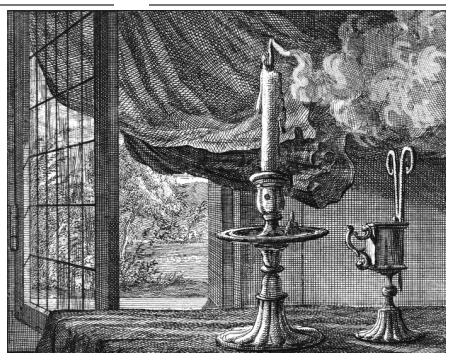
Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



The Only Ghost I Ever Saw

by Emily Dickinson

Grades 7–10 · Common Core RL.8.4, RL.8.2, RL.8.5

Dickinson wrote the poem around 1858–1860; it was published after her death. It has four four-line stanzas (our page prints them as two longer blocks). The "ghost" may be a real memory, a dream, or a figure for death itself. Notice how the first half is almost playful in its comparisons, and how the last lines turn suddenly dark.

THE POEM

The only ghost I ever saw
Was dressed in mechlin, -- so;
He wore no sandal on his foot,
And stepped like flakes of snow.
His gait was soundless, like the bird,
But rapid, like the roe;
His fashions quaint, mosaic,
Or, haply, mistletoe.

His conversation seldom,
His laughter like the breeze
That dies away in dimples
Among the pensive trees.
Our interview was transient,--
Of me, himself was shy;
And God forbid I look behind
Since that appalling day!

VOCABULARY

mechlin — a fine lace from Mechelen (Belgium)

gait — way of walking

roe — a small deer

quaint — oddly old-fashioned or charming

haply — perhaps

mosaic — made of many small pieces; patterned

pensive — quietly thoughtful

transient — lasting only a short time

appalling — shocking and frightening

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. List three comparisons the speaker uses for how the ghost looks or moves. What do they have in common?

2. What does “His conversation seldom” and “His laughter like the breeze” suggest about the ghost?

3. What does “Our interview was transient,–“ mean, and why was the ghost “shy”?

4. The poem ends: “And God forbid I look behind / Since that appalling day!” How does the tone change here?

5. Do you think the “ghost” is a spirit, a person, or a feeling? Use lines from the poem to support your answer.

WRITING PROMPT

Write a short poem (12–16 lines) about something you saw once and never forgot. Begin with calm, exact details; end with one line that shows how it still affects you.

The Only Ghost I Ever Saw — Answer Key

1. Any three: “dressed in mechlin,” “stepped like flakes of snow,” “soundless, like the bird,” “rapid, like the roe,” “fashions quaint, mosaic,” “haply, mistletoe.” They are soft, light, delicate and slightly strange—not loud or solid.
2. He almost never speaks; his laugh is faint and fades “in dimples / Among the pensive trees.” He is quiet, brief and hard to hold onto.
3. Their meeting was short (“transient,–“). He was shy “Of me,” as if he did not want to be known or stayed near.
4. The earlier lines sound curious and almost admiring; the ending is a prayer of fear. Looking back would somehow bring the terror back, or break a rule.
5. Accept supported answers: a literal ghost (lace, no sandal, soundless), death or memory (transient interview, appalling day), or a shy living person seen as ghostly.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/the-only-ghost-i-ever-saw-emily-dickinson/