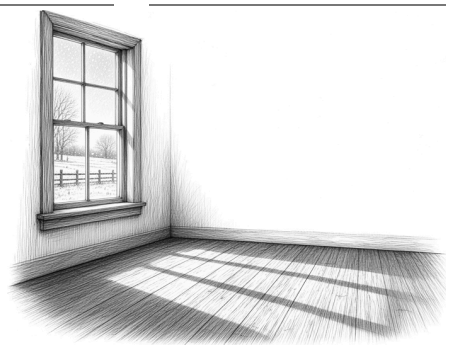
Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



There's a Certain Slant of Light

by Emily Dickinson

Grades 9–12 · Common Core RL.9-10.4, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.5

Dickinson wrote the poem around 1861; it was first published in 1890, after her death. It has four four-line stanzas in a loose hymn meter. Dickinson often turned ordinary moments in nature into studies of feeling, faith and death.

THE POEM

There's a certain slant of light,
On winter afternoons,
That oppresses, like the weight
Of cathedral tunes.

Heavenly hurt it gives us;
We can find no scar,
But internal difference
Where the meanings are.

None may teach it anything,
'T is the seal, despair, --
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the air.

When it comes, the landscape listens,
Shadows hold their breath;
When it goes, 't is like the distance
On the look of death.

VOCABULARY

slant — an angle; light coming in at a tilt

oppresses — weighs down, burdens

cathedral — a large, important church

internal — inside, within

seal — a stamp that marks something officially; also something that closes

imperial — royal, belonging to an emperor

affliction — suffering, a cause of pain

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What time of day and year does the poem describe? How does the light make the speaker feel?

2. Why might the light be compared to “the weight / Of cathedral tunes”?

3. What does “We can find no scar, / But internal difference” mean?

4. Why is the light called “An imperial affliction / Sent us of the air”?

5. How does the landscape react in the last stanza when the light comes and goes?

WRITING PROMPT

Think of a time of day or kind of weather that always changes your mood. Write a poem of 3–4 short stanzas describing the feeling without naming it directly.

There's a Certain Slant of Light — Answer Key

1. "winter afternoons"; the light "oppresses," making the speaker feel heavy and sad.
2. Slow, solemn church music can feel heavy and serious; the light weighs on the mind in the same grand, gloomy way.
3. The light hurts us, but leaves no visible wound; the change is inside, "Where the meanings are" (in our thoughts and feelings).
4. It is a suffering that comes from above, grand and powerful like a ruler's command; no one can resist or "teach it anything."
5. When it comes, "the landscape listens, / Shadows hold their breath"; when it leaves, it is "like the distance / On the look of death," a far-off, empty feeling.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/theres-a-certain-slant-of-light-emily-dickinson/