My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun

POEM TEXT

My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -
In Corners - till a Day
The Owner passed - identified -
And carried Me away -

And now We roam in Sovreign Woods -
And now We hunt the Doe -
And every time I speak for Him
The Mountains straight reply -

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow -
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let it's pleasure through -

And when at Night - Our good Day done -
I guard My Master's Head -
'Tis better than the Eider Duck's
Deep Pillow - to have shared -

To foe of His - I'm deadly foe -
None stir the second time -
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye -
Or an emphatic Thumb -

Though I than He - may longer live
He longer must - than I -
For I have but the power to kill,
Without - the power to die -

SUMMARY

My life felt like it was a loaded gun, unused and set aside in a corner until one day the gun's owner came in, noticed me there and took me away.

Now we wander outside in the woods together, hunting female deer. When the gun is shot, it feels like the owner and I are one and I'm acting out his wishes. The gunshot echoes through the mountains.

I smile during these instances, and the light from my smile glows upon the valley like a volcanic eruption glows with lava.

When it's night, when our day is over, I protect and watch over my master. This duty is more fulfilling than sleeping beside him and sharing a pillow.

I'm dangerous to his enemies because I kill them on the first try. I aim, they look into the barrel of the gun, and a certain thumb pulls the trigger.

I might live longer than the owner, but he actually has to outlive me because I can only kill. I don't have the power to die.

THEMES

POWER, RAGE, AND GENDER

"My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun - " is an ambiguous poem open to multiple interpretations, but perhaps the most common deals with the power of anger. The poem contains one of Dickinson's most iconic images, with the speaker being the "Loaded Gun" of the title and the "Owner" functioning as an extended metaphor for the speaker's inner rage. By separating the speaker and the speaker's rage into these two distinct characters, the poem explores the control that rage has over the body. At the same time, though, the poem suggests that rage provides a power the speaker alone does not possess. In other words, the poem suggests the speaker's tendency to get carried away by anger, but also that only *through* that anger can the speaker feel powerful.

This reading takes on further resonance when considering that the anger in the poem is personified as being male; if readers interpret the speaker to be a manifestation of Dickinson herself, and as such that the speaker is female, then it's possible to take the poem as a specific testament to *women's* dormant rage, and how anger is the only way for the speaker to feel a sense of power in a male-dominated society.

The speaker introduces the metaphor of her life as a "Loaded Gun," detailing a meaningless, powerless existence before the appearance of the Owner—which, in this reading of the poem, can be understood as a reference to the speaker's anger. The specific wording of "carried away" further suggests how much control anger exerts over the speaker, since people are often described as being "carried away" by intense emotions.

As the day proceeds from hunting to sleeping, the poem expands from the Owner's *control* of the speaker into the *power* it affords the speaker. While "hunt[ing] the Doe," the speaker "speak[s] for Him" (with "Him" perhaps being a personification of the speaker's anger) and "The Mountains straight reply -." This evocative image alludes to an echo caused by a gunshot, and by doing so, shows the magnitude of the speaker's power when dominated by rage. So loud is the speaker's voice when

bolstered by anger that it reverberates throughout the "Mountains." At the same time, it suggests that this rage is at odds with women's expected demeanor; a "Doe" is a female deer, often taken as a symbol of innocence and beauty, yet the speaker *hunts* this creature. Perhaps this means that only by suppressing the stereotypically feminine side of herself can the speaker assert her power.

In any case, having experienced the enticing power that the Owner's control endows, the speaker allows him to gain full dominance: the speaker in line 14 now calls the owner "My Master." Basically, the speaker feels powerful when angry, and as such fully submits to (or is "mastered by") rage. When the "good Day [is] Done," the speaker "guard[s]" the "Master" while sleeping, an arrangement indicating both the speaker solidifying her devotion and the speaker protecting and tending to her rage.

The poem ends by emphasizing the extent of the Master's control over the speaker, suggesting the speaker couldn't survive without rage. The poet furthers the gun metaphor by saying the speaker "may longer live," and "[having] but the power to kill, / Without - the power to die - ." On the one hand, this metaphor might make more sense if readers think of the speaker herself as a gun—an inanimate object made of metal and designed to shoot deadly bullets. On another level, though, the metaphor suggests that the speaker is only truly living when feeling and feeding her inner rage.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD AND HUMANITY

"My Life had stood a Loaded Gun - " is one of Dickinson's most challenging poems. The ambiguity leaves it open to varying interpretations and meanings. Many scholars of Dickinson, especially early ones, propose a reading where the Owner/Master is meant to represent the Christian God, with the speaker/gun representing humanity at large. In this reading, the speaker is saying that people are passive tools, granted purpose and power through serving God.

The temptation in poetry to equate the life of the poet with that of the poem's speaker, as well as comparing one poem to an entire body of work, is possibly what led scholars to the Christian interpretation of this poem. Emily Dickinson grew up in a religious family amidst an age of revivalism. While spiritual, she refrained from joining the church, and mulled over her doubts in letters and of course, her poetry. Many of her poems reckon with the central tenants of the Christian faith, such as eternity in "Because I could not stop for Death - ," and even expresses what could be seen as bitterness towards a disengaged God in "Of Course - I prayed - ." Therefore, though the correct meaning will never be known (and the obscurity perhaps intentional), a reading that interprets the Owner/Master as the Christian God and the speaker/gun as humanity is a probable one.

"Identified" is a key word for this reading, as followers of the Christian faith believe their true identity can only be found through God. Fittingly, the speaker's violent devotion to her Master, willing to literally kill any "foe of his," could be seen as precisely the kind of unwavering faith prescribed to followers of Christ in the Bible.

This reading is perhaps subconsciously inspired by Dickinson's use of the ballad verse for this poem, which uses a familiar and hymn-like rhythm. Dickinson's extensive knowledge of the Bible and traditions allowed her to mimic its written conventions, even more effective when providing a possibly sharp critique. Viewed in this light, the enigmatic last stanza could be read as Dickinson's doubt in her faith, unable to fully submit to the extent commanded of a Christian: to die for it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20
- Lines 3-4
- Line 14
- Line 17
- Lines 21-24

THE POWER OF CREATIVITY

With an opaque poem like this one, the possible interpretations or readings are endless. In addition to the Owner/Master functioning as inner rage or the Christian God, the Owner/Master could also be seen as representing a poet's creative muse, her talents and abilities. In this reading, the life of the speaker/gun (here representing a poet) is aimless, full of potential ("Loaded") yet languishing in "Corners" until the creative muse (the Owner/Master) finds her and takes control. No longer content with a life devoid of her art, the speaker's very essence is tied up with the act of creation and dependent on the muse's existence. Art gives the speaker purpose and power.

The distinct characters of the speaker/gun and Owner/Master seemingly become fractured parts of one self in this interpretation. Once found, they become so enmeshed that the speaker is able to "speak for [the Owner/Master]." The speaker's contentment with extreme violence begins to make sense when thought of in this light. The "smile" is pride in her artistic achievement, which, in turn, is portrayed as the gunshot; so powerful is her art that it echoes throughout mountains. Further, when the speaker protects her Owner/Master at night, it can be read as the poet's fierce commitment to her writing, prioritizing it over any romantic entanglement

("'Tis better than the Eider Duck's / Deep Pillow to have shared -").

This reading of the poem also takes on additional resonance if viewed as being specifically about *women's* art. Nineteenth-century attitudes about the expected role of women were such that a woman's art was taken as an affront to cultural values and norms, which is what the fifth stanza could seem to explore. All four lines express a determined confidence and profound rage ("To foe of His - I'm deadly foe - / None stir the second time - ").

The final stanza then brings up an anxious weight perhaps experienced by all artists. Without her muse, her spark of inspiration, the speaker simply could not survive (Though I than He - may longer live / He longer must - than I - "). The added context of 19th-century women artists' struggle for recognition, acceptance, and even survival elucidates the poem's heaviness and high stakes.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -
In Corners - till a Day
The Owner passed - identified -
And carried Me away -

The first line of "My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -" launches the poem into its extended metaphor through its striking introduction comparing the speaker's "life" to a "Loaded Gun." Note that the speaker is not just a gun, but a *loaded* one, a difference that suggests a dormant capacity for destruction.

Dickinson's use of capitalization to emphasize the two parts of the metaphor ("My Life" and "Loaded Gun") visually reinforces the comparison, while the dashes before and after "a Loaded Gun" literally sets this phrase apart from the rest of the line. This emphasis is also made through the first line's rhythm: the line is made up of regular iambs (poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed beat pattern), but this steady rhythm is partially interrupted by the caesura created from the dash before "a Loaded Gun":

My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -

This caesura forces a pause in the middle of the line, and in doing so emphasizes the importance of the "Loaded Gun." Dickinson also uses consonance to great effect in this line, with the heavy, thunking /d/ sounds almost mimicking the sound of a plodding, 19th-century gun.

My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -

Another dash functioning as a caesura breaks up line 2:

In Corners - till a Day

The purpose here seems to be a dramatic shift, separating before and after that fateful "Day" that ends line 2. The enjambment between lines 2 and 3 then adds speed and urgency to the phrase "till a day," which, even without the enjambment, already conveys anticipation. That enjambment pushes the reader straight into line 3 and the introduction of the character of the "The Owner," who transforms the speaker by noticing her (she has been "identified"), and then "carrie[s]" the speaker "away."

As in the first line with "a Loaded Gun," line 3 uses dashes to set off "identified," adding extra emphasis to the word. This implies being noticed—*seen*—was of great importance to the speaker. The consonance continues from the first line as well, the thudding /d/ sound echoing in lines 2-4: "till a Day / The Owner passed - identified - / And carried ..." Finally, this first stanza is one of only two in the poem that rhyme. In this stanza, Dickinson uses an ABCB rhyme scheme: "Day" ends line 2 and "away" ends line 3.

Altogether this stanza expands on the loaded gun metaphor, as the speaker recounts an empty and powerless existence before the appearance of the Owner. This implies that the speaker has been lying idle until—depending on the reading—the speaker's anger, God, creative muse, or otherwise gains control. To that end, the speaker describes being alone and useless, hidden away "In Corners" until the Owner "carried [the speaker] away." This image serves to highlight the speaker's lack of agency, as the speaker is *taken by*, rather than *leaves with*, the Owner.

LINES 5-8

And now We roam in Sovreign Woods -
And now We hunt the Doe -
And every time I speak for Him
The Mountains straight reply -

Having been "carried ... away" by this mysterious Owner (which, again depending on readers' interpretation, might represent the speaker's anger, creativity, or even God), the speaker now "roam[s]" the woods hunting doe, female deer. Doe are often equated with innocence and beauty, so it's striking that the speaker seems to find joy in hunting them.

The second stanza thus marks a noticeable and significant shift in the poem. The first stanza was in the past tense ("had stood," "carried"), but the second stanza shifts into the present tense ("We roam," "I speak"). This shift accompanies a major change for the speaker: in the first stanza the speaker was alone, a loaded gun unnoticed in the corner; now, that gun has been identified and taken by the Owner. The shift to present tense

propels the poem, much as the speaker has been "carried away" by the Owner.

The propulsive feel of the second stanza is also supported by the anaphora of the opening phrase of lines 5 and 6, as well as by the polysyndeton of the repeated "And" in lines 5 through 7:

> And now We roam in Sovreign Woods -
> And now We hunt the Doe -
> And every time I speak for Him

These devices create an almost hypnotic effect, possibly alluding to the power the Owner has over the speaker. The anaphora also invokes a reverence and solemnity, possibly stemming from the fact that anaphora has deep roots in and associations with biblical Psalms. Dickinson may have used this association to stress the control that the Owner has over the speaker, and the devotion reflected back from the *speaker* to the *Owner*.

No longer the "Me" of the first stanza, the speaker now describes herself as part of a "We" with the Owner. Further, while the speaker of the first stanza was passive, now she "roam[s]," "hunt[s]," and, by line 7, has begun to "speak." This disparity in action—the passive nature of "stood" in the first stanza vs. the active and violent nature of roaming and hunting—highlights the speaker's inertia in the absence of the Owner, as well as the Owner's powerful ability to physically take control of the speaker's life.

Breaking down lines 7 and 8 reveals an evocative image of a gun firing and producing a resounding echo. Because of the hunting context, and mainly the speaker-as-gun conceit, a logical interpretation would be that her "speak[ing] for Him" suggests a gunshot. What furthers that conclusion is the "Mountains straight reply[ing]" in line 8. The "reply" coming from the "Mountains" alludes to an echo that would occur following the loud bang of a gun. It's also not just a reply after some time, but a "straight" reply, just as an echo would occur directly after the gunshot.

While in the second stanza is, like the first, a quatrain written iambic meter, this stanza doesn't rhyme. Because the rhyme scheme of stanza one was ABCB, the fact that the second stanza is unrhymed doesn't actually become apparent until the last word, "reply," in line 8. This delay, teasing a sonic resolution to the rhyme scheme without getting it, makes the stanza feel somewhat unsettled, which reflects the thematic elements at play in this stanza. The speaker has found purpose, but it's a violent one. While the killing of an innocent doe may cause sorrow in the reader, it's soon revealed the speaker feels quite the opposite. The unresolved rhyme scheme hints at that unsettling thought and the stormy undercurrent of this poem.

LINES 9-12

> *And do I smile, such cordial light*
> *Opon the Valley glow -*
> *It is as a Vesuvian face*
> *Had let it's pleasure through -*

The fact that the second stanza breaks with the rhyme scheme of the first makes the poem feel a strangely incomplete; readers expect, based on the ABCB pattern established in the first stanza, for line 8 to rhyme with line 6, but it doesn't ("Doe" and "reply" clearly don't rhyme). The beginning of the third stanza, however, quickly offers some relief from this unexpected, unsettling lack of rhyme. This is because the assonance of the long /i/ sound in "I," "smile," and "light" echoes that in "reply" from the previous line.

This line also leads into a calm, even beautiful image of the speaker's smile creating a glowing light over the valley. For a moment, the reader might forget that this smile is caused by violence (from "hunt[ing] the Doe").

The speaker's "smile" is compared to a "Vesuvian face." This is a reference to the Italian volcano Mount Vesuvius, and, as such, implies the increase of the speaker's power into volcanic and explosive proportions. The speaker experiences a thrill through her violence, hinted at when speaking of the "Vesuvian face … let[ting] it's pleasure through."

To greatly simplify, this stanza has the speaker comparing the glow of her smile to lava erupting out of a volcano. The speaker has become destructive and powerful. Vesuvius refers to the volcano that famously destroyed Pompeii in 79 CE, burying thousands of people in ash. Using this allusion to describe the speaker's smile, then, is a rather unsettling comparison. The allusion to Mount Vesuvius also hearkens back to the "Loaded Gun" image, in that the speaker's power was dormant but often bubbling just below the surface.

The sibilance in these lines draws attention to the undercurrent of violence or unease. The repetitive /s/ is reminiscent of hissing: both a sound of disapproval and the sound a snake makes (snakes have long symbolizing evil or deception):

> And do I smile, such cordial light
> Opon the Valley glow -
> It is as a Vesuvian face

Consonance is seen here as well, with the gentle /l/ sound adding to the deceptive gentleness of these lines (which, in contrast to the soft sounds, again compares the speaker's "pleasure" to a deadly volcanic eruption):

> And do I smile, such cordial light
> Opon the Valley glow -
> It is as a Vesuvian face
> Had let it's pleasure through -

This stanza has two examples of Dickinson's unique

orthography (spelling) with her use of "Opon" in line 10 and her apostrophe in "it's" in line 12. "Opon" is a Middle English way of spelling "upon." Her use of an apostrophe in "it's" to signify possession, rather than the modern way of only using using an apostrophe in "its" when used as a contraction for "it is," is also antiquated, and had been mostly shifted to its modern usage by the time she was writing this poem.

LINES 13-18

And when at Night - Our good Day done -
I guard My Master's Head -
'Tis better than the Eider Duck's
Deep Pillow - to have shared -
To foe of His - I'm deadly foe -
None stir the second time -

After having roamed throughout the woods joyfully hunting deer, the speaker/gun spends the night dutifully guarding her "Master's Head." This stanza is the most intimate of the poem, as the speaker describes tending to the Owner while he sleeps. Sleeping together (even if one is keeping watch) is an inherently intimate act, and what solidifies the closeness of their relationship is the switch from "Owner" to "My Master" in line 14. Mentioning a pillow, even though it's only to make clear they aren't sharing it, further suggests a warmth and coziness.

Consonance and alliteration are abundant in this stanza. Note the heavy /g/ and /d/ sounds that resonate throughout:

> And when at Night - Our good Day done -
> I guard My Master's Head -
> 'Tis better than the Eider Duck's
> Deep Pillow - to have shared -

The stanza feels neat, tidy, and cohesive. Flitting back and forth between the repeated sounds is so rhythmic and sonically pleasing that it's easy to forget there's no true rhyme scheme in this stanza, (though "Head" and "shared" in lines 14 and 16 approach the level of slant rhyme).

Lines 15 and 16 could be interpreted in varying ways, and have by different critics:

> 'Tis better than the Eider Duck's
> Deep Pillow - to have shared -

The speaker is intimating that "guard[ing] [her] Master's Head" is preferable to sleeping next to him, which could simply mean the speaker's service to the Master is what brings her the most fulfillment, more than even sleep could. However, it could also mean that the speaker's undying devotion to her Master is more gratifying than any traditional intimate relationship. This would mean, depending on how one interprets the "Master/Owner" in the poem, that either God, the speaker's anger, or her artistic muse (the force that compels her to create or write) is more important than romance. (Dickinson was famously reclusive, adding weight to the idea that the speaker's devotion to her art/religion was her priority.)

The domestic, quiet fourth stanza concludes with an end stopped line. What quickens the swing into the violent fifth stanza is the repetition of "to" ("... to have shared - / To foe of His ..."). Dickinson uses repetition to subvert the expectation that a similar sentiment would follow, using "to" as a preposition (to + noun) rather than an infinitive marker (to + verb).

This intensifies the comparison between the tranquil nighttime of the fourth stanza with the speaker's brazen boasts starting the fifth: "To foe of His - I'm deadly foe - ." In other words, the Master's enemy is the speaker's enemy as well. While killing the Master's "foe" reiterates the speaker's loyalty, it also elucidates the confidence this power has brought to the speaker, who seems almost cocky in her wording here. She wants to make it known that it only takes one shot to bring down her Master's enemies: "None stir the second time -"

The repetition of the /s/ and /t/ sounds in line 18, a combination of consonance and sibilance, enhances the sneering boast of the speaker's own marksmanship, almost sounding like the speaker's spitting out this phrase.

LINES 19-24

On whom I lay a Yellow Eye -
Or an emphatic Thumb -
Though I than He - may longer live
He longer must - than I -
For I have but the power to kill,
Without - the power to die -

Line 19 personifies the gun as both an organ ("Yellow Eye") and appendage ("Thumb"). The speaker is saying that, whoever is on the other side of her gun is out of luck; she'll kill them quickly, and they won't "stir" again.

The soft, lulling /m/ and /l/ sounds narrating the act of shooting a gun work to soften the imagery, and evoke the way that the speaker used gentle sounds to compare her smile to a deadly volcano erupting earlier in the poem. Perhaps these sounds are meant to reflect the way the speaker is underestimated; if the poem is taken as an exploration of the power of female rage, then the poem's gentle, deceptive consonance reflects a woman's expected submissive demeanor—something that hides the bubbling anger and power bubbling beneath the surface.

The last stanza in many ways mimics the first. For one thing, it's the only other stanza to employ a rhyme scheme, and the same one at that: ABCB (where "I" in line 22 rhymes with "die" in line 24). It also contains the same amount of caesuras as the first stanza, in all but one line.

The last stanza presents an enigmatic, seemingly paradoxical

riddle, basically saying that the speaker may outlive the Owner/Master, but he "must" outlive her. The speaker's reasoning is that she cannot *die*, only *kill*. It's a puzzling stanza that can have many different interpretations. What seems most apparent in the last stanza however is Dickinson emphasizing the inanimate but powerful nature of the gun, thus hearkening back to the dormancy of the "Loaded Gun" in the first stanza. Although the gun has powerful abilities—including the power to kill—it requires *someone else* to use it; it is unable to act on its own. The gun was also never *alive*, so it cannot actually *die*.

An interpretation of this stanza could be that the speaker/gun is so enmeshed with the Owner/Master, and so alive *with* him, that she couldn't possibly live *without* him. It brings to mind the idea of immortality: is it *worth* living forever without the very essence of one's vitality, one's self?

These are weighty questions, the kind of interior probing Dickinson spent her life contemplating through her poetry. As such, the repeated caesuras emphasize the slowness required to fully grasp these questions. The reader starts and stops through the first two lines before reaching the smoothness of line 23, absent of any dashes. The last phrase in line 24 is set between two dashes, providing the final, mysterious idea: " - the power to die - ."

SYMBOLS

DOE

It is possible to see the "Doe" being hunted in line 6 as being a symbol for women or femininity in general—a "doe" is the name for a female deer. The validity of this argument is bolstered by the fact that a woman, Emily Dickinson, wrote this poem in an era before women held many rights. Dickinson's devotion to her craft was uncommon for women at this time, a time where the expectation for a woman was a wifely devotion to a husband, children, and family.

Reading the poem in a way where the Owner/Master isn't the speaker's own inner rage, but rather inner poetic voice or muse, lends credence to the argument of the speaker, together with her muse (the Owner/Master), working to destroy the notion of what's expected of a woman. Therefore, the "Doe" being hunted could represent that feminine ideal—the society of that time's expected role for a woman—which the speaker takes pleasure in obliterating.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "And now We hunt the Doe -"

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

Anaphora appears a few times in the poem, specifically with the repetition of the word "And" at the start of six lines. This creates a hymn-like rhythm, fitting for the overall ballad meter of the poem.

As previously noted in this guide, the repetition of this word creates a rather hypnotic, lulling effect—one that possibly alludes to the power the Owner has over the speaker. This anaphora—technically also an example of polysyndeton—also may bring to mind the Bible, as biblical Psalms famously feature the same device. As such, the repetition of "and" in this poem creates a sense of reverence and solemnity, once again emphasizing the level of control that the Owner has over the speaker.

However, the most significant use of this anaphora occurs where the lines begin not just with "And," but with "And now We." The repetition places a special emphasis on these lines, and is perhaps why Dickinson chose to use it here. It is in these lines where the speaker and Owner become a single unit. The first stanza has "My" and "Me" used as the speaker's pronouns, and the Owner is introduced as a distinct, separate character. That they have become a "We" by the beginning of the second stanza is important in understanding the relationship between the speaker and Owner, since once he "carrie[s] [her] away," she gains the power to "roam" and "hunt." However, the speaker doesn't do these things *alone*. Only when she's with the Owner as a unit, as a "We" does she "now" have these abilities. Using anaphora highlights how much changes for the speaker once she's under the Owner's control.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "And"
- **Line 5:** "And now We"
- **Line 6:** "And now We"
- **Line 7:** "And"
- **Line 9:** "And"
- **Line 13:** "And"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The entire poem can be understood as one long extended metaphor, in which "Loaded Gun" represents the speaker's life. This is clear from the poem's first line, and each stanza builds upon the implications of this image—of the speaker's life being akin to a loaded, deadly weapon.

In a popular reading of the poem, the Owner/Master may then represent the speaker's anger or inner rage—which takes control of the gun/speaker. In other words, the speaker is able to derive power *from* her anger; without this anger, she remains

a passive, inanimate object whose potential is never realized. The gun may be loaded, but it still needs someone to fire it.

If this poem is indeed about Dickinson's own inner rage, or even a woman's anger in general, it might have seemed safer (at the time the poem was written, when women were largely expected to be submissive and demure) to talk about through this extended metaphor of a gun, rather than state her thoughts and ideas in direct terms. The poem might be metaphorically revealing how the speaker reaches her breaking point, in a sense; how, as a woman, she's spent her life passively, submissive to the men surrounding her, until rage pushes her to become a more active force, to *live* her life for herself instead of standing around "in Corners."

The Owner/Master may alternatively be a stand in for God. God is the force that breathes active life into the speaker, as being noticed by God pushes the speaker from dormancy into active service on God's behalf. And, in yet another interpretation, the Owner may be a metaphor for a creative muse; the poem would then suggest how the speaker is brimming with artistic potential that finds its release upon connecting this muse.

In any of these readings, the speaker's life is presented as something with the immense *potential* for power—the gun is loaded, not empty—but which can't actually make *use* of that power until the Owner comes by and "carrie[s]" the speaker away. This suggests that the speaker *needs* either her rage, her creativity, or God to put all her potential to use. Her life is just waiting to be set off.

This poem is ambiguous and open to many alternate interpretations, though most of the complication comes with who the Owner/Master is and what his relationship to the speaker is. Dickinson makes clear in the very first line that the speaker is comparing her "Life" to a "Loaded Gun," which is why although this poem is ambiguous, the extended metaphor remains clear overall, as the *Owner* of the gun is secondary to the gun *itself*.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

PERSONIFICATION

Dickinson uses a gun a part of the overall extended metaphor for the speaker's life, and builds on this metaphor by using personification. By giving the gun human characteristics, it becomes easier for the reader to associate the gun with the speaker.

Personification arguably begins in the first stanza, as the speaker/gun uses the pronoun "Me," suggesting the gun has the ability of thought. It continues throughout as the "gun" is referred to using first-person pronouns. The device becomes more obvious in the second stanza, however, where the gun gains the ability to "roam," "hunt," and "speak." This progression of human activity is indicative of the gun gaining power. The relative passivity of "roam[ing]" leads into the more active "hunt[ing]," which are both conducted with the Owner. This then progresses to the gun by itself, not "speak[ing]" *with*, but *for* the Owner. The gun's speech is, likely, a metaphorical reference to a gunshot. The "Mountains" then are also personified here as granting a "straight reply" in response to the gun's speech—a.k.a., in response to this gunshot. In other words, the sound of the gun firing echoes throughout the mountains.

In the beginning of the third stanza, the personification continues to progress, not in the active way of the previous stanza, but in the construction of more human attributes, this time in the form of a "smile." By the fifth stanza, the personification reaches its climax, as the speaker/gun moves from possessing human *characteristics* to actual *organs and appendages*:

> To foe of His - I'm deadly foe -
> None stir the second time -
> On whom I lay a Yellow Eye -
> Or an emphatic Thumb

Personifying the gun brings humanity to the speaker. By building up the human attributes and reaching peak human form in the penultimate stanza, the reader is able to fully grasp the emotional weight of the last stanza; the gun is a tool to kill, but it *itself*—despite all this personification—is not really a person and can never die.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "And carried Me away -"
- **Lines 5-7:** "And now We roam in Sovreign Woods - / And now We hunt the Doe - / And every time I speak for Him"
- **Line 8:** "The Mountains straight reply -"
- **Line 9:** "And do I smile,"
- **Line 14:** "I guard My Master's Head -"
- **Line 17:** "I'm deadly foe"
- **Lines 19-20:** "On whom I lay a Yellow Eye - / Or an emphatic Thumb -"
- **Lines 21-22:** "Though I than He - may longer live / He longer must - than I -"
- **Lines 23-24:** "For I have but the power to kill, / Without - the power to die -"

CAESURA

Emily Dickinson uses caesuras throughout the poem, specifically with her characteristic dash. Her idiosyncratic use of the dash creates an odd pause that wouldn't naturally occur in speech or text, resulting in an emphasis on certain words and

phrases and a unique deviation from the normal constraints of form.

The poem is written primarily in alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter (more on this in the Meter section of this guide), and many of the caesuras occur directly in the *middle* of the lines. This is the case with the first line, where the dash is written after the first two metrical feet ("My Life | had stood"), and before the last two metrical feet (a Loa- | ded Gun):

> My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -

In the very next line, however, although it's again directly in the middle, it occurs in the middle of the second iambic foot of the line ("ners - till"), as opposed to between two separate metrical feet:

> In Corners - till a Day

Thus the rhythm normally created by the iambic foot is interrupted, and the caesura slows the reading down.

The next line also employs a caesura, with the last line of the stanza becoming the only line without one. The repeated caesuras produce a plodding, start-and-stopping effect, which intensifies when coupled with the consonance created by the repetition of the /d/ sound throughout the first stanza. When the sonic and rhythmic devices are used together, it seems to mimic what's being described: a heavy and loaded gun.

An interesting by-product of Dickinson's repeated caesuras in this poem can be found in the contrast of the lines *without* one. The speed and smoothness of the lines without a pause are perhaps greater than they would be in a poem that didn't use caesuras with as much frequency. In other words, the lack of caesura causes these lines to stand out.

However, the stanzas employing caesuras the most—the first and last—still stand out for their abundant use of the device. The last stanza is an obvious parallel to the first stanza, and employs the ABCB rhyme scheme of the first. It also starts by mimicking the pattern created in the first stanza before flipping the last two lines. The first three lines of the first stanza have a caesura, with the final line running straight through without a break in the middle:

> The Owner passed - identified -
> And carried Me away -

In contrast, though the last stanza has caesuras in the first two lines, it switches the pattern by having the third line run without a pause and ending with a caesura in the fourth line, the final line of the poem:

> For I have but the power to kill,
> Without - the power to die -

This subtle shift is effective in emphasizing the weighty sentiment of the last two lines. The caesura caused by the dash after "Without" shows that Dickinson didn't want the focus on what the speaker had ("the power to kill"), but what the speaker lacked: "the power to die - ."

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "-"
- **Line 2:** "-"
- **Line 3:** "-"
- **Line 9:** "-"
- **Line 13:** "-"
- **Line 16:** "-"
- **Line 17:** "-"
- **Line 21:** "-"
- **Line 22:** "-"
- **Line 24:** "-"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used throughout this poem, some stanzas more sparingly than others, and works alongside consonance and assonance to create sonically rhythmic and beautiful lines. Alliteration, like most devices, can be subjective, but the places where it seems most intentional and not a part of another device (such as anaphora), it appears in pairs.

It's used with the most frequency in stanza four, where five pairs of words appear:

> And when at Night - Our good Day done -I guard My Master's Head -
> 'Tis better than the Eider Duck's
> Deep Pillow - to have shared -

A few things are striking about the usage of alliteration in this stanza. While most of the word pairs appear directly next to each other, the separation of "good" and "guard" with the pair of "Day" and "done" in the middle creates a connection between the lines and a musical, rhythmic pattern. Another interesting aspect is seen through Dickinson's unorthodox capitalization, which visually emphasizes the alliteration, as in "My Master's" and "Duck's Deep." Finally, the prevalence of Dickinson's alliterative word pairs in this stanza visually and sonically works in conjunction with the subject matter. Regarding the relationship between the speaker and Owner/Master, it's the most intimate of the stanzas. The word pairs created through alliteration mirror the increasing closeness of the actual pair: the speaker and Owner/Master.

Other striking moments of alliteration include the shared /v/ of "Valley" and "Vesuvian," as well as the /s/ and /t/ sounds of line 18 with "None stir the second time." This latter example suggests a sort of spitting, biting sound, perhaps reflecting the

speaker's biting, angry dismissiveness upon killing her enemies.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Life," "Loaded"
- **Line 9:** "smile," "such"
- **Line 10:** "Valley"
- **Line 11:** "Vesuvian"
- **Line 13:** "good," "Day," "done"
- **Line 14:** "guard," "My," "Master's"
- **Line 15:** "than," "the," "Duck's"
- **Line 16:** "Deep"
- **Line 18:** "stir," "second," "time"
- **Line 21:** "Though," "than," "may," "longer," "live"
- **Line 22:** "longer," "must"

CONSONANCE

Dickinson was a brilliant wordsmith, and as such, uses an almost constant consonance throughout this poem, many times in conjunction with alliteration, assonance, and sibilance. One of the most effective instances of consonance occurs in the first stanza, with the repeating /d/ sound present in every line and for a total of 10 times. The heaviness and clunkiness of the /d/ is reminiscent of an old 19th-century gun, like the "Loaded Gun" the speaker compares herself to in the first line of the stanza:

> My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -
> In Corners - till a Day
> The Owner passed - identified -
> And carried Me away -

Dickinson uses consonance so frequently it's almost a constant back and forth between sounds that eventually picks up again in the next word or line before ping-ponging back and forth a new one. An example of this can be found in stanza 3, where the repetition of the /d/ sound turns into a repeated /s/ sound, returns to the /d/ sound and then repeats an /l/ sound, and that's just the first line!

> And do I smile, such cordial light
> Opon the Valley glow -
> It is as a Vesuvian face
> Had let it's pleasure through -

There's clear sibilance here as well ("smile," "such," "Vesuvian face," etc.); the repeated /f/, /v/, and /z/ sounds found in this stanza are sometimes called a form of sibilance, since the buzzing sound is similar to the hissing /s/ sound. What's important here is that this adds a slow, almost hypnotic cadence that creates the sort of warmth being described in the "glow" of the speaker's smile as well as the flow of lava metaphorically implied. In combination with the consonance of the soft /l/ sound throughout this stanza, these lines feel deceptively gentle. The stanza is comparing the speaker's "pleasure" to a deadly volcanic eruption, so the *sound* of the stanza is, in a way, at odds with its *content* (or perhaps the opposite: the sound of the stanza reflects the volcano's calm surface, the context the bubbling rage underneath). Adding to this effect is the fact that sibilance is also often associated with hissing, a sound of disapproval and the sound a snake—a creature often associated with evil or deception—makes.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14
- Line 15
- Line 16
- Line 17
- Line 18
- Line 19
- Line 20
- Line 21
- Line 22
- Line 23
- Line 24

ASSONANCE

Assonance occurs throughout the poem, often in unexpected places. On the one hand, assonance is tied to the poem's rhyme scheme (where that rhyme scheme is actually followed). In the first stanza, for example, the end rhymes of "Day" and "away" are created through assonance of the long /a/ sound. This creates and ABCB rhyme scheme, which is typical of the ballad stanza form that the poem seems to be following.

Readers thus probably expect the next stanza to follow this ABCB rhyme pattern, but it doesn't. Line 8 does *not* rhyme with line 6. It *is*, however, assonant with line 9, at the start of the next stanza:

> The Mountains straight reply -
> And do I smile, such cordial light

The string of long /i/ sounds comes almost as a relief after this unexpected, unsettling break in the rhyme scheme. It adds to the sensation of pleasure and calm created by the speaker's smile—a deceptive calm, perhaps, given that this smile is subsequently likened to a deadly volcano! Later, the long /i/ sound reappears in quick succession with lines 18-19:

> None stir the second time -
> On whom I lay a Yellow Eye -

Here, the /i/ is again associated with a sense of unnerving stillness. The speaker is saying that, whoever has the bad luck to be on the receiving end of her "Yellow Eye" is not going to move again. In other words, she kills her enemies with a single shot.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Day"
- **Line 4:** "away"
- **Line 8:** "reply"
- **Line 9:** "I smile," "light"
- **Line 12:** "let," "pleasure"
- **Line 18:** "time"
- **Line 19:** "I," "Eye"
- **Line 22:** "I"
- **Line 23:** "I"
- **Line 24:** "die"

DIACOPE

Diacope appears a few times throughout the poem and typically is used for emphasis. In line 17, for example, the speaker repeats the word foe:

> To foe of His - I'm deadly foe -

Through this repetition, the speaker is saying that her Master's enemies better watch out: *she's* an enemy to her *Master's* enemies. The addition of the word "deadly" before "foe" further reiterates the speaker's violent devotion to this Master.

Later, the diacope of "longer" and "power" both reflect the relationship between the speaker and her Master and add to the riddle-like quality of the poem's final stanza:

> Though I than He - may longer live
> He longer must - than I -
> For I have but the power to kill,
> Without - the power to die -

Whereas the speaker *may* live "longer" than her master, the Master *must* live "longer" than the speaker. This is a confusing sentiment—a paradox, really—that is easiest understood when considered within the broader context of the poem's extended metaphor. If the speaker is akin to a loaded gun, then she, technically, "lives" longer than her Master because she's never really *alive* in the first place; she's an inanimate object, something passive yet full of potential ("Loaded"). She can kill—fire her bullets—but, again, since she's not alive in the first place, she can't actually die. She *needs* this Master—whether that be her rage, her creativity, or God—to bring her to life, to help her *realize* her potential; a gun cannot fire itself, and the speaker is perhaps saying that she depends on anger, art, or divinity to grant her life purpose and meaning.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** "to"
- **Line 17:** "To," "foe," "foe"
- **Line 21:** "longer"
- **Line 22:** "longer"
- **Line 23:** "power"
- **Line 24:** "power"

VOCABULARY

Sovreign (Line 5) - One of Dickinson's unique spelling choices. Sovereign is the correct spelling, and means royal or supreme. It can also mean independent.

Doe (Line 6) - A female deer.

Cordial (Line 9) - Friendly.

Opon (Line 10) - Dickinson's spelling of "upon."

Vesuvian (Line 11) - A reference to Mount Vesuvius, an active volcano in Italy that destroyed the ancient city of Pompeii (among others) in its 79 CE eruption. In the context of the poem, it captures both the latent destructive power of an un-erupted volcano and the actual destruction released when the eruption occurs.

Eider Duck (Line 15) - A type of duck whose feathers are often used to make the down in pillows.

Foe (Line 17) - Enemy.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun - " is written in six quatrains—that is, six stanzas made up of four lines. The poem uses common meter, which is typically associated with a poetic form called the ballad. Most traditional English ballads employ a constant rhyme scheme throughout, but Dickinson does so in just the first and last stanzas. Ballads also historically told a narrative, which Dickinson does in this poem through the story of the Owner/Master and Gun/speaker. The first stanza

introduces the "characters" of the Gun/speaker and Owner/Master, with each successive stanza furthering the Gun/speaker's tale.

Dickinson's unique orthography (conventions and norms for writing a language; including spelling, punctuation, and capitalization) is on full display in this poem. Her characteristic dashes end all but 6 of the 24 lines, her capitalization stands out, and her usage of the spellings "Opon," "Sovreign," and "it's" are from an earlier era.

METER

"My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -" consists of alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter: four iambs (a metrical foot made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one) followed by three iambs. Below is an example, showing stressed and unstressed syllables with the | symbol demarcating the metrical feet:

> My Life | had stood | - a Load- | ed Gun -
> In Cor- | ners - till | a Day

Dickinson stays mostly faithful to this meter structure. While this meter usually involves the consistent rhyme scheme of ABCB, Dickinson only employs the rhyme scheme in the first and last stanzas of this poem. This is also closely related to common meter, which is one of three types of meter found in biblical hymns. It's possibly the familiar, hymn-like rhythm that caused certain scholars to interpret the Owner/Master of this poem as the Christian God.

RHYME SCHEME

The common meter in which this poem was written usually uses the rhyme scheme ABCB. However, "My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun - " only uses that rhyme scheme in the first and last stanzas. This link between the rhyme scheme in those two stanzas serves to link them, as well as bolster their importance within the poem. Serving as bookends, they illustrate both the speaker's birth ("identified" and "carried ... away") and eventual death.

While the other stanzas don't use a normal rhyme scheme, they're full of richness created by sonic repetition and variation using assonance, consonance, alliteration, and sibilance. Additionally, Dickinson employs varying levels of slant rhymes in the unrhymed stanzas, as in stanza four:

> And when at Night - Our good Day done -
> I guard My Master's Head -
> 'Tis better than the Eider Duck's
> Deep Pillow - to have shared -

SPEAKER

The speaker announces herself immediately as "a Loaded Gun" in the first line, an ambiguous image that has had multiple interpretations. What's clear is the *journey* of the speaker/gun, as she's taken by a mysterious "Owner" after being forgotten and stowed away in "Corners." Her story progresses into a life in tandem with the Owner/Master: wandering around in nature and hunting. As the speaker/gun realizes the pleasure she derives from her own violent explosions on behalf of the Owner/Master, she becomes increasingly more devoted to him, even watching over him while he sleeps. Her protectiveness over the Owner/Master, and perhaps over her own pleasure, manifests in more violence to any enemies or detractors. The ending finds the speaker in a quandary, and reflecting on the limits of her power.

But while the speaker is comparing herself to a gun, who does the speaker actually represent? To many readers, the speaker is Emily Dickinson herself. (Indeed, this is why we've chosen to use female pronouns throughout this guide; note that the poem itself never actually grants the speaker a gender, and it's possible to interpret things differently.) Others, usually when viewing the Owner as the Christian God, feel the speaker is standing in for all of humanity. Still others view the speaker as representative of a female artist, with the Owner representing her creative muse. The pleasure in poetry is sometimes the freedom it affords through its ambiguity, leaving room for the reader's own take.

SETTING

The setting starts ambiguously in "Corners," which might mean the corners of a house but can also be more broadly interpreted as any out of the way place where the speaker goes unnoticed and ignored. Alternatively, the corners could be describing the boundaries and limits of the speaker's mind. After the speaker is "carried ... away" by the Owner/Master, the two end up outside in a wooded area surrounded by "Mountains" and overlooking a "Valley." The last physical setting described is presumably inside, where the speaker watches over the Owner/Master as he sleeps.

In a poem like this, due to its ambiguity and abstract ideas, the physical landscape—described only in spare imagery ("Mountains," "Corners")—takes a backseat to the interior one. The vague, limited description of the setting allows the reader space to consider their own thoughts and experiences within the large concepts of the poem, while emphasizing the poem's enigmatic, fable-like nature.

CONTEXT

Literary Context

Emily Dickinson published fewer than twelve out of the nearly 2,000 poems she wrote in her lifetime. While she gathered and arranged these poems in her own booklets (what her editors and scholars refer to as fascicles), they were rarely dated or titled. Dates for her poems are instead approximations based on careful research. This poem is placed in the year 1863, the height of her productivity—a year in which she is thought to have written approximately 295 poems.

"My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun - " touches on many recurrent themes in Dickinson's oeuvre, namely death and the natural world. Dickinson was knowledgeable in the traditions of poetry, which is apparent in how in the poem she both adheres to the ballad form while seamlessly and purposefully deviating from it at times for added meaning or emphasis.

Dickinson grew up in a household teeming with books, was well-educated, and remained a lifelong reader. Among her favorites and recognized as major influences were the works of Shakespeare, the King James Bible, and the Romantic poets, including Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Scholars speculate that *Aurora Leigh*, Browning's novel in verse chronicling a woman writer's struggle to break free from societal constraints, was a direct influence on this poem. What's known for certain is that Emily Dickinson's admiration for Elizabeth Barrett Browning was so great, a framed portrait of Browning hung in her bedroom.

There's no adequate way to express Emily Dickinson's enduring influence on arts and letters, but something particularly notable about this poem in particular, is how the first line, "My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -," has inspired other works over the years. Biographies of Dickinson, studies on both Dickinson and women writers such as Sylvia Plath, even an educational book all use a form of the line as their title. The evocative, mysterious image says so much with so little, perhaps the key to its continued resonance.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

That a poem with such seemingly violent and dark imagery was written in the middle of the American Civil War is probably not just a coincidence. While Emily Dickinson's preoccupation with death began earlier, and she doesn't ever reference the war explicitly, the Civil War forced Americans to deal with the loss of life or potential loss of life in a rapid, physical way. Raised religiously, Dickinson was already prone to examine moral and existential quandaries, as well as the follies and perils of humanity. It's unsurprising that the majority of her output was produced while Americans battled Americans over the most abominable part of our history.

As a woman writing in the mid-nineteenth century, Dickinson was unique in her utmost devotion to her work over all else. Women of the time were expected to marry, have children, and serve their church and communities. The pervasive image of Dickinson as a recluse (something more recently challenged) may possibly have stemmed from her individualism, a forced isolation due to social and political barriers impeding her from the life she desired. It's important to remember that at the time she was writing this, thought to be 1863, the United States was still 57 years away from granting women the right to vote. Whether Dickinson was or was not an actual recluse, what's certain is her exploration of an immense interior landscape through her poetry, and the way her poetry at times seems to challenge the feminine ideals imposed upon women.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Wild Nights With Emily — The cast of the film Wild Nights With Emily—based on Dickinson's letters—on what modern readers don't know about Dickinson. (https://film.avclub.com/molly-shannon-amy-seimetz-susan-ziegler-and-brett-ge-1834086513)
- PBS NewsHour Feature — A short PBS NewsHour feature on the 2017 Dickinson exhibition at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York. (https://youtu.be/BLeMZ5WIdrI)
- Dickinson's Handwriting — An image of an original manuscript of this poem. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/75410)
- The Dickinson Archive — An open-access website of Emily Dickinson's manuscripts. (https://www.edickinson.org/)
- Susan Howe on Emily Dickinson — An interview with Susan Howe discussing Dickinson. It includes a reading from her award-winning book of creative scholarship, focusing primarily on this poem. (https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Howe/LINEbreak-1995/Howe-Susan_Complete-Interview_LINEbreak_NY_1995.mp3)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- As imperceptibly as grief
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- Success is counted sweetest
- There's a certain Slant of light
- This is my letter to the world
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

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