

## As imperceptibly as grief Emily Dickinson



As imperceptibly as Grief  
The Summer lapsed away —  
Too imperceptible at last  
To seem like Perfidy —  
A Quietness distilled  
As Twilight long begun,  
Or Nature spending with herself  
Sequestered Afternoon —  
The Dusk drew earlier in —  
The Morning foreign shone —  
A courteous, yet harrowing Grace,  
As Guest, that would be gone —  
And thus, without a Wing  
Or service of a Keel  
Our Summer made her light escape  
Into the Beautiful.

What to make of Emily? She is almost imperceptible, a guest who would be gone... She was not a professional writer, visited no schools to declaim or explain her poems and had no editor to please. She wrote to please herself.

This would go some way to explain why her poetry is tricky for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century reader, especially a young reader. A common piece of advice to poets is to avoid the abstract and make things concrete. Here she does the opposite and whether she succeeds or not is up to the reader to decide. Here is a quote from The Poetry Foundation (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson> )

“To make the abstract tangible, to define meaning without confining it, to inhabit a house that never became a prison, Dickinson created in her writing a distinctively elliptical language for expressing what was possible but not yet realized.”

### First Impressions

Most students will need some vocabular explaining. *Imperceptible, perfidy, sequestered* are not likely to be familiar terms. Having done that, just read the poem through a few times or listen to a recording. Do not worry about the exact meaning of each line. Treat Emily Dickinson like a butterfly – once pinned down, it is dead. After some readings, offer some possible titles and ask students to choose the one they feel most appropriate – or they might write their own.

The passing of summer. The transience of life. Life is short. Time slips away so quietly. I grieve for the ending of summer. Appreciate the present moment. A meditation on impermanence.

### A Closer Look at Language

Ask students to pick out words or phrases which add to the sense of something leaving or declining. (lapsed - twilight - dusk drew earlier in - be gone – escape) Should distilled be added? What happens when you distil something? Notice how gentle all these qualities are.

What phrases do students find strange or confusing? These are phrases I find unexpected or thought-provoking and I would share my feelings with students, offering my musings and encouraging theirs.

*As imperceptibly as grief* – is this a helpful image? Isn't grief a strong overwhelming feeling? Or is this the kind of grief people keep to themselves?

*spending with herself / Sequestered afternoon* – So Nature is spending a quiet afternoon by herself.

What does that image add to (or detract from) the poem's meaning?

*morning foreign shone* – (a difficult phrase, surely?) The morning sun was shining in an unfamiliar way? Why? Because it was beginning to get less intense as autumn approached?

*harrowing grace* – the summer sun is anxious to make a polite departure? Harrowing is too strong an adjective to my mind.

*Into the beautiful* – anyone's guess but it sounds nice. Commentators have suggested 'into the beauty of autumn' or 'dissolving into itself' and so on.

### Poetic Conventions

Dickinson's poetry, though it became popular when first published after her death, was felt to be unconventional. You may see more evidence for that in some of her other poems, but is there much evidence of it here? Consider stanza pattern, rhyme and rhythm, use of language. Compare 'Wild Nights – Wild nights!' for example. Beware, some editors have tidied up her presentation, as in this version:

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The summer lapsed away,—  
Too imperceptible, at last,  
To seem like perfidy.

A quietness distilled,  
As twilight long begun,  
Or Nature, spending with herself  
Sequestered afternoon.

The dusk drew earlier in,  
The morning foreign shone,—  
A courteous, yet harrowing grace,  
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Into the beautiful.