

A Bird came down the Walk

Emily Dickinson

A Bird, came down the Walk -
He did not know I saw -
He bit an Angle Worm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw,

And then, he drank a Dew
From a convenient Grass -
And then hopped sidewise to the Wall
To let a Beetle pass -

He glanced with rapid eyes,
That hurried all abroad -
They looked like frightened Beads, I thought,
He stirred his Velvet Head. -

Like one in danger, Cautious,
I offered him a Crumb,
And he unrolled his feathers,
And rowed him softer Home -

Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam,
Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon,
Leap, plashless as they swim.

VOCABULARY

Angle Worm - another term for 'earthworm'

Fellow - a person or being

Convenient - available or easy to access

Sidewise - aside, sideways

Hurried all abroad - looked all around in different directions

Plashless - fluidly, elegantly flowing, without splashing

STORY/SUMMARY

Stanza 1: A bird came down the walkway where I was standing, he didn't know that I was watching him - he bit an earthworm into two halves and ate the creature raw.

Stanza 2: And then, he drank a drop of dew that had settled nearby on a convenient piece of grass, and then he hopped sideways onto a wall to let a beetle go past him.

Stanza 3: He looked around with quick eyes that darted all about - I thought that they looked like frightened beads - he stirred his velvet head

Stanza 4: It was as if he thought he was in danger, cautious, I offered him a crumb of bread, and he spread out his feathers and softly rowed himself home through the air

Stanza 5: His wings through the air were softer than oars that split through the ocean, too silver to leave any trace of their movement through the air like a seam in fabric, they were also softer than butterflies which leap off the banks of noon, making no splash or ripple as they swim elegantly through the air.

SPEAKER/VOICE

The **speaker is a lone figure**, who encounters an equally lone figure of the bird on a path or sidewalk. We could interpret this **symbolically**, as representative of the way in which the human world and natural world interconnect. It is presumably either early morning or evening, as the bird drinks 'dew' from the grass. Other creatures inhabit the world - an earthworm, which the bird eats 'raw', and a beetle, for whom the bird moves out of the way. The speaker finds the contrast between these two encounters interesting, and she then tries to communicate directly with the bird itself, offering it a crumb of her own food. However, he doesn't trust her, and he elegantly glides away - though this should be a disappointing moment for the speaker as she didn't manage to make full contact with the bird, she seems instead to be in awe of its graceful, fluid movement in flight.

TASK: Rewrite the poem from the perspective of the bird, with the human as the subject. You can choose to keep the same metre if you like, or if that's too daunting feel free to just write it as an account in the diary entry form. How does the memory of the walkway change, and what is similar about it?

LANGUAGE DEVICES

Humorous tone: "He bit an Angle Worm in halves / And ate the fellow, raw," - the action of the bird is highly unexpected and a little repulsive - Dickinson personifies him using the pronoun 'he', encouraging readers to empathise with him; then, at this moment she describes a very unhuman behaviour - biting an earthworm in half and swallowing the pieces of it raw. The effect is to place us at a respectful distance to the subject of the bird - to understand that while we may to an extent feel curiosity about him and try to empathise or understand him, some of his instincts and behaviours are very different from our own. Though surprising, the line is also intentionally humorous, particularly with the inclusion of the noun 'fellow', which also personifies the earthworm - as if the speaker thought of the worm and the bird equally as two kind of

animals before she saw one consume the other, and now she distinguishes more clearly between them, perceiving the bird as a more complex being.

Gustatory imagery: “He drank a Dew / From a convenient Grass” - the speaker marvels at the bird’s resourcefulness, we may think that a bird needs to find a pool of water or river to drink from but here he notices that drops of water are ‘conveniently’ clinging to the grass around him, so he takes advantage of that. It also implies perhaps that he is thirsty after eating the worm, further creating **empathy** between readers and the bird as we often feel similarly after eating.

Personification: as well as the **pronoun** ‘he’, which establishes the bird as a male character, his behaviour in some ways feels relatable - for instance, when a ‘Beetle’ scurries along the floor, he hops ‘sidewise to the Wall’ in order to let it pass undisturbed. This is a curious behaviour, as from the speaker’s point of view it seems that there is no need to do this except to be polite and not disturb the beetle. Though this may be a projection of human behaviour upon the bird, it may also be true that he is being kind or at least accommodating to the beetle. Furthermore, the bird’s transition from happy when he is eating and drinking to stressed and confused when he flits to the wall creates further empathy, as we worry for him and his stressed state of being. He has ‘rapid eyes’ that ‘hurried all abroad’, showing that he feels he may himself be in danger. This shifts the perspective we have on the bird from being a predator - one that consumes the earthworm - to prey - one that feels he himself is in danger of being eaten.

Simile: “They looked like frightened Beads, I thought” - the speaker adds the phrase ‘I thought’ at the end as she seems aware of her own awkward attempt to understand and categorise the bird. She uses the **domestic image** of ‘beads’, a manmade object which is familiar to her, to describe the inscrutable, wild eyes of the creature. She seems aware that this is an odd and not entirely accurate image, yet it is also true to her own frame of reference - in some ways it creates an uncanny atmosphere around the bird as the speaker struggles between her instinct to view the bird objectively, as something like a toy without any thoughts or feelings, and subjectively as a feeling, thinking, living being.

Metaphor: “His velvet Head” - the material of the bird’s head is compared to velvet, a plush and luxurious material that is lustrous in the sun - this implies the value and beauty of the bird.

Synecdoche: 'velvet Head', 'rapid Eyes...like frightened Beads' - in her attempt to understand the bird, the speaker deconstructs the bird into component parts - his head is soft and beautiful, but this creates a confusing contrast with his eyes, which demonstrate fear and sharpness with their movement. Alternatively, we could also combine the idea of 'velvet' with 'beads' to create an impression of the bird being like a stuffed toy.

Ambiguity: "like one in danger" - can be read two ways, either the bird behaves that way or the human behaves that way, perhaps they both do.

STRUCTURE/FORM

Anecdote: The poem takes the form of an **anecdote** - a personal story told to prove a point or convey a specific message about something. We are not given too many contextual details - there is **no clear addressee or assigned reader** of the poem, and there is no context for who is the speaker, or her background, so our attention is **focalised** around the encounter of the human with the bird. The meaning is left open to interpretation, but invariably it does lead us to conclusions about how humans should respect and attempt to understand nature on its own terms rather than forcing it to conform to our own way of being.

Opening / Ending: "A Bird, came down the Walk - / He did not know I saw -" the poem begins with a sense of voyeurism where the speaker encounters a bird during a private moment in its life - typically, wild animals only eat and drink when they feel safe, so the bird behaves naturally when it doesn't realise she's there and she is given insight into its personality and habits. However, when it becomes conscious of her, its behaviour changes - at the end of the poem, it fluidly flies away through the air, using the **comparative adjective** 'softer' to state that the movement of the bird is more elegant and gentle even than the way in which "Oars divide the Ocean" - an **image** suggesting that our own technologies are compared to the graceful bird's wings, but that they are also cruder and less elegant than the natural design of the creature. The wings are even softer than "Butterflies, of Banks of Noon" that "leap plashless" as they "swim" through the air. This final set of images play around with our sense of solids, liquids and gases, comparing air to the "Ocean" and time ("Noon") to a river with "Banks", edges to it - the butterflies "swim" in this river of time, and they are

“plashless” as they move through it, not making any splashes or ripples due to the softness of their wings. The bird, however, is even more perfectly designed to glide away seamlessly into the air, as if it exists in perfect harmony with nature, time and its environment. The ending, therefore, forces us to contrast the elegance and harmony of the bird in its environment with the awkwardness of the speaker - she is certainly not ‘plashless’ or graceful in her attempt to interact with nature, as she startles the bird into flying away.

ATTITUDES

Nature can't be easily tamed - The speaker offers the bird a ‘crumb’, a small piece of her own food, despite the fact that he has just eaten a worm. He is either too frightened of her or too full to be tempted by the food and so he flies away. The speaker is arguably **hubristic** in thinking that she could so easily get a wild creature to trust her enough to take food from her hand, though her respect and curiosity for the bird is admirable. This suggests that there is a boundary between being appreciative of nature in all its beauty and wildness, and trying to force it into being tame or bend to a human's will.

Nature is often wild and sometimes puzzling or grotesque - the strange, confusing behaviour of the bird is only odd from a human perspective, to the bird its behaviour is logical and natural. The bird is both a predator that consumes live beings and a fragile creature that may itself be hunted - this sense of duality justifies its varied behaviour, where it transitions quickly from being confident in its surroundings to feeling stressed and as though it is in danger.

Humans should have a quiet respect for nature - the point at which the speaker tries to interact with the bird and tame it is the point where it flies away; this likely signifies that we should have a quiet respect for nature and not try to change it or force it into interacting with us. There is also the sense that from the bird's perspective, the speaker's behaviour seems ‘unnatural’ - she is a larger animal than the bird, and therefore potentially a predatory threat to it as far as the bird is concerned. Therefore, the bird does not trust her offering of food because he sees her as a potential danger, and the risk of being caught outweighs the potential benefit of

the food - particularly when food is already available in abundance within his natural environment. There's also, a suggestion here is that **when we observe or interact with nature, we change its behaviour.**

We make assumptions at first sight about others that may be wrong - we could view the bird and the speaker more abstractly as two beings that come into close contact with each other for the first time. The bird is shocking to the speaker as he devours the worm; equally, the speaker is shocking to the bird once he recognises her presence in the walkway. This could be interpreted as a metaphor for the way in which we are quick to judge one another on first encounters and to make inaccurate assumptions from impulsive judgments. The fact that the speaker appears female and the bird is personified as a 'he' also opens up the potential reading for the poem to be about the interaction of genders.

TASK: We are part of nature, but also in many ways different from wild animals - the encounter with the bird helps us to understand the extent to which the bird and human are similar, and how they also differ. Make a list of similarities and differences between the bird and the human.

CONTEXT

Dickinson led a peaceful, reclusive life, living almost all her years in her family's homestead in Amherst, Massachusetts, USA. Yet, she derived so much complexity from studying the small, isolated world around her and considers it in great detail through her poems - here is an example of how a simple walk down a country path and an encounter with a bird can, in Dickinson's mind, turn into an overwhelmingly tender and spiritual experience that encourages her to think more deeply about the connections between humans, nature, and divinity.

Dickinson's was raised in a highly Christian environment, New England being initially a deeply religious place that was often considered "Puritanical" - an extreme form of

Christianity which encouraged its followers to focus on the state of their soul and their relationship with God instead of being too interested in the material world around them. Puritans often felt guilty about their corrupted souls and were encouraged to comply with the teachings of the church. By Dickinson's time, this belief had mellowed into a softer version of faith, and her family taught her Calvinist values, which merged with her own interests in 'Transcendentalism' - a rejection of institutions such as the church and a belief in the inherent goodness of individual souls, coupled with an appreciation for the natural world as an expression of divine power. Dickinson struggled with faith and doubt throughout her life, particularly with the idea that individuals should follow the church rather than relying on their own minds and instincts and the idea that the entire focus of Christianity should be on Christ, with no focus on the material world around us. Perhaps because of her uncertainty and her naturally inquisitive mind, spiritual questions were always a concern of hers and feature centrally in most of her poems. Here, we can see her interest in the relationship between humans, nature and the spiritual power behind them that connects us all.

Darwinism - new and groundbreaking concepts in science were also being developed around Dickinson's time, the most notable being Charles Darwin's 'Theory of Evolution', which proposed that over time a process of 'natural selection' encouraged all living organisms to adapt to better suit the ever-changing nature of their environments. The bird in the poem is, scientifically, a marvel in terms of its ergonomically designed wings, which glide seamlessly through the air - we could interpret this as Dickinson marvelling at the power of God, or otherwise appreciating the Darwinian stages of evolution which led the bird to develop such beautiful and perfect wings.

THEMES

TASK: For each of the themes below, make a mind map and explore quotations that relate to it. What, in your opinion, is Dickinson's final message or statement about each theme?

- Nature
- Spirituality
- Humanity
- Duality
- Life and Death
- Wildness
- Ecosystems
- Hierarchy
- Communication
- Empathy