

Before You Read

The Soul selects her own Society; If you were coming in the Fall by Emily Dickinson

LITERARY FOCUS: SLANT RHYME

Not that long ago exact rhyme was part of every poet's craft. An **exact rhyme** occurs when the accented syllables and all following syllables of two or more words share the same sound, such as *love* and *dove* or *number* and *slumber*. Many poets in more recent times, however, have chosen not to use rhyme at all. Some do not like the constraint of a rhyme scheme, and some feel that all the good rhymes have been used already.

Other poets choose to use slant rhyme, also called approximate rhyme. **Slant rhyme** is a close, but not exact, rhyming sound. Examples of slant rhyme are *follow* and *fellow*, and *mystery* and *mastery*. Look for exact rhymes and slant rhymes in the following two poems by Emily Dickinson.

Finding Slant Rhymes Some poets like to have a list of rhymes on hand when they sit down to write a poem. Use the chart below to start your own list. The first row has been done to get you started.

Word	Exact Rhyme	Slant Rhyme
love	dove, glove, above	leave, live, loaf, grove
moon		
fight		
shimmer		

READING SKILLS: ANALYZING FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

A major element of Emily Dickinson's poetry is her use of **figures of speech**. In her poems, you'll find **similes**, comparisons of two unlike things using words such as *like*, *as*, *than*, and *resembles*; **metaphors**, comparisons that do not use direct words of comparison; and **personification**, a type of metaphor that gives inanimate things human characteristics. You'll also find **extended metaphors**, metaphors developed over several lines or even over the whole poem. As you read Dickinson's poems, think about what the figures of speech mean and what they help you visualize.



Literary Skills

Understand exact rhyme and slant rhyme.

Reading Skills

Analyze figurative language (metaphor, simile, and personification).

The Soul selects her own Society

Emily Dickinson

IDENTIFY

What does Dickinson **personify** in lines 1–4? Draw a box around the example you find.

ANALYZE

In this poem, Dickinson uses an **extended metaphor**, in which she compares the soul to a queen. How would you explain the chariots at the gate and the kneeling emperor in lines 5–8?

IDENTIFY

Every other line in this poem rhymes. Underline the **slant rhymes**, and circle the **exact rhyme**.

FLUENCY

Read the poem aloud until you can read it smoothly. The dashes are an indication to pause, but don't pause too long. Be sure *not* to pause at the end of the only line that has no dash at the end.

The Soul selects her own Society—
Then—shuts the Door—
To her divine Majority—
Present no more—
5 Unmoved—she notes the Chariots—pausing—
At her low Gate—
Unmoved—an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat—
I've known her—from an ample nation—
10 Choose One—
Then—close the Valves of her attention—
Like Stone—



Emily Dickinson's bedroom window.

Permission to photograph courtesy of the Dickinson Homestead, Trustees of Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts. Photo © Jerome Liebling.

If you were coming in the Fall

Emily Dickinson

If you were coming in the Fall,
I'd brush the Summer by
With half a smile, and half a spurn,
As Housewives do, a Fly.



5 If I could see you in a year,
I'd wind the months in balls—
And put them each in separate Drawers,
For fear the numbers fuse—

If only Centuries, delayed,
10 I'd count them on my Hand,
Subtracting, till my fingers dropped
Into Van Dieman's Land.^o

If certain, when this life was out—
That your's and mine, should be
15 I'd toss it yonder, like a Rind,
And take Eternity—



But, now, uncertain of the length
Of this, that is between,
It goads me, like the Goblin Bee—
20 That will not state—it's sting.

^o**Van Dieman's** (dē'mənz) **Land:** former name of Tasmania, an island that is a state of Australia.



INTERPRET

What does the speaker say she'll do with the months (lines 5–8)? Why would she do that?

IDENTIFY

In this poem, the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme. Circle **exact rhymes**, and underline **slant rhymes**.

INTERPRET

In folklore, a goblin is a tormenting creature. What point is the speaker making by comparing waiting for a bee sting with waiting for her love (lines 17–20)?

EVALUATE

What corrections to lines 14 and 20 would you make if you were editing this poem?

The Soul selects her own Society; If you were coming in the Fall

Reading Skills: Analyzing Figurative Language Sometimes the meaning of figurative language is very clear. When something *stings like a bee*, you know that it hurts. But when it *goads like a Goblin Bee*, you have to infer or interpret the meaning based on the surrounding text and your own prior knowledge.

The chart below lists some figures of speech from Emily Dickinson’s poems. In the other columns, identify the two things being compared, and then write what you think each figure of speech means.

Figures of Speech from “The Soul . . .”	Comparison	Meaning
1. “The Soul selects her own Society—” (line 1)		
2. “I’ve known her—from an ample nation— / Choose One—” (lines 9–10)		
Figures of Speech from “If you were . . .”		
3. “I’d brush the Summer by / . . . / As Housewives do, a Fly.” (lines 2 and 4)		
4. “I’d toss [this life] yonder, like a Rind, / And take Eternity—” (lines 15–16)		

SKILLS PRACTICE

Full Powers

Reading Skills: Comparing and Contrasting Poems Pablo Neruda acknowledged his debt to Whitman for his poetic inspiration. Compare “Full Powers” to the three Whitman poems you have just read. Fill out the chart below with details you find in the poems.

Elements of Poetry	Whitman's poems	Neruda's poem
Subject	Subjects are America, heroes and “the people” in general, poetry, the poet's empathy with all life.	Neruda's subject is himself and his writing. Title refers to his powers as a writer.
Sounds	Whitman uses free verse, repetition of words and sentence patterns, colloquial speech. Poems sound conversational, very rhythmic.	Poem is in translation so it's hard to describe sounds of Spanish. But, like Whitman, Neruda uses a lot of parallel structures and repeats words. Words “sing” and “I” are repeated by both poets.
Imagery	Striking visual imagery, some gory images of blood, etc.	Rich images of place, such as “teeming street,” “black crop of night,” “opening broken doors to the sea, / for it to fill the wardrobes with its foam,” “sea goes battering at a reef / in wave on wave of salty white-tops / and drags back stones.”
Figures of speech	Not many figures of speech. Poetry is pretty straightforward.	Uses more elaborate figures of speech than Whitman. Metaphors of day and night throughout poem: of keys and locks in lines 6–11; says he wavers “as between two lost channels under water”; long comparison in lines 26–32; uses paradox in last line. Poem is more complex and harder to understand.
Theme	Whitman's theme is that all of human life is in his poetry, and he is part of all he surveys, all of earth and all the people in it.	He and his poetry are products of light and darkness, living and dying, being and nonbeing. Shares with Whitman love of earth and humanity.

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Collection 3: American Masters: Whitman and Dickinson

Before You Read

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by Emily Dickinson

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READING SKILLS: ANALYZING FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

A major element of Emily Dickinson's poetry is her use of figures of speech. In her poems, you'll find similes, comparisons of two unlike things using words such as *like*, *as*, *than*, and *resembles*; metaphors, comparisons that do not use direct words of comparison; and personification, a type of metaphor that gives inanimate things human characteristics. You'll also find extended metaphors, metaphors developed over several lines or even over the whole poem. As you read Dickinson's poems, think about what the figures of speech mean and what they help you visualize.



Literary Skills
exact rhyme and slant rhyme.

Reading Skills
Analyze figurative language (metaphor, simile, and personification).

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The Soul selects her own Society

Emily Dickinson

IDENTIFY

What does Dickinson personify in lines 1–4? Draw a box around the example you find.

ANALYZE

In this poem, Dickinson uses an **extended metaphor**, in which she compares the soul to a queen. How would you explain the chariots at the gate and the kneeling emperor in lines 5–8?

The chariots bring suitors, or possible friends or lovers. The emperor is another suitor.

IDENTIFY

Every other line in this poem rhymes. Underline the **slant rhymes**, and circle the **exact rhyme**.

FLUENCY

Read the poem aloud until you can read it smoothly. The dashes are an indication to pause, but don't pause too long. Be sure not to pause at the end of the only line that has no dash at the end.

The Soul selects her own Society—

Then —shuts the Door—

To her divine Majority—

Present no more—

5 Unmoved—she notes the Chariots—pausing—
At her low Gate—

Unmoved—an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat—

I've known her—from an ample nation—

10 Choose One—

Then—close the Valves of her attention—

Like Stone—



Emily Dickinson's bedroom window; photo by John Homestead, Trustees of Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts. Photo © Jerome Libling.

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If you were coming in the Fall

Emily Dickinson

If you were coming in the Fall,

I'd brush the Summer by

With half a smile, and half a spurn,

As Housewives do, a Fly.

5 If I could see you in a year,

I'd wind the months in balls—

And put them each in separate Drawers,

For fear the numbers fuse—

If only Centuries, delayed,

10 I'd count them on my Hand

Subtracting, till my fingers dropped

Into Van Dieman's land.

If certain, when this life was out—

That your's and mine, should be

15 I'd toss it yonder, like a Rind,

And take Eternity—

But, now, uncertain of the length

Of this, that is between,

It goads me, like the Goblin Bee—

20 That will not state—it's sting.

* Van Dieman's (dǝ'manz) Land: former name of Tasmania, an island that is a state of Australia.



INTERPRET

What does the speaker say she'll do with the months (lines 5–8)? Why would she do that?

She would put the months in drawers so that she will not lose track of them.

IDENTIFY

In this poem, the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme. Circle **exact rhymes**, and underline **slant rhymes**.

INTERPRET

In folklore, a goblin is a tormenting creature. What point is the speaker making by comparing waiting for a bee sting with waiting for her love (lines 17–20)?

Waiting for what might be bad news can be worse than the pain of getting bad news.

EVALUATE

What corrections to lines 14 and 20 would you make if you were editing this poem?

Remove the apostrophe in *your's* and the apostrophe in *it's*.

SKILLS PRACTICE

The Soul selects her own Society;
if you were coming in the Fall

Reading Skills: Analyzing Figurative Language Sometimes the meaning of figurative language is very clear. When something *sings like a bee*, you know that it hums. But when it *goads like a Goblin Bie*, you have to infer or interpret the meaning based on the surrounding text and your own prior knowledge.

The chart below lists some figures of speech from Emily Dickinson's poems. In the other columns, identify the two things being compared, and then write what you think each figure of speech means. **Sample responses appear below.**

Figures of Speech from "The Soul . . ."	Comparison	Meaning
1. "The Soul selects her own Society—" (line 1)	The soul is compared to a woman who can choose her own company.	We choose the people we want to be close with or love.
2. "I've known her—from an ample nation— / Choose One—" (lines 9–10)	The soul is compared to a queen. Acquaintances are compared to a large nation.	We sometimes choose just one person to love out of many possibilities.
Figures of Speech from "If you were . . ."		
3. "I'd brush the Summer by / . . . / As Housewives do, a Fly," (lines 2 and 4)	How the speaker would spend the summer, is compared to a housewife brushing away a fly.	The summer would be unimportant; it would pass quickly.
4. "I'd toss [this life] yonder, like a Rind, / And take Eternity—" (lines 15–16)	The speaker's life is compared to a rind of fruit that is thrown away.	The speaker would choose to die.

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Before You Read

Because I could not stop for Death;
I heard a Fly buzz—when I died by Emily Dickinson

LITERARY FOCUS: IRONY

Stories or poems can surprise you. You may expect something to happen based on what you have read so far, and instead the opposite happens. This literary "surprise" is an example of irony. Irony is a contrast between expectations and reality. There are three main kinds of irony:

- **Situational irony** is the kind described above—a contrast between what happens and what we expect to happen.
- **Verbal irony** is a contrast between what is said and what is meant.
- **Dramatic irony** occurs when the reader knows something a character does not know.

The following poems by Emily Dickinson rely on situational and verbal irony.

READING SKILLS: SUMMARIZING A TEXT

Have you ever read the capsule reviews of movies in the TV listings? They usually summarize a movie's plot in just a few sentences. A **summary** of a text is a brief retelling of its main events and most important ideas. The best summaries are complete but short. They include important information only. Summarizing a text is a useful reading skill because it can help you gain a better understanding of what you read.

Use the Skill Both of these poems by Emily Dickinson tell a very brief story. To follow the events, stop at the end of each stanza and summarize what just happened.

RELEVANT SKILLS
As you read "Because I could not stop for Death," you may expect something to happen based on what you have read so far, and instead the opposite happens. This literary "surprise" is an example of irony. Irony is a contrast between expectations and reality. There are three main kinds of irony:

SYMBOL
A person, place, thing, or event that has a meaning that stands for something beyond itself as well. The dove, for example, is a symbol of peace.



Literary Skills
Understand irony.

Reading Skills
Summarize a text.

Review Skills
Understand the use of symbols.

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