

Poem 127

'A narrow fellow in the grass'

A reading

In Poem 127, Dickinson represented the concept of belonging through exploring an image of a person in a cornfield who encounters a snake and speculates about its relationship with humans and the place of both in the natural world.

The poem opens with a tone of affection towards an unidentified presence that is described as 'a narrow fellow' who 'occasionally rides'. The word 'fellow' invites us to anticipate and evaluate the presence as a friend. Dickinson used the second person to engage her reader in stanza one and to share the experience of meeting a snake. The use of the word 'may' in 'you may have met him' adds another level of uncertainty. Some critics have suggested that she is playfully referring to the male sex organ or that the poem is about her fear of sexual connection with men. Dickinson presented the point of view of the undefined presence as being startled by its encounter with a human – 'his notice sudden is'. This suggests that the human and the unidentified creature experience a mild state of shock.

A more detailed but not clear description of the other presence is given in stanza two, and this is developed in stanzas three and four. It is a 'spotted shaft' but lost 'within the grass that moves as it passes through', and the grass 'divides as with a comb' and 'opens further on'. This tells us that the snake's hidden slithering movements are swift and orderly. The words create a disturbing undertone and hint at the potentially dangerous things going on around us of which we are only partly aware.

Dickinson used alliteration such as 'too cool for corn' and 'spotted shaft' and the repetition of the 's' sound to establish the snake's presence. It dwells in isolated or unpleasant places, such as a 'boggy acre' or farmland that cannot be planted with corn because it is too cool and infertile. In stanza three, the speaker is identified as a barefoot boy, heightening the snake's

dangerous presence. The boy's lack of shoes suggests he might be careless and unprepared. However, the boy is unperturbed, and he bends down to identify the snake, but its quick movement makes this difficult. Metaphors give life and action to the snake. A whiplash metaphor is used to describe the snake sunning itself and its reaction to a human presence. It 'unbraids', 'wrinkles', and then vanishes. This suggests its shy, elusive, unpredictable and deceptive nature.

In stanza five, the boy reflects on loving relationships between members of the natural world. This bond of 'cordiality' can develop out of mutual and conscious knowledge of each other. However, the relationship between the boy and the 'narrow fellow in the grass' cannot develop in a comfortable and friendly way because in their encounter they cause mutual distress.

The end of the poem contrasts with previous observations. In stanza six, the potentially dangerous behaviour of the snake fills the boy's heart with terror. The meaning of snake is extended to include any person who has snakelike qualities and is capable of treachery and dangerous attacks. This is suggested by the boy's 'tighter breathing' and, by implication, the fear of the moment of one's impending death when breathing ceases. The concluding and striking phrase 'zero at the bone' captures and dramatises this moment of terror in a chilling way. It constricts breathing and causes bone-numbing horror. This poem implies that although humans and snakes belong to the natural world, they have an antagonistic relationship and are alienated from one another. This contradicts the Romantic ideal of the natural world as united and a source of spiritually uplifting emotional experiences for human beings.