

# The Grass

The grass so little has to do, –  
A sphere of simple green,  
With only butterflies to brood,  
And bees to entertain,  
And stir all day to pretty tunes  
The breezes fetch along,  
And hold the sunshine in its lap  
And bow to everything;  
And thread the dews all night, like pearls,  
And make itself so fine, –  
A duchess were too common  
For such a noticing.  
And even when it dies, to pass  
In odors so divine,  
As lowly spices gone to sleep,  
Or amulets of pine.  
And then to dwell in sovereign barns,  
And dream the days away, –  
The grass so little has to do,  
I wish I were the hay!

~ *Emily Dickinson* ~

## Synopsis and Notes

In many of her poems, Emily Dickinson writes about something very ordinary, but does so in an extraordinary way. Here, she uses careful syntax and startling images to make common grass seem beautiful, complex, and meaningful. The speaker opens the poem with the premise that grass “so little has to do,” but then lists all of the things the “sphere of simple green” actually does. Dickinson's syntax here is important: it is not that the grass has little to do. It “little has to do.” In other words, it can do as it pleases because it is not compelled to do anything but grow. Like a socialite, it has “butterflies to brood, / And bees to entertain.” It stirs “all day to pretty tunes,” holds “the sunshine in its lap / And bows to everything.” It threads “the dews all night, like pearls” and makes itself finer than a duchess. When cut and put in the hay loft, it dreams the days away.” it participates in the landscape, interacts with its surroundings, enhances the beauty of the world, and spends its time in ways that the speaker envies.

“The Grass” draws our attention to the wonders of the natural world and the opportunities that it provides for contemplation and close observation. Through the sequence of images here, Dickinson casts the lowliest of plants into the role of a duchess, juxtaposing high society with mean nature. Its work involves brooding, entertaining, stirring, fetching, holding, bowing, threading “pearls” of dew, and “making itself so fine.” Unlike the duchess, though, the value of the grass does not end with death. Instead, it continues to enhance the world with its earthy smell, and instead of rotting in the earth, it lives in “sovereign barns” to dream away the days.

### Start a Conversation

1. Why do you think Dickinson chose to write about grass? Do you think that it is an apt subject for poetry?
2. The speaker begins by observing the grass. What are some of the things that she notices? How do her observations of grass compare to your own?
3. Do you agree that the grass has so little to do? What about the activities that the speaker lists? What else does grass do?
4. What happens to grass when it dies or is cut? Does it rot in the earth? What beauty does it still possess? How does it spend its days?
5. Explain the image of the pearls. What does the speaker mean when she says that the grass “thread[s] the dews all night, like pearls / and make[s] itself so fine?”
6. The poem is an extended metaphor in which the speaker compares the grass to a duchess. How are the grass and a duchess similar? In what ways do they differ?

### Read Like a Writer: Elevating the Ordinary

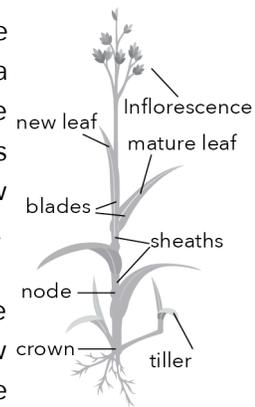
In this poem, Emily Dickinson makes ordinary grass the subject of a clever and sophisticated poem. She starts with the claim that grass has very little to do, but then she contradicts this claim by listing all of the things that the grass actually does. Her list is not an ordinary one, however; it is a poetic one. Instead of simply moving in the wind, the grass “stirs all day to pretty tunes / The breezes fetch along.” It does not simply provide a shelter for bugs; it entertains bees and cares for butterflies. At night, dew does not simply collect along the blades; instead, the grass is active, stringing the beads of dew as if they were pearls. Even when it is cut, the grass is not idle. Once your students understand Dickinson’s approach, ask them to try it themselves:

Find an ordinary natural object such as a leaf, dandelion, acorn, or rock. Make a list of things that the object actually does. For example, a rock provides shelter for underground bugs, it sits on the ground, and it might sparkle in the sunlight. Take one of those ordinary activities and try to make it sound interesting, unique, and poetic by creating a story or narrative about it. When you are done, adjust and arrange your list so that it sounds like a poem.

### Explore More: What is Grass?

An individual blade of grass lives, on average, only forty days, but the parent plant can endure for much longer. The above-ground section of a grass plant, called the shoot, has three main components: the stem, the leaves, and the seed head or inflorescence. The upper part of a leaf is called the blade, and the lower part is called the sheath. The leaf’s new growth is due to cell division at the point where the blade and sheath meet.

On most plants, new growth happens at the tip of the leaf, but on grass, the growth point is located below the tip, which allows the plant to grow a new tip when an old one is cut off. The plant also features nodes, which are enlarged areas along the stem where leaves connect. The shoot of the grass meets the roots at the crown, a thick, light-colored portion of the plant that is located at the level of the soil. The crown contains many nodes, each of which have a bud capable of producing a new, independent plant called a tiller. Because of the crown’s location, it escapes mowing or grazing and is therefore able to support regrowth and to generate new tillers.



*Next time you are in a field of hay, wheat, or grass, take a few minutes to appreciate the beauty and complexity of the individual blades. Though they may seem idle, their lives are full and varied.*





## Grass Egg Head

*Make a grass duchess (or duke), and play with the extended metaphor of this poem in a way that the poet never imagined.*

### Gather:

- Raw egg
- Potting soil
- Small spoon
- Grass seed
- Permanent markers
- Toilet paper tube
- Scissors

### Procedure:

1. For each grass egg head that you want to make, you will need an empty eggshell that is deep enough to hold a substantial amount of soil in which to plant grass seed. In order to get such a shell, crack the egg very close to the top, either by tapping it gently on a countertop or striking it gently with a butter knife or spoon. Pour the egg out of the shell, rinse the shell well, then set the clean shell in the egg carton to dry.
2. Carefully use a small spoon to fill the shell with all-purpose potting soil. Use your finger to gently compact the soil. Leave about one centimeter of space at the top of the shell. Add enough water to wet the soil thoroughly, but do not soak it.
3. Being careful to keep the eggshell upright, use permanent markers to add a face.
4. Sprinkle grass seeds on top of the soil to create a thin layer that covers the soil completely. Next, add a very thin layer of potting soil on top of the seeds. The new layer of soil should just cover the seeds.
5. Return the filled and decorated eggshell to the carton, or you can use a pair of scissors to cut a one-inch section from the end of a cardboard tube to create a stand for the egg head.
6. Place the shell in a warm, sunny spot. Keep the soil moist (not soaking wet), and wait for the grass to sprout. If you want to keep the egg person around for a while, you can give it a haircut whenever the grass gets too long. You might also make some unique egg stands with jewelry wire, paper cups, beads, or other supplies.