# **"There's a certain Slant of light" by Emily Dickinson**

# **1861 (Start of The American Civil War)**

This poem focuses only on the effect of a certain kind of light that the speaker notices on winter afternoons. It quickly becomes clear that this is not going to be a poem extolling nature or winter light’s virtues, for this light “oppresses.”

What kind of oppression this is, exactly, is what the rest of the poem describes. In the first stanza it is described as “like the Heft/Of Cathedral Tunes –,” which is not a common simile for something oppressive, making it clear that this light’s oppression is of a complicated nature.

This slant of light gives a “Heavenly Hurt” to the observer of it—that is, something that causes no outwardly visible damage (“We can find no scar”), but instead causes a mental or spiritual change (“But internal difference, / Where the Meanings, are –”).

This change cannot be induced through teaching (“None may teach it – Any –”); instead, it must be experienced. Though it is “Despair,” it is an “imperial affliction,” that is, a regal or royal affliction, that although painful, leads to an uplifting.

It is powerful enough that even nature notices its presence (“When it comes, the Landscape listens”), and its departure allows for a preternatural understanding of death (“When it goes, ’tis like the Distance / On the look of Death –“).

**Analysis**

This poem very closely describes a fairly common theme of Dickinson’s—that of change as a fearful but illuminating process, both painful and essential. Here this awe of change is embodied in the “certain Slant of light” that becomes the place of departure for the transformation. This slant of light is oppressive, but this is no simple, purely negative oppression, it is instead oppressive like “the Heft/Of Cathedral Tunes –.”

The choice of “heft” here, instead of “weight,” which would actually have fit the rhyme scheme more closely, emphasizes the paradoxically uplifting aspect of this oppression, because while “weight” gives the reader solely an image of a downward force, “heft” implies a movement upward, albeit a difficult one. Thus while this slant of light is oppressive, while it creates difficulty for the speaker, the diction makes it clear that it is also uplifting.

This makes the surprising use of the simile of the “Cathedral Tunes” more understandable, as this seems to fit in with Dickinson’s views of religion. Faith, religion, and God are not easy for her; instead, they have a great difficulty, an oppressiveness, about them, and they cause “Heavenly hurt”—the importance of the adjective here is emphasized in the alliteration, and the flipped syntax of the line, opening with the direct object instead of the subject. This difficulty is, however, one that leads to greater understanding, and thus perhaps uplifts her, and in so doing takes her closer to God.

The importance of this painful transformation becomes even clearer in the third stanza. Here we see that its lessons cannot be taught, but must be lived; the emphasis of “Any” at the end of the first line of this stanza makes this very clear. And it is a “Seal of Despair – / An imperial affliction.” The close proximity of “Seal” and “imperial” make this experience into something that brings she who experiences it onto another level -- into a select, almost royal group of those marked by it.

This painful transformation has a better side to it implied throughout the poem, a certain uplifting that makes it worthwhile, that makes those who have lived through it members of a select club. However, the final stanza ends this transformation, and in so doing, leaves the day much closer to ending and the observer much closer to death, the word with which the poem itself closes. Yet death is balanced closely with life, as is shown by the fact that “death” rhymes with “breath,” an obvious symbol for life, earlier in the stanza, so even this death is not purely negative.

**Article 2**

This poem begins by noting the oppressive sound of church bells heard in the bleak atmosphere of a winter afternoon. They give “Heavenly Hurt,” though they leave no external scar. Within six lines, Dickinson synthesizes a description of depression in terms of three senses: hearing, sight, and feeling.

This depression is, however, more than ordinary sadness. It comes from Heaven, and it bears the Biblical “Seal Despair.” It hurts the entire landscape, its nonhuman as well as its human constituents, which listens, holds its breath for some revelation, yet perceives only the look of death. Significantly, the poet nowhere implies that no meaning exists; indeed, in other poems she is certain that a divine being exists and that there is a plan. Even so, the implications of what she writes are almost as devastating, for the apocalyptic seal of revelation holds fast, yielding no enlightenment to those below but the weak afternoon sun of a New England winter.

Read straightforwardly, the only means to combat this despair is, logically, faith, but in Dickinson’s landscape one senses only its external sign: the weighty tunes of a cathedral carillon. The “internal difference,” the scars of discouragement and despair remain within all, though visible to none.

**Article 3**

There are several interpretations of the ‘slant of light’ that features in this poem; however, it is commonly seen to be either Despair, God or Death. The stanza structure is said to mirror that of a religious hymn, which often leads to the mistake that this is a celebration of God and religion. Dickinson was raised in a Calvinist household; as she grew older she became increasingly independent and atypical in her religious views considering her gender within the time period. She became a transcendentalist while also believing that the strict Biblical teachings of the time were too restricting: Dickinson felt that individuals should be able to worship God and practice religion in whichever way they felt appropriate.

**Article 4**

It's winter, it's painful, and you know what that means. We've got [Emily Dickinson](http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/155) in town for the day, ready to shed some light on, well, "light" and its oppressive ways. At first glance maybe you're thinking "There's a certain Slant of light" will be a bit more upbeat than usual for Dickinson, since it looks like it's about light. But you'd be mistaken, because "light" in this case is something that's harsh, oppressive, and impossible to define—especially in those "Winter Afternoons."

But we should cut Dickinson some slack. Despite all the doom and gloom she's typically associated with, the lady was quite the rebel in her day. After all, we're talking about mid-19th-century America, when women were expected to cook, clean, tend to their husbands/fathers all day, and have a nice big smile all the while. Oh and forget about Beyoncé and all her "single ladies." That was pretty much the worst thing a woman could possibly imagine, according to 19th-century standards. And yet, take one guess as to who chose to defy the odds and focus on her own work without marriage. That's right. Dickinson was [polishing her proverbial rebel boots](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/emily-dickinson) way before Beyoncé.

You can imagine, though, that this sort of decision proved to be a rather painful one. Editors weren't exactly lined up out the door, ready to publish a woman's work. In fact, most of Dickinson's poetry never saw the "light" of the publishing world until 1890—after her death. Still, she managed to compose over a thousand poems that audiences today recognize as being groundbreaking in form, [syntax](http://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/syntax.html), and philosophy so many years later.

"There's a certain Slant of light" is one of her most well-known poems, one that provides a nearly perfect indication of what Dickinson's work was all about. She uses the [imagery](http://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/imagery.html) of winter light to create connections with the [speaker](http://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/speaker.html)'s internal [conflict](http://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/conflict.html) over meaning, despair, and understanding. So, yes, we can't escape the elements of depression and despair here, but it isn't just about doom and gloom. We recognize that there is indeed something disconcerting about that "Slant of light" in Dickinson's poem.

Beyoncé fan or not, we can't help but look around us now and then and realize that quite a bit has changed for women over the years in America. Nowadays we've got songs all about feminine independence and ladies in real life making their way in the world. But back in the 19th century, all that talk might as well have been a dream for most women. So it's kind of cool to look back to [Emily Dickinson](http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/155)'s time when those seeds of independence and autonomy were just starting (at least in spirit) to really take root.

And even if you're not a woman, Dickinson's "There's a certain Slant of light" will prove that the issue of meaning and "internal difference," as our speaker puts it, is something that affects us all. We're all unique human beings trying to figure stuff out and define the outside/inside worlds as best we can. And in doing so, we tend to get turned around and left feeling kind of down because of that indefinable "Heavenly Hurt" and the fact that "we can find no scar."

So even though we recognize that Dickinson was a rather rebellious poet thumbing her nose at the patriarchy and all its expectations of women, we also understand that her poetry is remarkably human and indicative of the struggles we all face on occasion. And no matter a person's gender, race, religion, or allegiance with Team Jacob or Team Edward, their life can be quite the struggle with all the defining, re-defining, and that "Slant of light" that keeps getting in their eyes.