

# *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.

## About the author and the poem

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) was born and lived her entire life in the small college town of Amherst, Massachusetts. She never married and in later years almost never left the family house. She wrote around 1800 poems, but fewer than a dozen of these were published during her lifetime. They were changed by editors to fit the poetic ideas of the time. As with Walt Whitman, Dickinson's original and surprising use of language was not appreciated until after her death. She is now known as one of America's greatest poets.

Dickinson wrote short lyric poems, usually in four-line stanzas, like the hymns that were commonly sung in church during her lifetime. Within this simple form, she is able to express ideas that are amazingly complex and profound.

Emily Dickinson was a keen observer of nature. She studied botany and geology during her school days at Amherst Academy, and made a herbarium (a book of pressed flowers) that is a marvel of order and precision. She tended the garden at her home throughout her life, and often sent her friends flowers with verses attached.

In the following poem she looks with her poet's eye at a bird pecking at worms on the ground, surely a common sight in her garden. She starts with an unsentimental, dryly humorous series of detailed observations, and seamlessly takes us into an unrestricted space of freedom. The poem was first published in 1891 in the second collection of Dickinson's poetry.

[POEM AGAIN]

Emily Dickinson's language is deceptively simple. Unlike many nineteenth century poets, she does not use elaborate words or create long strings of flowery metaphors, and her rhyme schemes are very

basic. In this poem, the second and the fourth lines of each stanza rhyme.

Or do they? Notice that although the rhymes of the first two stanzas are perfect: saw/raw and grass/pass, the next rhyme is abroad / head. The final consonant is the same, but the vowel is different. Next comes crumb / home, also a different vowel. The final rhyme is seam / swim, two words that have exactly the same consonants and only a slightly different vowel.

What is this? Did Dickinson not know how to write rhyming poetry? Was she an ignorant and uneducated writer? Certainly not; she was very well-read and loved poetry. There is no question that she knew what a rhyme was. But she often chose to write with off-rhymes or slant rhymes that play with the conventions of the language. They pull us a little off balance, making us laugh or think or wonder a bit harder.

Dickinson also puts words together that although simple and common themselves, are surprising in combination. An example is when she compares the bird's eyes to "frightened beads." What a perfect description! And yet who ever thought of beads, small hard objects that they are, being afraid?

After this image of nervous movement, the bird suddenly changes into something quite different when he "unrolls his feathers" and "rows home," like a boat sailing on calm water. With such simple yet rich images, Dickinson works her word-magic.

Remember, you can find a transcript of this episode at [enterenchanted.com/english](http://enterenchanted.com/english). And now, let's listen one more time to the poem. A Bird Came Down the Walk, by Emily Dickinson.