which is metaphorically compared to an envelope sealed shut with "Despair." This rhyme, then, seems to reflect the metaphor, in a way, of nature ("Air") as an envelope sealed shut by "Despair."

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a deeply ambiguous figure, whose gender, age, and appearance all remain unclear. It could even be argued that the speaker is a *plural*, as the only first-person pronouns used in the poem are "We" and "us."

Whether singular or plural, the speaker is someone who feels down and lonely, and who is intensely focused on their own reactions to the "Slant": these include "Hurt," a feeling of oppression, "internal difference" (confusion), and "Despair."

SETTING

The setting, like the speaker, is ambiguous. Taken literally, the poem might be thought of as taking place on a winter afternoon with beams of sunlight angling down from the sky. But the poem doesn't even necessarily occupy this specific setting, since the poem opens with *generalized* language about "Winter Afternoons." These could be any or all winter afternoons, anywhere in the world. The only specific details one can glean is that the speaker's reflections are prompted by a natural setting that includes a "certain Slant of light" and a quiet "Landscape," with "Shadows." The speaker may be standing in such a place right now, may be merely remembering it, or perhaps even be imagining it from a cozy study.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Scholars don't know exactly when Dickinson wrote this poem, since, as with all but a small number of her pieces, it was only discovered after her death in 1886. Along with 40 notebooks and disorganized loose sheets, it had been kept undated in a locked chest, without having been shown to anyone else. Her sister Lavinia carried out Dickinson's will, burning most of her correspondence; however, the poet didn't mention what to do with the contents of the chest. When Lavinia discovered the poems inside, she recognized their importance and went about seeking a publisher. With the help of her brother's wife and mistress, the first edition of *Poems* by Emily Dickinson, appeared in 1890.

Dickinson's style was highly irregular at the time, especially her syntax and use of punctuation (such as her characteristic use of dashes and idiosyncratic capitalization). This meant that the first edition of her work involved heavy re-editing of her manuscripts to better fit 19th-century expectations. Certainly her punctuation doesn't have a predecessor in western poetry. That said, much of her language, themes, and imagery derive from traditional sources. Chief among these is the King James Bible. Dickinson's poetry often adheres to the ballad stanza

form and common meter typical of religious hymns and folk songs. Dickinson's writing also often focuses on themes related to death, mortality, and religion, all of which can be seen in this poem.

Another important influence on this particular poem was the Transcendentalist writer Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose writing preaches individualism and solitary communication with God through nature. These ideas can be clearly seen throughout "There's a certain Slant of light," although it lacks Emerson's optimistic viewpoint.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The poem is intensely focused on the individual experience of seeing this "Slant of light," and, as such, very little reference is made to historical context at all. Despite the fact that Dickinson lived through tumultuous times, which included the Civil War and the Industrial Revolution, this poem is focused on a mix of personal, philosophical, and religious themes, and excludes any reference that could date it. This *ahistorical* approach lends it a kind of eternal importance: it is not concerned with narrow questions of the here and now, but deeper dilemmas experienced by the whole human race, by "us" all.

That said, there are thematic ideas in the poem that were influenced by the period in which Dickinson lived. For one thing, there was a widespread religious revival in her hometown of Amherst, Massachusetts in 1845. Dickinson embraced Christianity for a time, though her faith wavered greatly throughout her life. Dickinson was also obsessed by death, particularly after the death of her second cousin from typhus; such diseases were far more common during Dickinson's lifetime.

Finally, as an unmarried woman living in the 19th century, Dickinson was denied much of the freedom and influence of her male counterparts. She was infamously reclusive, often communicating with friends through letters alone, and considered eccentric by neighbors. Her sense of isolation can be sensed in much of her work, including this poem.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Original Manuscript — View the manuscript of the poem, as it was discovered locked in Dickinson's trunk. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/74928)
- "In Our Time" Podcast — Listen to experts discuss Dickinson and her work on the well-known BBC podcast. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDBADIHwchQ)
- Helen Vendler on Dickinson — Read an interview with renowned Harvard scholar Helen Vendler, in which she discusses this and other poems. (https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2010/09/vendler-on-dickinson/)
- Understanding Emily Dickinson — An article introducing students to some of the main aspects of Dickinson's poetry, from the Emily Dickinson Museum. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/emily-dickinson/poetry/tips-for-reading/major-characteristics-of-dickinsons-poetry/)
- "There's a certain Slant of light" Analysis — An academic analysis of the poem by a professor at the University of Nebraska, for students who want to push their understanding to a higher level. (https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/donald-e-thackrey-258-theres-certain-slant-light)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- As imperceptibly as grief
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- Success is counted sweetest
- This is my letter to the world
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Clement, Mathis. "*There's a certain Slant of light.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 7 Jan 2020. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Clement, Mathis. "*There's a certain Slant of light.*" LitCharts LLC, January 7, 2020. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/emily-dickinson/there-s-a-certain-slant-of-light.