

## Lecture Sheet

### *Selected Poems: Emily Dickinson*

Adnan Shakur  
Lecturer & Deputy Head  
Department of English  
University of Global Village (UGV), Barishal

## “Hope” is the thing with feathers

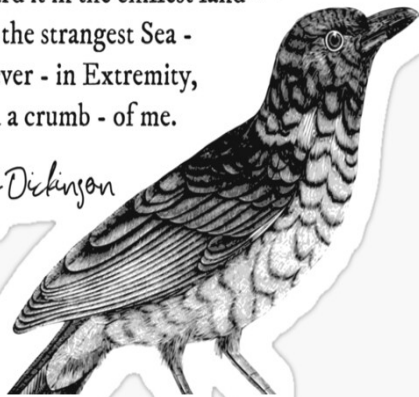
BY EMILY DICKINSON

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -  
That perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune without the words -  
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -  
And sore must be the storm -  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm -

I’ve heard it in the chilliest land -  
And on the strangest Sea -  
Yet - never - in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb - of me.

*Emily Dickinson*



### Analysis

"Hope is the thing with feathers" (written around 1861) is a popular poem by the American poet Emily Dickinson. In the poem, "Hope" is metaphorically transformed into a strong-willed bird that lives within the human soul—and sings its song no matter what. Essentially, the poem seeks to remind readers of the power of hope and how little it requires of people. The speaker makes it clear that hope has been helpful in times of difficulty and has never asked for anything in return. "Hope is the Thing with Feathers" is one of a number of poems by Dickinson that breathes new life into an abstract concept by using surprising imagery and figurative language. The speaker defines "Hope" as

a feathered creature that dwells inside the human spirit. This feathery thing sings a wordless tune, not stopping under any circumstances.

Its tune sounds best when heard in fierce winds. Only an incredibly severe storm could stop this bird from singing. The "Hope" bird has made many people feel warm. "Hope is the thing with feathers" is a kind of hymn of praise, written to honor the human capacity for hope. Using extended metaphor, the poem portrays hope as a bird that lives within the human soul; this bird sings come rain or shine, gale or storm, good times or bad. The poem argues that hope is miraculous and almost impossible to defeat. Furthermore, hope never asks for anything in return—it costs nothing for people to maintain hope. By extension, then, "Hope is the thing with feathers" implores its readers to make good use of hope—and to see it as an essential, deeply valuable part of themselves.

The poem begins by establishing its key metaphor—that hope is a bird. It then tells the reader more about this bird, adding detail, before showing it in different situations. The poem concludes by stating that, despite all it does, hope never asks for anything from the speaker. Overall, then, the poem turns hope into a vivid imagined character in order to show how important it is, both to individuals and to humanity as a whole.

The poem initially defines hope as "the thing with feathers." Though it's obvious that this is a bird (as confirmed in line 7), the unusualness of this first description shows that the poem wants the reader to look afresh at hope—to see hope with clear eyes and not take it for granted. Starting with "hope is a bird" would have the same literal meaning but would feel much less surprising, and the surprise element helps establish the poem's purpose of redefining hope.

This "Hope" bird "perches" in the soul, showing that the soul itself is hope's home. Hope is thus directly linked with the human spirit, where it sings without ever stopping. This perseverance, then, is a representation of humanity's infinite capacity for hope. Even in the depths of despair, the poem seems to say, people can still have hope—and this hope will sustain them. Indeed, the bird sings "sweetest" in the storm. In other words, hope shows its importance in times of adversity and seems to guide people through that adversity. This point could apply to humanity's challenges in a general sense, or it could relate to more personal experiences like individual grief and loss. In either case, hope gives people the strength to carry on, and it's at its most useful when circumstances are at their worst.

Of course, there might be times when people do seem to lose their strength—but, the poem argues, hope still plays an important role in these situations. The poem demonstrates this by gesturing towards the sheer number of people ("so many") who have been sustained by hope, saying that it would have to be a truly "sore" "storm" that could diminish the strength of "the little Bird." Hope, it seems, can keep people "warm" even in the worst situations.

And though hope is so essential to human life, the beauty of it—according to the poem—is that it requires practically nothing of people. Hope costs nothing, not a "crumb"—yet it can literally and figuratively keep people alive. With hope, people can make it through the hardest of times—they just have to listen to "the little Bird" singing its tune. Overall, then, "Hope is the thing with feathers" implores its readers to value their capacity for hope—and to recognize that it's never

really gone. Without becoming overly specific, the poem argues that hope can be especially helpful in the most extreme situations and that people should therefore rely on it as a precious resource.

The speaker has heard the bird's singing in the coldest places, and on the weirdest seas. But in the speaker's experiences, even the most extreme ones, the bird has never asked for anything in return

# A Bird, came down the Walk

BY EMILY DICKINSON

"A Bird Came Down The Walk" by Emily Dickinson 1893

- #1      A bird came down the walk:  
          He did not know I saw;  
          He bit an angle-worm in halves  
          And ate the fellow, raw.
- #2      And then he drank a dew  
          From a convenient grass,  
          And then hopped sidewise to the wall  
          To let a beetle pass.
- #3      He glanced with rapid eyes  
          That hurried all abroad,  
          They looked like frightened beads, I thought;  
          He stirred his velvet head
- #4      Like one in danger; cautious,  
          I offered him a crumb,  
          And he unrolled his feathers  
          And rowed him softer home
- #5      Than oars divide the ocean,  
          Too silver for a seam,  
          Or butterflies, off banks of noon,  
          Leap, plashless, as they swim



## Analysis

The speaker describes once seeing a bird come down the walk, unaware that it was being watched. The bird ate an angleworm, then “drank a Dew / From a convenient Grass—,” then hopped sideways to let a beetle pass by. The bird’s frightened, bead-like eyes glanced all around. Cautiously, the speaker offered him “a Crumb,” but the bird “unrolled his feathers” and flew away—as though rowing in the water, but with a grace gentler than

that with which “Oars divide the ocean” or butterflies leap “off Banks of Noon”; the bird appeared to swim without splashing. ‘A Bird Came Down The Walk’ is a poem by Emily Dickinson. In this poem, she shares her observation of a bird that had come down the walkway of her home. This poem showcases the poet’s powers of observation and juxtaposes various elements of nature. The poem consists of five stanzas of four lines each. The rhyme scheme is ABCB. The poem is largely written in iambic trimeter. One day, the poet noticed a bird in the walkway of her home. However, the bird was oblivious to the fact that it was being observed. The bird saw a worm, an angleworm in this case, and ate it after biting it into two halves. The action of biting the worm in half and eating it raw, accentuates the inherent violence in the action that often goes unnoticed. Perhaps the

poet wanted to make a point on the violence that is present in nature, even in the process of something as basic as ensuring nutrition. It may be noted that the same element of violence is often present, perhaps indirectly, in the food consumed by humans too. After the meal, the bird sought some water. There was some grass, likely on the side of the walkway. Dew was still present on the grass, indicating that it was early morning. The bird found the dew upon a blade of grass and drank it. The poet calls this grass 'convenient' because it offered the bird an easy source of the water it was searching for. The poet then observes how the bird allows a beetle to pass by hopping sideways to the wall. This line shows that it is not all violence in the natural world. Cooperation also exists in good measure. A comment that could also be very well be said of humans. The bird has its own predators. It is also fearful of humans. It has to be very attentive of its surroundings at all times. Hence it glanced around with 'rapid eyes'. To the poet, the darting eyes looked like 'frightened beads'. The head of most birds have a velvet look about them. The poet observes this about this bird too. The bird's head stirred, perhaps because it had become aware of the poet, or perhaps it had heard or felt something else. The end of this stanza and the beginning of the next stanza have two different versions. In the most commonly printed version, there's a period followed by a dash, after Head, and a comma after Cautious. This punctuation arrangement indicates that it is the poet herself who acts cautiously, like one in danger, while offering a crumb to the bird. A slight change of punctuation could have made this line "Like one in....Cautious" about the bird rather than about the poet. Note that this line would be quite applicable for the bird too. It seems that the bird did not accept the crumb from the poet. It unfurled its wings and flew away. The poet begins a series of powerful images and metaphors to describe the flight of the bird. She compares the wings to oars that row the bird home. The bird is compared to a boat and the sky to the ocean. The motion is quite silent, hence use of the word 'softer'. The bird's wings, the poet comments is more silent than oars that cut through the water surface. The action of cutting through the water surface is referred by the poet as splitting the ocean. To the poet's eyes the oar-like wings are passing through an ocean (the sky) seamlessly, i.e, without causing even a ripple on the surface of this metaphorical ocean. Thus unlike oars that visibly cut through the water, the action of the wings are too smooth for the observer to notice any such action. The poet then conjures up an image of butterflies flying around at noon. Their movement is very fluid and smooth. The poet imagines these butterflies swimming without a splash. The flight of the bird is softer than even the 'plashless' swimming of the butterflies. The final six lines of this poem offer an incredible description of a bird at flight and offers a series of beautiful soothing images. This poem offers us a glimpse into Dickinson's interest in the natural world, her acute sense of observation and her ability to invoke powerful imagery into an everyday scene.