I’m Nobody! Who are you?

POEM TEXT

I’m Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – too?
Then there’s a pair of us!
Don’t tell! they’d advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!
How public – like a Frog –
To tell one’s name – the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog!

SUMMARY

The poem begins with an introduction from the speaker, who announces themselves as “Nobody!” They ask the identity of the addressee—which could be the reader—and if they’re "Nobody" too. Presumably learning that the addressee *is* "Nobody" too, the speaker expresses that together they make a “pair” of “Nobodies.” The speaker instructs the addressee not to tell anyone about this, because other people would make a fuss—which, the speaker implies, is something the addressee already knows.

The speaker then talks about how boring it would be to be a “Somebody.” It would leave nothing private. The speaker likens being a somebody to being a frog.“Somebodies” spend their time talking themselves up to anyone who will give them attention and admire them, comparable to frogs making their noises in a swamp.

THEMES

ANONYMITY AND SOLITUDE

"I'm Nobody! Who Are You?" is a short but powerful poem that questions the need for attention, seeking instead to highlight the virtues of anonymity and isolation. In essence, it is a poem in praise of quiet, individual contemplation—the kind represented by Dickinson and her poetry itself. Indeed, though they may never meet, those individuals who choose to be “Nobodies” over “Somebodies” paradoxically form a subtle but powerful community. The poem strives to say that it’s okay to be withdrawn, and that people aren’t necessarily alone in feeling like they want to keep themselves to themselves.

Note how the poem opens with an oxymoron: the speaker introduces themselves just like someone would in real life—by saying their name—except the speaker calls themselves "Nobody." The capitalization of this word subverts the typical social introduction, because the speaker isn’t trying to cement their identity in someone else's mind. Instead, they are joyfully and enthusiastically claiming that they are "Nobody!" In other words, the speaker's name or identity is the *absence* of a name or identity. This is a proclamation, encouraging others to feel that it’s okay to be "nobody too." From the beginning, then, it's clear that there's nothing wrong with or shameful about being nobody. (This could also relate specifically to Dickinson's acceptance that her poems would not find a wider audience during her lifetime.)

Not only is being a "nobody" perfectly okay, but it’s actually something of a badge of honor. In assuming that someone reading the poem will recognize themselves as a "nobody too," the speaker then expresses firm solidarity with them—which, ironically, means the speaker isn't really alone. Though some people might not want to draw attention to themselves or feel the need to network with their contemporaries, these people still form a kind of community. It exists, says the poem, and should be celebrated.

The speaker knows that this thought goes against the status quo, and thus presents it as a kind of secret, imploring the reader not to tell the "somebodies" about the existence of what's essentially an underground network of "nobodies." Those "somebodies"—people who care about fame and recognition—would tell others about the "nobodies" (that is, they'd "advertise" their existence), which, in turn, would transform those "nobodies" into somebodies—the exact opposite of what the "nobodies" want!

In the second stanza, the speaker calls out being "somebody" as "dreary." That is, it’s not quiet, shy people who are boring—it’s those people who don’t have the inner resources to be by themselves. The implication is that these types of people are so preoccupied with singing their own name to the "admiring bog" all day that they miss something fundamental about being human. While it might be part of human nature to seek attention and socialization, it’s *also* just as important to know how to be alone, and to find self-worth that isn’t dependent on external approval.

With characteristic brevity and humor, then, Dickinson’s poem makes a bold point: it's okay—even powerful—to be anonymous. Indeed, in a world obsessed with social media and public perception, perhaps the poem is even more relevant now than at the time of writing.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – too?

The poem argues in favor of outsiders and criticizes people who depend on others' attention for approval. It sets up this premise immediately with its emphatic opening statement, in which the speaker introduces themselves with an oxymoron. The speaker refers to themselves as "Nobody," the capitalization of the word making it read as a proper noun (like a person's first name). Not only is the speaker "Nobody," but they're also enthusiastic to say so, as shown by the exclamation mark caesura in the middle of line 1.

In essence, this opening is a kind of parody. Overall, the poem questions those who are overly reliant on external approval—people whose lives are governed by garnering attention and being liked. This type of social behavior—at least from this poem's perspective—is a kind of performance, and the first line seems to deliberately mimic such behavior. It's almost like the opening remark of one businessperson meeting another for the first time, making sure that the other is under no illusion as to the first's identity. It echoes the language that two people might use when shaking hands and gives the impression that they're trying to impress each other. But while the line has the tone and insistence of a confident meeting, it is actually a deliberate expression of anonymity. That's why it's an oxymoron—you can't be "nobody" in the literal sense if you are a living, talking human being saying the word "nobody" out loud (or writing it on the page).

With that in mind, then, "nobody" already means something different from what it might mean in a sentence like "nobody was there." Whereas in that example, "nobody" denotes an absence (there were no people around), "Nobody" here does precisely the opposite—it announces someone's presence.

Following this proclamation, the speaker asks the reader—or an off-page addressee—who they are. In a way, this is a rhetorical question—the poem provides no answer in textual form, and whoever is on the receiving ends of the question can't answer. But of course, the rest of the poem undercuts this brilliantly by providing its own answers. This begins in the second line, with the speaker asking hesitantly whether the reader is a "nobody" too. The two caesurae in this line—the characteristic Dickinson dashes—create a sense of hesitation. This is important, because the poem overall is implying that most people are not willingly "Nobodies," but rather prefer to be "Somebodies." The speaker is so amazed to find another "Nobody" that the basic question ("Are you nobody too?") doesn't come easily—it's almost like the speaker is checking that this other "Nobody" is real.

The word "too," though small, is crucial. It speaks to a process of recognition, as the speaker realizes that he or she isn't the only "Nobody" in the world. Thematically speaking, these lines establish a sense of solidarity between two people, showing the reader how connection can occur without seeking the approval of others. This is the poem's central paradox: a community of people based on anonymity, who, by virtue of their shyness (or just personal preference) are unlikely to ever actually meet face-to-face. Dickinson's inability to find literary fame during her lifetime is also relevant. People who don't seek fame and attention, the poem seems to suggest already , still make an important contribution to humanity and are capable of living happy lives.

LINES 3-4

Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!

If lines 1 and 2 are the tentative introductions between two "Nobodies," lines 3 and 4 show the speaker's enthusiasm and happiness to find someone else like himself or herself. Now, the original "Nobody" is no longer alone—there's a "pair" of "Nobodies." There is a shift from isolation and anonymity to recognition and togetherness. With playful humor, the speaker asks the addressee to keep their shared status a secret. Line 3 uses assonance cleverly to suggest this pairing, with two identical vowel sounds in "there" and "pair." Interestingly, these two sounds sound exactly alike but are not visually identical—perhaps representing the way that the two "Nobodies" were not immediately known to one another in the way that more confident and social "Somebodies" might be.

Line 4 is an instruction from the speaker to the addressee, imploring the latter not to tell anyone about the fact that they've found each other. The combination of exclamation marks and the instructions being offered creates a sense of whispered excitement. "Advertise" is perhaps the most intriguingly puzzling word in the poem (and this might explain why it was changed to "banish" by Dickinson's editors in some versions of this poem). According to the poem, being a "Nobody" is not a bad thing—it's something worth guarding, and it's much better than being an egotistical and attention-hungry "Somebody." So telling the addressee not to "advertise" their bond (that is, make a public big deal out of it) shows that the speaker sees "Nobody"-ness as precious and in need of protection. Indeed, the "you know!" after another caesura implies that the reader/addressee knows the value of "Nobody"-ness too.

This poem was written in 1861, so it's not quite the saturated world of relentless advertising of 2019—in which almost every available space is used to sell something. But the word

"advertise" does speak to the idea that people who strive to be "somebody" are, in essence, trying to sell *themselves*—and that, by implication, there is something more true and authentic about being "Nobody."

LINES 5-6

How dreary – to be – Somebody!
How public – like a Frog

While the first stanza built a picture of what it means to be "Nobody," the second is about providing a definition of "Somebody" and explaining why, in the speaker's opinion, the former is better than the latter. Like "Nobody," "Somebody" is capitalized to create a proper noun, supporting the poem's premise that the world is divided into two types of people.

Line 5 subverts the idea that being the center of attention is inherently exciting—in fact, says the speaker, it's boring ("dreary"). The caesura dashes here work differently than in lines 2 and 4, in which they were used to suggest hushed excitement. In line 5, they're more like a kind of poetic eye-roll, with the speaker expressing weary disbelief that anyone would ever even *want* to be a "Somebody." The assonance underscores this point, making being "Somebody" sound like a laborious effort:

> "How dreary – to be – Somebody!"

Line 6 uses anaphora, starting (like the preceding line) with the word "How." This repetition again emphasizes the worst aspects of being "Somebody," as though the speaker has a long list from which they could reel off reasons to stay a "Nobody." Not only is being "Somebody" boring, it's "public"! Being "public," then, is portrayed as something inherently egotistical, embarrassing, and ultimately unnecessary. The word ties in with the earlier use of "advertise," questioning the priorities of those who crave attention.

In the second half of this line—which is also broken by a caesura dash—the speaker presents a simile that compares being "Somebody" to being a "Frog." It's a wonderfully cutting comparison; it isn't trying to demean frogs per se, but rather to deflate the air of self-importance that comes with trying to be a "Somebody" navigating the competitive world of other "Somebodies." Attention-seeking behavior, the poem says here, makes human society no more or less important than the world of frogs—which is not a comparison a "Somebody" would enjoy!

LINES 7-8

To tell one's name – the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog!

Continuing the thought from the previous line, lines 7 and 8 develop the "Frog" simile. Essentially, the speaker is presenting an image that describes the typical behavior of an average "Somebody." They spend their time telling others their name—an act which has already been comically subverted by the poem's opening—to anyone who will listen admiringly. This name is, in essence, no more or less significant than the croaking sound of frogs. And ironically, by being part of a chorus of people's names, these "Somebodies" are actually less unique than a "Nobody" might be. That is, a "Somebody" is rendered anonymous by the fact that they are just one of many people trying to stand out from the crowd—they're a part of a crowd ("Bog") of people that want to be admired and praised. It's also worth noting that the speaker seems not to think much of these potential admirers, either. A bog is literally a kind of muddy wetland—which makes the admiring crowd sound like a vaguely unappealing entity whose opinion probably doesn't mean much.

The second half of line 7 offers another potential reason why trying to be a "Somebody" is ultimately futile. The mention of the "livelong June" shows a preoccupation with the fleeting nature of time, which shows up in many of Dickinson's poems. "Livelong" means "entire," but June is, relatively speaking, a short amount of time. The month might be a long time relative to the size and lifespan of a frog, perhaps, but it's not much time for a human. Connecting this word to the attention-seeking behavior of the "Somebodies" suggests that even if they succeed in their quest to be known and admired, they won't end up having much time to enjoy that success anyway. In other words, this desire to be known, to be recognized, to be loved, might stem from a desire to survive mortality—but of course, evading death is impossible.

Why then, asks the poem, should people fixate so much on recognition? Dickinson, for example, knew she wouldn't get recognition for her work while she was alive; she did suspect people would realize the strength of her poetry after her death, but this, of course, wasn't guaranteed. Yet she continued to write her poems, because the act of writing was not—and should not be, according to the poem—an act of mere attention-seeking. It was something deeper, something which is just as fundamental to being human as being admired—and, indeed, writing is an act that generally requires a willingness to be alone. In other words, a readiness to be a "Nobody."

SYMBOLS

FROG

In the poem's only instance of figurative imagery, the speaker compares being a "Somebody" to being like a frog. This frog is a "public" creature, which refers to the fact that frogs announce their presence (essentially, "tell" their "names") via loud croaks, while all the other frogs around them do the same thing. This comparison suggests that "Somebodies," too, like to talk about themselves all the "livelong" day to other "Somebodies." The frog here represents

how vacuous and, frankly, annoying this tendency can be.

This isn't really meant as an insult to frogs. The point is that these sounds are loud, grating, and uncouth (no one would characterize croaks as being sophisticated or lovely). A "bog" also isn't exactly a nice place to hang out—it's smelly and swampy, which makes being surrounded by "Somebodies" seem like a less than pleasant experience.

And of course, these frog noises all sound pretty much the same! So, for all that "Somebodies" want to be recognized as unique and special, the way in which they go about this actually makes them all quite mundane and similar. The noises made by "Somebodies," then, are being gently mocked here, with the comparison suggesting that, for all their bluster, they are ultimately vapid and meaningless.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Frog"

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

Anaphora occurs in the second stanza, both with the repeated "How" in lines 5 and 6 and with the repeated "To" in lines 7 and 8. To understand why anaphora is used here, it needs to be considered within the overall movement of the poem. The first stanza showed the speaker recognizing another "Nobody," speaking to this addressee in excited, hushed tones and imploring him or her not to tell anyone that the two have found each other. In other words, the first stanza develops the idea of being a "Nobody."

The second stanza, however, is like a mirror image of the first, discussing instead the idea of "Somebody" (which also helps define "Nobody"). Put generally, the speaker believes that it's better to be "Nobody" and that it's actually quite boring—"dreary"—to be "Somebody."

This is where the anaphora comes in—it helps create this sense of boredom and weariness, as though the speaker can hardly put up with the idea of another "Somebody" in the world. The two sets of lines in the second stanza feel repetitive and predictable—exactly the qualities that the speaker thinks "Somebodies" embody. The anaphora also makes it sound as though the speaker offers just two negative "Somebody" traits from a long list—the speaker could, if they wanted, name more flaws than dreariness and being public. Finally, the anaphora has an insistent sound to it, which mimics the way in which "Somebodies" try to impose their identity on the world in order to gain admiration and attention.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "How"
- **Line 6:** "How"
- **Line 7:** "To"
- **Line 8:** "To "

ASSONANCE

The assonance in "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" is subtle but effective. In the first stanza, the speaker builds a sense of excited solidarity between themselves and another "Nobody," who could be interpreted as the reader. The speaker asks whether this unseen addressee is a "Nobody" too, and the unseen/unheard answer is affirmative—now there are two "Nobodies." Blink and you'll miss it, but there's a little hint at this new pairing in line 3. In "there" and "pair," there are two identical sounds—in other words, a perfect pair. The assonance, then, brings to life the newfound kinship between the speaker and the addressee. The first two lines even foreshadow this connection, with the repeated /oo/ sound across both lines seeming to mirror the two individuals drawing closer to each other.

The other key moment of assonance is in line 5. Here, the speaker is talking about how much better it is to be "Nobody" than "Somebody" by negatively defining the latter. In this line, the speaker is describing "Somebody"-ness as boring (twisting the more common idea that solitude is boring). The vowel sounds in "dreary," "be" and "Somebody" seem to stretch the line, making it sound like an exhausting effort to even *talk* about "Somebodies."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "o," "ou"
- **Line 2:** "ou," "oo"
- **Line 3:** "e," "ai"
- **Line 5:** "ea," "y," "e," "y"

CAESURA

All of the poem's lines except for lines 3 and 8 contain caesurae. In line 1, the use of an exclamation mark in the middle of the line creates a dramatic sense of enthusiasm. Here, the speaker is greeting the other "Nobody" (which could be the reader) and is excited to do so. The caesura makes the opening statement seem bold and confident, even while it is expressing a certain kind of anonymity and possibly shyness. The caesura also helps the line mimic introductions between people more generally, gently mocking the tone of people who excitedly tell others about themselves—people that, perhaps, "tell one's name ... To an admiring bog!"

Most of the other caesurae in the poem take the form of Dickinson's trademark dash. The dash is used here in a versatile way. In line 2, for example, it creates the sound of someone

trying to keep a lid on their excitement—for fear they might accidentally "advertise" that fact that they're "Nobody." In the second stanza, however, the dashes feel more like disruptions, indicating the way that being a "Somebody" is draining and dreary. It makes the lines seem to take that little bit longer, conjuring the sense of dreariness that line 5 refers to. The dash is a distinctive feature of Dickinson's poetry, making her poems instantly recognizable. Ironically, then, they are also part of what makes her a posthumous "Somebody," in the sense of finding fame and recognition.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "!"
- **Line 2:** "–," "–"
- **Line 4:** "!," "–"
- **Line 5:** "–," "– "
- **Line 6:** "–"
- **Line 7:** "–"

OXYMORON

The poem uses oxymoron in its very first line. When the speaker exclaims "I'm Nobody!" they're saying something that, if taken literally, cannot be logically true. To be a speaker, whether through speech or writing, is to be *someone*. To say "I'm"—that is, "I am"—is to assert your existence. In other words, *somebody* is saying "I'm *Nobody*," which makes this a clever oxymoron.

This moment is a kind of comic take on the action described in line 7, which talks about the way that people who want to be "Somebody" tell their own names to anyone who will listen. Usually, for example, people might introduce themselves by saying: "I'm [insert name here!" But the oxymoron allows for the speaker to argue powerfully against this common tendency for self-promotion, by borrowing the language and grammar of interpersonal introductions but turning them into something altogether more intriguing.

Combined with the capitalization of the word "Nobody," the oxymoron also means that the reader is asked to think of another definition for the word "Nobody" beyond the literal one. Where "nobody" would normally denote the absence of people, here it's about *redefining* what it means to be a person. In other words, the poem is offering its support to people who don't feel like they need to win admiration and attention from others, or who aren't comfortable doing so and might appreciate permission to just let themselves be "Nobodies."

Where Oxymoron appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I'm Nobody!"

PARADOX

The whole poem is a paradox. Put simply, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" is a poetic argument that says it isn't necessary to crave attention and admiration to live a rewarding life. Indeed, the desperate desire to be a "Somebody" is actually, according to the speaker, rather dull. The speaker thinks it's much better to be "Nobody."

But this is where the paradox comes in—because surely the speaker isn't the only person in the world who experiences this "Nobody" status. Indeed, that's what the first stanza is driving at—it acts out a meeting between two "Nobodies," which proves that being one isn't the negative experience it might outwardly seem to be. Indeed, with its suggestion of whispered secrets ("Don't tell!"), the poem suggests that being a "Nobody" can actually be a source of fun and connection. Though being a "Nobody" sounds like a life of withdrawal and isolation, the poem indicates that—paradoxically—there is a kind of community of "Nobodies" out there. Though they might not all get together to bask in one another's attention, that doesn't mean they don't share common experiences, ideas, and values. The poem argues in favor of this less obvious form of togetherness by acting it out through the speaker and the addressee, employing paradox in order to prompt the reader into reassessing their idea of "Nobody" and "Somebody."

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "I'm Nobody! Who are you? / Are you – Nobody – too?"
- **Line 3:** "Then there's a pair of us!"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

Both of the first two lines of this poem end in questions. They're rhetorical in the sense that the poem itself doesn't overtly offer up their answers, but that choice is actually part of the poem's power. It's true that the questions are technically rhetorical, but it's not quite accurate to say that they go unanswered. In fact, the way that the speaker develops what they're saying shows that this poem is a kind of conversation—the speaker seems to be responding to the addressee's responses and so on. In particular, the question of "Are you – Nobody – too?" is apparently answered with a resounding yes; that's why the speaker suddenly and excitedly says that there is now a "pair of us." This exchange helps dramatize the new bond between the speaker and the addressee.

The other powerful effect of this use of rhetorical questions is that the addressee does, actually, remain a nobody in the sense that the reader doesn't learn anything about them apart from what is implied by the speaker. This means the poem also asks another, wider question, one that left unstated: who is the other "Nobody?" In all likelihood, it's any reader who identifies

with what the speaker is saying. That is, this is a poem for all the "Nobodies" out there—of which, as the poem suggests, there are probably many.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Who are you?"
- **Line 2:** "Are you – Nobody – too?"

SIMILE

Simile is used in the second stanza. Here, the speaker compares being a "Somebody" to being a "frog." This isn't meant as an insult to frogs, but is merely an attempt to question the self-importance of those people who desperately strive to be recognized as "Somebodies."

The speaker likens the way in which these people want their names to be known to the sound that frogs make—it seems that the noise these people make doesn't have much meaning for other people. And like frogs in a pond, there are lots of these people around. The implication, then, is that "telling" your own name is a bit like one frog croaking amongst numerous other frogs making the same sound. It's not unique, in other words. It's probably not particularly pleasant to listen to, either; after all, birds also make a lot of noise that doesn't mean much to humans, but the speaker didn't choose to compare the "Somebodies" to birds.

The simile also underlies the poem's gesture towards time and mortality. The frog makes its sound in the bog—it talks to its society—for the "livelong June." Though a month might not be a long time for a human, it *is* a long time for most frogs—it might even be a significant portion of a frog's short life span. The simile, then, lets the poem hint at the old cliché that life is short. In other words, people are wasting precious time chasing admiration and recognition.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "like a Frog"

CONSONANCE

"I'm Nobody! Who are you?" employs subtle consonance. The first notable example is in line 3. Here, the /r/ sounds in "there" and "pair"—combined with assonance of the two words—form an actual pair in terms of sound. This is the moment in the poem in which the speaker recognizes their "nobodiness" in someone else, thereby creating a sudden sense of excitement and validation. More consonance is found in the next line, with the repetition of /d/ and /t/ sounds, both of which are percussive sounds that perhaps lend the instruction of the line an air of emphasis and authority.

The next consonance is found in line 6. Here, the words "public" and "like" combine with shared /k/ sound. The sound comes with the introduction of the poem's only simile—which compares being "Somebody" to being like a frog. The /k/ perhaps calls to mind similar words like "sticky" and "icky"—which makes sense, because the poem at this point is trying to show a kind of disdain for "Somebodies." It does so by portraying the "Bog" in which "Somebodies" tribe for attention as something swampy and gross, and the sound helps paint this picture (if being a little harsh on actual frogs!).

There's one other example of strong consonance found in line 7, which features strong repetition of /t/, /l/, and /n/ sounds. The line describes the way "Somebodies" have to keep "telling" their name in an effort to get attention. In other words, they are constantly trying to impose their "somebodiness" on the world. The many repeated sounds show the relentlessness of this thirst for admiration, as if these sounds themselves are the names that keep popping up throughout the line.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "r," "r"
- **Line 4:** "D," "t," "t," "d," "d," "t"
- **Line 5:** "b," "b"
- **Line 6:** "b," "c," "k"
- **Line 7:** "T," "t," "ll," "n," "n," "l," "l," "n"

VOCABULARY

Advertise (Line 4) - Here, this means something more like "publicize." (As in, the secret about being "Nobody" would be out if the addressee did "tell.") It's not meant in the sense of actual commercial advertising.

Livelong (Line 7) - A fairly old-fashioned word meaning the entirety of a specific period of time—so here it means "all of June."

Bog (Line 8) - This is like a swamp, with wet and muddy ground. (It does not refer to the informal British word for "toilet"!)

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"I'm Nobody! Who are you?" is a short poem made up of two stanzas, each of which is a quatrain. It's also a poem of two halves in the sense that each quatrain does something distinctly different. The first stanza sees the speaker reaching out to another person—perhaps the reader and/or all the other "Nobodies" in the world—and introducing themselves as "Nobody." This quatrain is a kind of two-way conversation of which the reader sees only one side. The speaker feels an affinity with the addressee, and, in hushed and excited tones, implores this second person to keep the"Nobody" status that

the two share a secret. The first stanza, then, is about identity and solidarity.

The second stanza shifts the poem into a discussion about people who try to be "Somebody." By explaining some of the negative things about being a "Somebody," this stanza also makes it clearer what's good about being a "Nobody": being a "Nobody" is *not* dreary, public, or dependent on admiration. This quatrain also contains the poem's most overtly poetical moment, when the speaker uses a simile to liken "Somebodies" to noisy frogs.

METER

The sound of the meter in "I'm Nobody! Who Are you?" is characteristic of Emily Dickinson's poetry more generally. Overall, the poem is generally iambic (meaning it follows an unstressed-stressed, or da DUM, syllable pattern.) We could classify it as going back and forth between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, but it never quite settles into something that feels especially regular, partly because of metrical variations and partly due to the use of punctuation.

There is an awkwardness to the meter in the first line that pokes fun at the enthusiasm with which "Somebodies"—people who crave attention and admiration—introduce themselves. The exclamation mark halfway through the line makes the most probable scansion seem to be:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?

Looked at this way, the line stresses the "no-ness" of the introduction. That is, though the line sounds like somebody telling someone else their name, the stress on "no" actually highlights the fact the speaker *doesn't* have a name—or if they do, they feel no need to reveal it.

Throughout the poem, all of the lines either have three or four stresses in them. The most regular-sounding line is line 7, which is iambic tetrameter that reads smoothly despite the dash:

To tell | one's name | – the live- | long June –

The meter in this line helps create a sense of plodding boredom, which is what the speaker perceives in the lives of "Somebodies." In contrast, then, the variability of the meter in the other lines highlights how being a "Nobody" is actually more fun and interesting than being a "Somebody."

RHYME SCHEME

The poem uses rhyme, but overall, it's too irregular to call it a scheme. The first two lines rhyme, and lines 6 and 8 form a rhymed pair as well.

These two moments are significant, though. The first pair—you/too—helps establish the speaker's sense of excitement and disbelief that they have found a "you" [that is, another person] who is also a "Nobody." It shows a move towards kinship between the "I" and the "you"—which is what is required for there to be a "pair." Indeed, these two rhymed works make a pair, therefore underscoring this sudden, unlikely, and exciting pairing. "Too" shows that there is now more than "one," in the sense that "too" means "as well." So the existence of a "you" creates a "too" (and a two!) that shows that the speaker isn't alone in being "Nobody."

The other rhyming pair is frog/bog. These make an obvious pair because the latter word describes the habitat of the first: frogs—or the frogs the poem refers to, at least—live in swampy bogs. This rhyme subtly reminds the reader that just as frogs have to live in their bogs, so too do "Somebodies" have to live in unappealing crowds full of other people competing for recognition.

SPEAKER

The speaker in this poem is not specified, but identifies themselves as "Nobody." They see being nobody—which perhaps means being private and humble—as preferable to being "Somebody." "Somebodies," the speaker says, live boring lives in search of attention and admiration. Of course, there are significant parallels between the speaker's position and Dickinson's own life story and ideas. She sensed the worth of her poems, but quickly realized that they wouldn't find an audience during her lifetime. This was in part because she was a woman, but also because of the startling originality of her writing. In short, she knew she would "Nobody" in the sense of finding fame and admiration, and part of this poem's aim is to legitimize the status of the outsider.

There's also a second speaker in the poem—but one whose voice the reader doesn't hear or see. In fact, it might even be the reader themselves! The speaker clearly gets a response to the poem's opening questions, with line 3 confirming that whoever the speaker is talking to *is* "Nobody" too. The beauty of the addressee's response being hidden is that the conversation between the poem and its audience essentially takes place every time the poem is read: anyone who identifies with what the speaker is saying can feel that they themselves are the second "Nobody" conversing with the speaker.

SETTING

This poem is a kind of conversation, without a specified place or time (or even addressee). The reader's only clue as to setting—which is not something the poem relies heavily upon—is in the tone of the speaker. The speaker is clearly surprised to stumble across another "Nobody," and the exclamation marks and dashes create a sense of hushed excitement around this discovery. Excitement because of the

new discovery, and hushedness because to make too much noise about it would let the secret out. It seems, then, that this poem is taking place in a society where "Somebodies" are the norm; it's as if the world of the poem is one that's generally not welcoming to "Nobodies" who aren't interested in talking about themselves.

In the second stanza, the poem makes mention of a "bog" where "a Frog" might live. But this is just in service of the simile—which compares "Somebodies" to frogs—rather than a specific setting. The second stanza, then, maintains the conversational setting of the first and also adds just a bit more detail about the world of the poem, implying that the society the speaker lives in may be dull and unpleasant, just like a bog.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson was an American poet who lived in Amherst, Massachusetts during the 19th century. Perhaps more so than any other poet in the English language, she is a kind of singular entity. She published very little during her lifetime—indeed, published work was predominantly put out by men at that time—and was a famously reclusive figure, choosing to stay indoors for most of her adult life. This obscurity, of course, is part of the poem's subject matter; the poem could be read as Dickinson expressing her self-worth despite the lack of much external validation. Indeed, many of Dickinson's other poems address similar questions related to public vs. private life or extroverts vs. introverts, such as "Some work for Immortality" and "Fame of Myself, to justify." It wasn't until after Dickinson's death that much of her work was finally published, with her sister, Lavinia Dickinson, playing a major role in this process.

Dickinson's reclusiveness, however, does not mean that she lacked literary influences. She is known to have valued the writings of William Wordsworth and Ralph Waldo Emerson, as well as Charlotte Brontë and William Shakespeare. During her early life, Dickinson went to a religious school and continued to be preoccupied with questions about faith and the meaning of existence. Church texts, then, were also a major part of her literary context, and her poems often employ a meter and diction similar to that found in hymns. Dickinson's posthumous influence was far-reaching, and she is now considered one of the most important poets in the English language.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dickinson grew up within a Puritan environment that placed great emphasis on the proper morality of the Christian tradition. Her father was a congressman and the patriarch of the family—and Dickinson could only begin writing her poetry because her father gave her permission. In this and countless other ways, Dickinson's gender affected her writing and career; put simply, she was a female author in a time and situation where women were discouraged from intellectual pursuits.

Dickinson's America was also one of religious revivalism, with competing ideas about the ways in which people ought to serve God, including the temperance movement of which her father was a part. The morality of slavery—and whether slavery should be abolished—was also an intensely debated issue at the forefront of the political scene, and which, of course, led to the outbreak of the American Civil War. Dickinson's brother, Austin, did not fight in the war, but she did have other friends and acquaintances who fought in the conflict.

The poem makes a powerful point about social status and the reluctance to actively seek admiration from others. Dickinson herself is one of many people who have made key contributions to their cultures without feeling the need and/or ability to "advertise" themselves. Others include Alan Turing, whose codebreaking helped the Allies win World War II; Rosa Parks, the civil rights activist; and the author Primo Levi (among many more). French psychiatrist Ludovic Dugas calls these high-achieving quiet people *les grandes timides*. Of course, this poem isn't specifically about people who make significant contributions to their worlds—but it does support the idea that you don't need to strive for admiration from the "Bog" in order to make a difference.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of the Poem — A reading from a play about Dickinson (which uses a slightly different version of the poem). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxYHoKNlFvs)
- Understanding Dickinson's Use of Meter — A valuable discussion of Emily Dickinson's use of meter in her poetry. (https://poemshape.wordpress.com/2009/01/18/emily-dickinson-iambic-meter-and-rhyme/)
- More of Dickinson's Poems — Check out more of Emily Dickinson work. (https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poems/45673)
- Learn More About Dickinson's Life and Poetry — Experts talk about Emily Dickinson's life and work on the BBC's In Our Time podcast/radio show. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDBADIHwchQ)
- Cynthia Nixon Interview — A clip in which actor Cynthia Nixon discusses playing Emily Dickinson in the film A Quiet Passion. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_SId6che2k)
- Educational Resources — Resources for students about Dickinson provided by the Emily Dickinson museum

(which is situated in her old house). (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/education/resources-for-students-and-teachers/)

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 -
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- 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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