

The Listeners

by Walter de La Mare

Walter de La Mare's famous poem, '**The Listeners**,' immediately grabs the reader with its sense of atmosphere.

It's a moonlit night, deep in a forest. A Traveller knocks insistently on the door of a 'lone house.' Although there is no response, inside a 'host of phantom listeners' hear the Traveller's call. Spooked by the silence, the man knocks even louder. He calls out a message to the mysterious listeners.

Then the Traveller grabs his horse and hightails it out of the whole spooky situation. Let's take a closer look at what makes this poem so effective.

The poem begins *in medias res*, 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.

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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 32). 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.