

Poem #9

“Hope” 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 chillest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.



Emily Dickinson wrote over 1,800 poems during her life, but fewer than twelve of them were published before she died. This poem's most famous lines are in the first stanza that compares hope to a bird. Dickinson's rhyme (called slant rhyme) isn't traditional – for example, in lines two and four that end in *soul* and *all*. Sometimes this is called “near rhyme” or “half rhyme.”

Her meter is also interesting, and it enables most of her poems – including this one - to be sung to the tune of the *Gilligan's Island* theme song and *Oh, Little Town of Bethlehem*. Go ahead; try it.

Taking it apart

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This poem uses an extended metaphor to compare hope to a bird inside oneself that never stops singing its tune.

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It asked a crumb of me.

A gale is a storm, and that is when the bird's song is sweetest.

“Sore” here means “harsh” or “terrible.”

“Abash” is “shame.”

Here, the bird of hope keeps people warm, not even just the person who has it.

This last stanza says that even though the bird of hope has sung its song in the hardest of times and never asked for even a crumb of payment.



Memorizing it

Try singing it to one of the tunes mentioned above for practice. Next, associate a strong image with each stanza.

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Memorizing it

Now that you've sung it through a few times and associated a strong visual image with each stanza, try reciting the poem using just the first letters of the words.

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H__i__t__t__w__f__
T__p__i__t__s__,
A__s__t__t__—w__t__w__,
A__n__s__a__a__,

A__s__i__t__g__i__h__;
A__s__m__b__t__s__
T__c__a__t__l__b__
T__k__s__m__w__.

I__h__i__i__t__c__l__,
A__o__t__s__s__;
Y__,n__,i__e__,
I__a__a__c__o__m__.