

## **The Listeners**

### **Walter De Lamare**

The poem begins with the traveler knocking on a moonlit door in an unknown place. It is this sense of the unknown, with all its ambiguities, that controls the tone and mood of the poem. The place in the forest where the traveler finds himself is deserted and overgrown with brambles; the sense of isolation and strangeness causes the lonely human visitor first to knock on the door of the turreted house, then to smite it, and finally to smite it even louder, as his cries receive no response.

One soon discovers, however, that it is only he who is perplexed and lonely in this nighttime scene; nature ignores the phantoms, as is seen by his horse contentedly champing the grasses and by the bird in the house's turret being disturbed, not by anything eerie or frightening in the natural scene, but by his voice and loud knocking. The scene reinforces one of Walter de la Mare's common themes: Human beings are estranged from both the natural and the social worlds, and are puzzled and even frightened by the unfathomable mystery at the heart of life.

This sense of mystery is deepened by the power of hints and suggestions—in Wallace Stevens's terms, of innuendos and inflections. Why is the traveler here? Evidently to keep some promise, perhaps to those who are no longer alive, since he is "the one man left awake" (line ੩੨). Something, though, has caused him to come to this lonely and isolated place in the middle of the night and compelled him to cry out repeatedly to a deserted house, without entering to see for himself who or what might be there.

De la Mare builds on the paradoxes and ironies inherent in the situation, opposing the "lonely" traveler to the "lone" house, and his standing "still" because he is perplexed and wondering to the "phantom listeners" who are "still" in the sense of being quiet (and perhaps dead). Yet even while the traveler feels in his heart their strangeness and stillness, his horse continues to crop the "dark turf," naturally oblivious to these human fears.

The poem ends with a shift in focus from the lonely traveler to the silent listeners; while he rushes to flee the scene, they remain behind in the returning silence. De la Mare's effort to coalesce verbal sounds and verbal symbols is nowhere more evident than in this poem, and especially in the soft sibilance of the s sounds in the final lines. Though the traveler has departed, readers are left wondering what has happened to those to whom he has made a promise as well as what this promise might be.