

The Listeners  
'Is there anybody there?' said the Traveller,  
Knocking on the moonlit door;  
And his horse in the silence champed the grasses  
Of the forest's ferny floor:  
And a bird flew up out of the turret,  
Above the Traveller's head:  
And he smote upon the door again a second time;  
'Is there anybody there?' he said.  
But no one descended to the Traveller;  
No head from the leaf-fringed sill  
Leaned over and looked into his grey eyes,  
Where he stood perplexed and still.  
But only a host of phantom listeners  
That dwelt in the lone house then  
Stood listening in the quiet of the moonlight  
To that voice from the world of men:  
Stood thronging the faint moonbeams on the dark stair,  
That goes down to the empty hall,  
Harkening in an air stirred and shaken  
By the lonely Traveller's call.  
And he felt in his heart their strangeness,  
Their stillness answering his cry,  
While his horse moved, cropping the dark turf,  
'Neath the starred and leafy sky;  
For he suddenly smote on the door, even  
Louder, and lifted his head:—  
'Tell them I came, and no one answered,  
That I kept my word,' he said.  
Never the least stir made the listeners,  
Though every word he spake  
Fell echoing through the shadowiness of the still house  
From the one man left awake:  
Ay, they heard his foot upon the stirrup,  
And the sound of iron on stone,  
And how the silence surged softly backward,  
When the plunging hoofs were gone.

“The Listeners” is the title poem of Walter de la Mare’s second collection of verse, *The Listeners*, published in May, 2012. The poem itself dates to 1909 or so, that is, three years before its publication and it is de la Mare’s most famous as well as praised poem. As a poet, de la Mare was highly recognized by such modernists as WH Auden, Vladimir Nabokov, Ezra Pound, and Thomas

Hardy, de la Mare's reputation as a poet has slumped somewhat since his death in 1956.

"The Listeners" is a poem of thirty-six lines, rhyming *abcb*. This poem creates an atmosphere of strange and outlandish nature. Investing in the mysterious, the gothic and the mystic, the poem tells the story of an imaginary journey of a nameless character. The narrator, being external and uninvolved, relates the events that he is able to observe with objectivity and detachment. While the title emphasizes passive entities who are only listening and hence contributing very little to the events, the poem itself focuses on a single traveller whose peculiar journey takes him on horseback to a forest. The traveller is bent on reaching a particular destination, in the form of an isolated house in some isolated spot in this mysterious forest. Upon arriving, he knocks on the door, even smites it repeatedly, but neither the door opens, nor anyone inside the house answers the many calls of the traveller. The house itself seems to be completely deserted as the creepers that overgrow on the window sill prove, yet the traveller seems to be confident there is someone inside. He gives up only after he realizes that those inside will not unlock the door separating him from them. Even then, he leaves a message, making sure that this visit of his will not go unnoticed.

As the traveller prepares to retract his steps and embarks on his journey back, the narrator turns the light on the chilly silence behind the barred door to focalize the listeners of the title. Since the poem has already built up an eerie atmosphere of mystery and secrecy, that the listeners are phantoms is no longer a surprising news to the reader. The traveller does not betray any sign of astonishment and the listening ghosts crowding behind the door and on the stairs inside the house are expected.

A symbolic reading of the poem offers insights into the fact that every human being is a traveller in the world. Existence itself is a journey from birth to death. It is both mysterious and familiar, strange and common. The door separating the traveller from the phantom listeners symbolizes the barrier between life and death, the secular and divine, the body and spirit. Though dream-like, the lonely journey through the woods is the journey of life.

De la Mare builds on the paradoxes and ironies inherent in the situation, opposing the "lonely" traveller 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 traveller feels in his heart their strangeness and stillness, his horse continues to crop the "dark turf," naturally oblivious to these human fears.