I felt a Funeral, in my Brain

POEM TEXT

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading - treading - till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through -

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum -
Kept beating - beating - till I thought
My mind was going numb -

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space - began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here -

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down -
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing - then -

SUMMARY

The speaker feels as though a funeral service is taking place within his or her own mind. It feels like the funeral attendees are pacing back and forth inside the speaker's head, so much so that whatever they're walking on might break under the strain and then cause reason itself to fall through the newly created hole in the speaker's mind.

The mourners finally take their seats for the funeral service. Yet this service doesn't contain any words. Instead, the speaker can only make out a repetitive, drum-like noise. This noise overwhelms this speaker, causing the speaker's mind to go blank, as if numb.

Now the service ends and the funeral procession begins. The mourners lift a coffin and carry it as they walk across the speaker's soul, which creaks like an old wooden floor. Everyone in the funeral procession wears heavy boots made out of lead, which is why their walking once again puts such a strain on the speaker's mind. Suddenly, there's the sound of a bell ringing, but rather than coming from a single source it seems to be coming from the whole world at once.

Even the sky (and possibly Heaven itself) rings like a bell. The speaker says that people exist only to listen to the world's ringing. The speaker—whose mind has been reduced to a numb silence—feels as though he or she is no longer human but instead has become some strange creature. The speaker is alone in his or her own body and mind, as if shipwrecked there.

Finally, one of the metaphorical floorboards in the speaker's rational mind does break, creating a hole through which the speaker falls further and further down. While falling, the speaker seems to collide with entire worlds, until the speaker's mind shuts down altogether and the speaker is no longer able to understand anything at all. Just as the speaker is about the say what comes after this state, the poem ends.

THEMES

MADNESS

Dickinson's poem depicts the difficulty of understanding the mysterious thoughts and feelings that happen inside people. Often interpreted as chronicling a nightmarish descent into madness, the poem can be read as depicting the terror and helplessness that accompany losing one's grip on reality.

Throughout the poem, the speaker's mind seems passive and confused. Indeed, the "Funeral" of the opening line can arguably be read as a reference to the death of the speaker's reason or sanity. As the funeral's "Mourners" repetitively tread through the speaker's mind, their steps seem to wear down whatever is holding "Sense" back. The speaker waits for "Sense" to come "breaking through"—basically, for meaning and reason to return. Alternatively, "Sense breaking through" could imply the fragility of that sense itself, further reflecting the disordered, easily-shattered nature of the speaker's mind.

In either case, sense—physical or rational—never returns; the mind goes "numb" in response to the drum-like "beating" of the funeral service. This strange simile evokes a sense of maddening, thudding repetition, perhaps representative of the—rather paradoxical—awareness of the fact that the mind is deteriorating. In other words, the "funeral" hammers home the death of the speaker's sanity. The speaker can't escape the knowledge that his or her knowledge is collapsing . The mourners carry a "Box"—perhaps a coffin containing the speaker's reason—as the speaker is left "Wrecked, solitary,

here" in a space unfamiliar even to him- or herself. This loss of sanity is thus a painful, isolating experience.

Indeed, the poem's initial conceit, of a funeral in the brain, summons an elaborate vision of the mind's structure as being full of mysterious, inaccessible elements. For instance, the first stanza basically asks readers to imagine the speaker's mind as a two-floor structure. The speaker only has partial access to this structure, listening from below to the funeral on the second floor. Additionally, the proceedings of the funeral itself are secret and hard to perceive. They are "felt" and "heard" rather than seen. And again, the service doesn't contain words, but rather beats "like a Drum."

Because of all this secrecy, the speaker almost becomes a stranger in his or her own mind. These metaphorical events have taken on a life of their own, reflecting an increasing sense of psychological dislocation; in other words, the speaker becomes ever more isolated from his or her own thoughts.

In the last stanza, "Reason" breaks and the speaker plunges "down and down" into—well, it's unclear, which is part of the point! The image of falling that dominates this stanza shows how the speaker's mind has finally lost all control. Finally, the speaker is "Finished knowing." The "then -" that ends the poem represents an ultimate unknowability: the speaker can't even say what comes next. The rational mind, in effect, has shut down. Ultimately, the poem evokes a sense of wonder and terror as it traces out a path that leads to inner destruction and, finally, a total absence of rational awareness altogether.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-13
- Lines 16-20

THE NATURE OF DESPAIR

Throughout the poem the speaker references mourning, numbness, and a loss of control. Using those characterizations as guideposts, readers can think of the poem as offering an idiosyncratic depiction of despair. The speaker presents no explanation or solution. Instead, the poem tracks despair from its onset to the darkest abyss of isolation.

The central metaphor of a funeral in the brain establishes the speaker's state of mind. The first two lines clue readers in: the speaker's brain contains a "Funeral" and "Mourners." Something has died within the speaker, and the speaker's mind mourns that loss. Rather than give a specific cause for this feeling, however, the speaker lets it remain ambiguous. Despair becomes a mysterious phenomenon without a clear cause.

The proceedings then continue for three stanzas, as the mourners sit for a service and carry a "Box," (i.e. a coffin) through the speaker. This suggests that despair can feel like a funeral procession for an unknown person. It creates a feeling of anonymity and confusion. Additionally, by taking up three stanzas, the funeral depicts how despair can seem unending, always finding new ways to make one's life bleaker.

The poem also evokes despair through physical metaphors. The funeral's drum-like "beating - beating -" along with the mourner's heavy "treading - treading -" affect the mind as if striking it. They cause the mind to go "numb." Just as repeated pounding can cause skin to lose sensation, so here the speaker's inner bleakness prevents the mind from thinking or feeling. Next the mourners' feet become "Boots of Lead." The speaker feels an increased heaviness inside. Because of this heaviness, the soul can only "creak" mournfully.

Finally, all this beating and heaviness causes something to snap in the final stanza ("then a plank in Reason, broke"). The speaker loses hold of certainty and falls completely into an abyss ("And I dropped down, and down"). Again, the speaker's mind gets repeatedly "hit," this time by the multitude of "World[s]" that populate the universe, until reaching a final numbness.

That physicality is compounded with a sense of loneliness, of being trapped within the mind. This loneliness stems from a dawning awareness of the enormity of the universe. Readers see this most clearly in the fourth stanza, when the speaker is "Wrecked, solitary, here." "Here" can be seen as representing the inescapable isolation of the self, how each person is trapped within the "here" of their own minds. The immensity of the universe—whose "Heavens" blare loudly like bells and whose plunging depths contain an unending series of alternate "Worlds"—dwarfs the speaker. By the end of the poem, even the mysterious "Mourners" have disappeared, leaving the speaker to fall down into this abyss totally alone.

Thus after depicting a kind of inner mourning, the poem comes to represent despair as a force that beats the mind to numbness, heightens the effects of loneliness, and finally throws the speaker down a pit of isolation.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 3-4
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-11
- Lines 12-13
- Lines 15-20

THE IRRATIONAL UNIVERSE

As the poem progresses, the speaker undergoes increasingly broad visions of the world. In these visions, reason—the ability to find order and meaning in the world—is seen as a human invention that the unknowable universe gradually breaks down. This can be thought of as a complement to the theme of madness in the poem: the speaker

loses "Sense" specifically *because* the speaker is exposed to the senselessness of the universe.

In the final three stanzas, the poem expands dramatically, leading the inner space of the mind into contact with the larger universe. Note how, in the third stanza, the sound from the creaking of the soul and the stomping of the "Boots of Lead" transforms into the "toll" of the entirety of "Space." This moment seamlessly transforms the inner world ("the soul") into the outer world ("Space). "Toll" here references the ringing of a bell. It's as if the whole world, even its empty spaces, has suddenly filled with a mysterious sound whose source can't be placed or explained. This sound also has an ominous quality to it (think how frightening such a moment would be). Since Dickinson's poems often speculate on the existence of God, this can be read as a moment of confrontation between the speaker and a terrifying, God-like force, a kind of divine noise that fills the universe.

This in turn leads the speaker to speculate on the mind's place in the universe, saying, "Being" is "but an Ear." Existence thus becomes passive; things exist only to be present to the world, to *perceive* but not to *explain*. This line signals that the speaker has come to a new understanding of what it means to be human. Or rather, the speaker seems to have *become* something that's almost not human at all—"some strange Race" that exists, along with silence, as the means by which the universe makes itself known. It's as if the speaker's journey has simplified the speaker's mind, reducing it to this state. (This state also can serve as a model for the poet. That is, the poet can only "listen" to the universe as intently as possible, not explain it.)

When the poem began, it implicitly compared the speaker's mind to a building. That building's collapse represents the collapse of order and reason, so that the speaker confronts an endless universe that cannot be explained through human means. When the speaker says "a Plank in Reason, broke," the floorboards of the mind finally snap. By explicitly associating these boards with "Reason," the speaker treats rationality as a manmade structure, one that can be broken by external forces. In other words, the universe *doesn't* obey the supposedly rational rules created by people; in fact, it actively works to destroy them.

The final collapse of reason coincides with a vision of the universe as an abyss that contains "a World, at every plunge." That is, the world contains many worlds, or infinite possibilities. There's nothing exciting about this, however, as the speaker bangs against these "worlds" without being able to grasp any of them. This exposure provides an overwhelming glimpse of the universe's mystery and complexity—the way it seems ultimately irrational and unknowable to human beings. And it is this awareness, ironically, that causes the speaker to be "Finished knowing" altogether.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-4
- Lines 12-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,

This first line introduces the conceit that will guide the poem as the speaker compares his or her state of mind to a funeral. This initial comparison allows readers to draw a host of inferences about what's going on with the speaker. First off, funerals, especially in Western culture, represent a time of sadness, bleakness, and even despair. People mourn by wearing black and expressing a somber attitude. The Puritan tradition—the religious culture at the root of the history of New England, where Dickinson grew up—emphasized piety and moral seriousness over gaiety. Already, then, the poem takes on a rather somber and perhaps mysterious tone.

Right off the bat, the speaker has placed the poem in the past tense ("felt"). Whatever's going to happen in the poem has already happened; the speaker's on the other side of it. Notice, too, how it's left totally unclear who exactly this funeral is *for*. This creates an air of mystery in the events that follow. The odd capitalization of this line will also recur throughout the poem, suggesting that this is meant to be taken figuratively—that is, that each of these capitalized nouns are being used as broad, symbolic stand-ins for the poem's thematic ideas about death, sense, and reason. The quick caesura also creates a halting, almost uncertain rhythm; already the speaker must pause to clarify his or her thoughts.

Finally, this funeral takes place in the "Brain." Rather than taking place in the abstract region of, say, the "mind," the poem locates itself directly in the speaker's body. This line, then, prepares readers to accept that the metaphorical, emotional, and even mystical events of the poem will all in some way relate to the speaker's own physical self. Here, readers can almost picture a tiny funeral service happening inside the speaker's skull. This isn't to that the metaphor should be taken literally, but that this possibility prepares readers for future gray areas when they might lose track of the metaphor's vehicle and tenor—in other words, for when the poem's extended metaphor becomes more complex, harder to map onto the poem's lines themselves as the speaker's reason begins to break down.

LINES 2-3

And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading - treading -

Already in the second line the poem complicates its initial

conceit. The metaphor doesn't proceed predictably; it doesn't detail, as readers might expect, how *sad* the funeral is, emphasizing a sense of loss. Instead, it picks up on a small element of the funeral—the pacing of the attendees. This pacing has been driving the speaker crazy—in the colloquial sense but also, as will become apparent later in the poem, perhaps literally as well.

What's also strange about choosing to go in this direction with the metaphor is that the speaker seems to have started taking it literally. On one hand, readers can of course think of this moment as representing the way thoughts (especially negative ones) can become obsessive, repeating themselves over and over, as if pacing through your mind. At the same time, the poem injects this comparison with no small amount of mystery. Who exactly are the "Mourners"? Dickinson's characteristic use of capitalization, which expressively draws attention to important words, again serves to transform them into proper nouns. Instead of simply being a metaphor, these "Mourners" seem to become independent beings that have taken over the speaker's mind.

Additionally, Dickinson inverts the syntax of this phrase, which would more naturally read "And Mourners kept treading - treading - to and fro." On a purely technical level, switching up the word order allows there to be a slant rhyme between "fro" and "through," thus maintaining the poem's ballad stanza rhyme scheme. It also allows Dickinson to maintain an iambic meter:

> And Mourn- | ers to | and fro

Look how this meter would have been totally broken in the more natural word order:

> And Mour | ners kept | treading - | treading -

Technique, however, is never an end and justification in itself. Rather, it provides a structure that enables the poet to productively heighten the poem's intended effects. Here, switching up the syntax reflects the speaker's disorientation. It conveys how the speaker is in a mental state where it's difficult to get words out in the right order.

Furthermore, by maintaining its iambic meter, the poem captures the rhythmic pacing of these mysterious mourners. That rhythm gets further emphasized by the epizeuxis of the repeated "treading - treading." Finally, the enjambment between lines 2 and 3 (which will in fact continue through the end of the stanza) seems also to reflect the speaker's building anxiety and agitation. Together, lines 1 and 2 actually make a complete, if strange, sentence: "I felt a Funeral in my Brain, and Mourners to and fro." To move "to and fro" essentially means the same thing as "treading," and the choice to enjamb line 2 thus emphasizes the pacing of the mourners, who *tread* right over the line break itself.

LINES 3-4

> *till it seemed*
> *That Sense was breaking through -*

Now the speaker introduces a whole new set of mechanics and spatiality to the poem. The mourner's pacing has worn down the metaphorical floor of the speaker's mind, so much so that it seems like a hole might form, through which "Sense" will fall through. "Sense" here has a range of significations including reason, rationality, and meaning. This phrase, "till it seemed / That Sense was breaking through - " offers a heap of possible interpretations, so let's take some time to parse them out.

First off, the image of "Sense ... breaking through" implies that something divides the speaker's mind: on one side is sense, which is about to break through to the other side. Because of the previous image of the pacing mourners, it makes sense (no pun intended) to associate this divide with the floor that the mourners are pacing on and wearing down. Readers might imagine the speaker listening from the floor below the funeral, expecting "Sense" to come tumbling down through a hole worn into the ceiling. Alternatively, readers could imagine the speaker right there in the funeral itself, watching sense about to fall through a crack in the floor.

In the first scenario, the speaker waits for sense to return. In the second, the speaker feels like he or she about to lose it. As often happens with Dickinson's metaphors, readers don't have to (and probably shouldn't) pick a single interpretation. Rather, readers can glean from both these scenarios that the speaker's mind has become compartmentalized, leaving reason in a precarious state. Either the speaker's about to lose sense or about to gain it, but either way the speaker isn't in full possession of his or her faculties.

Additionally, it's not clear that the poem is taking place within a kind of inner space of the mind. In the space of four lines, the poem has taken a straightforward conceit ("I feel like there's a funeral inside of me") and allowed it to create a whole world. Though readers are still vaguely aware of what's being compared to what (the mind is like a room that reason might fall out of at any moment), the poem has also begun dismantling the strict divide between metaphor and reality. In some sense, the poem is *literally* talking about the spaces of the mind that reason passes through. And, because the poem specifically deals with reason's precariousness (a state we might be inclined to call madness), there's no assurance the speaker has any interest in maintaining a distinction between metaphor and reality. In other words, if the speaker *is* talking about a journey into madness, then allowing metaphors to become literal is part of the point. Perhaps that's exactly what madness is, in this poem.

LINES 5-7

> *And when they all were seated,*

A Service, like a Drum -
Kept beating - beating -

Now the funeral actually commences. One strange thing about how Dickinson constructs her metaphors is that each additional line seems to revise readers' knowledge of what's been going on so far. This whole time, the funeral hadn't even begun yet! In retrospect, the whole first stanza served as preamble, a wake, to what only begins to happen in the second—the actual funeral service.

Yet, strangely, the service contains no words. It only beats "like a Drum." The mourners' pacing has ceased as they take seats for the service, but this wordless beating replaces the sermon. So, on one hand, we have a speaker relaying to us (the readers) in words that happens in his or her mind. On the other hand, those happening are explicitly wordless. If the service does contain words, they can't be made out by the speaker. So, while the speaker can communicate with us, the speaker *can't*, it seems, communicate with what's going on in his or her own mind.

The drumbeat of the service also replaces the traditional instrumentation of the church organ. Whereas an organ can produce a multitude of notes, harmonies, and melodies, this drum simply beats repetitively (much like the mourners' treading in the previous stanza; indeed, the epizeuxis of "beating - beating" again appears in the third line of the stanza). Rather than evoking the richness of human feeling, the drumbeat represents a kind of deadening, an inability to achieve proper expression. Recall also Dickinson's uncertain relationship with religion. Here, the poem shirks a representation of traditional Christian funerals in favor of something stranger, less traditionally articulate.

This representation creates a rather paradoxical emotional atmosphere. The sadness associated with funerals gets offset by the speaker's feeling of removal from the actual proceedings. It's as if the speaker contains a sadness that he or she doesn't have full access to. Coupled with the strangeness of the funeral service, this creates a sort of terror—terror at not being able to grasp what's happening in the speaker's own mind. This can also be thoughts is also a form of despair, an unplaceable sadness whose source the speaker can't pinpoint.

LINES 7-8

till I thought
My mind was going numb -

The end of the second stanza refreshes readers' window into the speaker's emotional state. Throughout the poem so far, there's been a repetitive striking within the speaker's mind, whether from the mourners' feet or from the service's beating. Like skin hit so many times it loses feeling, the speaker's mind also goes "numb." The speaker loses the ability to make sense of what's happening in his or her own mind. The stanza's final line reverses the expectations of the preceding "till I thought."

Instead of the speaker reaching a thought that offers a definite conclusion as to what's going on inside his or her own head, the speaker ultimately isn't able to think at all.

This numbness can be read as a kind of despair, a growing sense that the speaker can't be fully present to his or her own thoughts and feelings. One of the paradoxes of the poem's depiction of despair is that it contains both terror and monotony: terror at the strangeness of these proceedings, monotony from its repetitiveness (e.g. "beating - beating"). The rhyme between "Drum" and "numb," the poem's first full rhyme, embodies this paradox. The "Drum" represents the almost threatening quality of the funeral, which then gets transformed into a numbness to that very threat.

The poem's meter is still iambic, though the lines alternate between 4 and 3 feet, following a traditional ballad stanza. Line 8 capitalizes on its shortened length to play up the sense of numbness.

Kept beat- | ing - beat- | ing - till | I thought
My mind | was go- | ing numb -

It's as if the speaker's mind is so out of it that the speaker has to cut the line short. Dickinson's characteristic dash also adds to that effect. Finally, notice how the word "mind" has replaced the word "Brain" from line 1. Just as "Brain" emphasized the speaker's physicality, "mind" de-emphasizes it, once again contributing to this numbing effect.

LINE 9

And then I heard them lift a Box

Line 9 both addresses one of the poem's central mysteries *and* seems to gloss right over it. This is the mystery of who or what exactly this funeral is for. But readers don't get an answer. The closest glimpse comes as "a Box," likely a coffin, which never gets opened and never appears again in the poem. In this way, the coffin can be thought in terms of what filmmakers call a MacGuffin. Although the death of whatever lies in the coffin has supposedly caused this funeral in the brain, it otherwise seems to elude description. Particularly, the use of the word "Box" emphasizes the coffin's role as a container while simultaneously expanding the possibility of what the box might contain.

One way to interpret this box, especially with regard to the theme of madness, is that it contains the speaker's reason or sanity. All the proceedings thus far have signaled a loss of control on the part of the speaker. It's as if these strange "Mourners" have taken over her mind. Readers might think of line 9 as the laying to rest of the speaker's sane self. Or, considering the atmosphere of despair, readers could think of the box as containing happiness, without which the speaker becomes numb.

But readers can just as well *not* ascribe a single meaning to the

contents of the box. Instead, it's possible to think of the inaccessibility of the box as a symbol for the larger inaccessibility of the speaker's mind. The suggestiveness and mystery of the box in this way become irreducible, the box symbolizing an absence of meaning within the speaker. The box, then, could just as well be empty.

The action of this line, the lifting of the box, also emphasizes the poem's sense of physical space. Furthermore, continuing to emphasize the speaker's distance from the proceedings of the funeral, the lifting is "heard" rather than seen. This makes readers feel like they're inhabiting the speaker's mind-space, yet only able to half-glimpse what's actually going on.

LINES 10-12

And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space - began to toll,

This stanza continues to focus on the speaker's hearing. The funeral procession crosses the speaker's "Soul." The poem has already suggested the speaker's mind has something like a floor that the mourners are walking on. Here, rather than repeat "Mind" or "Brain," the speaker switches it up with "Soul." In the first stanza the word "Brain" emphasized the physicality of the poem's events, signaling that this metaphorical funeral was going to take on very real dimensions. But by line 10, the poem has become fully immersed in those dimensions. Yet now Dickinson does the opposite: she takes a concrete word like "creak" and lends it an abstract dimension with "Soul."

What does it mean for the speaker's *soul* to creak? Well, think of how a creaking floorboard sounds—almost whining or mournful. And think of *why* they creak, how wood warps over time and the floor no longer fits together as neatly as it once did. Think also of what happens when you step on a creaky floorboard for the first time. You're surprised, even startled. Now imagine how you'd feel if you suddenly discovered your own soul could creak! Perhaps there'd be a combination of sadness and surprise, the sudden realization that your mind is maybe starting to fall apart a little bit. Part of what this implies is that people's souls are both *part of* and *separate from* them, just as your hands are part of you, but you're also more than your hands.

This line can almost be felt in the body, as if the soul is a tender limb stomped on by the "Boots of Lead," whose leadenness receives further emphasis from capitalization. This detail once again retroactively qualifies what's been happening in the poem; all this time the mourners have been wearing lead boots! The caesura in line 11 before "again," meanwhile, creates a sense of exasperation or perhaps resignation. It's no coincidence that this appears in the third line of the stanza, just as the "treading" of the mourners and the "beating" of the service did in their respective stanzas; again, the speaker is saying, a repetitive pounding echos across the speaker's mind and soul.

Then, suddenly, the poem makes a dramatic shift. The world of the poem, up till now contained within the speaker's "Brain," suddenly opens up. Now, "Space" suddenly rings out like a bell. This is not just outer space, but space itself—that is, everywhere, the physical extent of the universe. The poem has ballooned in scale. It accomplishes this transition partly by continuing to focus on sound. The soul's creaking and the boots' stomping now become space's tolling. This final sound also increases the volume; a bell's tolling is much louder than a floorboard's creaking. This tolling completes the funeral by acting as a funeral toll, the ringing of a church bell during a funeral or burial service.

LINE 13

As all the Heavens were a Bell,

At the end of the third stanza, all the space surrounding the speaker seemed to ring out with the same intensity. At the beginning of the next stanza, the speaker proposes a source for the ringing: "the Heavens." Perhaps, the speaker is suggesting, the whole sky has become like a bell. Perhaps the sound has even leaked from the Christian Heaven itself. There's still not a clear source. Nor, on such a vast scale, does the speaker perceive any explanation for *why* this ringing has happened. Who has struck the world like a bell? The speaker doesn't, and perhaps can't, know.

If the first three stanzas—up to this point—explored the terror of losing inner control, now the poem transitions to an exploration of terror at the sheer immensity of the world itself. Perhaps this represents a moment of increasing madness, in which the speaker's inner turmoil bleeds into the world around. On the other hand, perhaps the speaker has reached a startlingly mystical perception of the world; perhaps something larger than the speaker is at work.

The line between madness and heightened perception is a recurring theme in Dickinson. For instance, in her poem "Much Madness is divinest Sense," in which she suggests that sanity is a matter of agreeing with the majority, and that those we call "mad" often have the truest perceptions of reality. While this poem doesn't explicitly make that same argument, readers have to reckon with it in some way. Are readers to take what follows as a further descent into madness, or as a series of acute observations about the nature of existence? This challenge to the reader is part of what makes a poem like this worth reading over and over—it continually asks you where you stand, even forces you into an uncomfortable zone where what you might regard as "crazy" is actually a carefully detailed form of knowledge.

LINE 14

And Being, but an Ear,

One of the amazing qualities of Dickinsons' writing is her

compression. She can write a three-beat line that warrants a full entry here. The poem has suddenly expanded to take in the world around the speaker in addition to the inner events of her mind. Rather than focusing single-mindedly on the funeral, the speaker now has leeway to comment on the state of her existence more generally.

"Being" here refers to existence, more specifically a property that all things that exist have. Defining the concept of being is a problem that has occupied Western philosophers and theologians for centuries. Particularly, how do we define human "being" in relation to the world around us? The American Romantics, Dickinson's closest literary precursors, emphasized human openness to the natural world. Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose poetry Dickinson had read, famously declared himself "a transparent eyeball," meaning he was open to all perceptions the universe had to offer.

Here, Dickinson replaces Emerson's eyeball with "but an Ear." Whereas in Emerson's writing openness leads to a liberating communion with the world, this particular poem of Dickinson's depicts a more pessimistic situation. Emerson emphasizes sight, but in this poem sight has been continually thwarted, replaced by hearing, which receives imprecise clues as to what's going on. We are *only* ears. The sky tolls, but we can't tell why. A funeral service happens, but we can only make out an incoherent beating. In short, to be an ear is to be reduced and trapped, rather than liberated. This is reflected in the quick alliteration of "Being" and "but," that latter conjunction immediately cutting existence itself down to size.

On the flip side, readers can also see this moment as offering a measured assessment of what a poet does. After all, the traditional medium of poetry is sound. The poet's ability to hear intimately relates to her ability to make poems. And despite the incoherence of what the speaker hears in his or her own experience (the treading, beating, tolling, etc.), the speaker has then transformed those sounds into coherent, evocative language. That isn't to say the speaker rationalizes or explains what's happening, but rather that the speaker is able to use language to capture the experience of non-language sounds. Seen in this light, being like an ear is exactly the thing that enables poetry to exist in the first place. Ears straddle the boundary between sense and non-sense, taking in not only a bell's toll, but also the meaning of the word "toll" itself.

LINES 15-16

And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here -

Lines 15 and 16 pivot out of the startling perception of line 14. If line 14 proposed a definition for what it means to exist in the world, these next two lines detail exactly what kind of human being the speaker is. In fact, these lines seem to suggest that thinking in terms of "human beings" doesn't really make sense anymore. Rather, the speaker proposes the idea "some strange Race." "Race" here means something like species, or the use of "Race" in sci-fi and fantasy—a type of creature, be it human, elf, angel, bird, etc.

The speaker has become this "strange Race." The preceding events of the poem have led to a point where the speaker can no longer think of him/herself as being human. This transformation has a distinctly negative overtone in the word "Wrecked," as if the speaker has been *reduced* to this state. So again, readers can interpret this as a moment of the increasingly negative effects of madness, which prevent the speaker from being the person he or she once was.

Alternatively, readers could see this as a kind of scraping away of the speaker to reveal exactly who she *is*. The Romantics, for instance, emphasized solitude as integral to self-knowledge and connection to the world around one. Going even further back in time, think of Robinson Crusoe, whose shipwreck (faintly suggested by the poem's use of the word "Wrecked") ultimately leads to a discovery of his own ingenuity. And there's of course Dickinson's own biography, her famous characterization as a recluse—whether or not such a characterization is strictly accurate—which undoubtedly gets played up in some of her own poems. The poem "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" for instance, valorizes the solitude of eccentricity over public acceptance.

Reading "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" in such a manner, readers can see the isolated speaker discovering him/herself to be something other than human. This something is like an "ear," incredibly responsive to the "sound" of the world around it.

There are two ways to read "Silence" in line 15.

1. It's actually silence *itself* that is the "strange Race." In this case, silence becomes the speaker's companion in this wreck.
2. Silence lies within the speaker and together they form this race, a strange amalgam or unity, like a hermit crab and its shell, or lichen on a tree. Either way, silence seems to have something to do with both listening and numbness. The speaker's inner silence enables the speaker to hear the tolling of space and the heavens, but it results from the "beating - beating -" that prevents the speaker from having any thoughts of his or her own. Ultimately, the speaker's new sense of his or her state of being leads the speaker to a feeling of isolation. The speaker is emphatically "here," trapped within her mind and body.

Finally, note the strong sibilance of both of these lines, with "Silence," "some strange race," and "solitary" all adding to a hushed, whispering tone that reflects the content of the line itself. The many caesuras further add a halting quality to lines 15 an 16, as if mimicking the speaker's "self" unraveling.

LINES 17-18

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down -

The final stanza merges what readers might call the poem's two "settings" thus far: the inner world of the mind and the outer world of, well, everything else. The first line of the stanza returns readers to the mind's floorboards, which so dominated the beginning of the poem. Finally, they go from creaking (in line 10) to actually *breaking*.

Now, however, the speaker explicitly identifies the floorboards with "Reason," rather than the "Soul." It becomes clear to the speaker that all this time it has been reason that has held the speaker's mind together. In other words, the poem suggests that rationality and the ability to find order in the world also enables us to maintain order in our own minds.

The breaking of this plank gets caused by the "Boots of Lead" which have been threatening to break it all along. But due to the presence of the intervening stanzas, this break also seems to be caused in some way by the "wreckage" the speaker experiences in stanza four. All the challenges present thus far in the poem—the speaker's inner threat of madness as well as the threatening "toll" of the universe—come together to finally snap the speaker's mind.

As the floor of the mind breaks, the speaker falls through it. A subtle shift happens that enables this image to work. The speaker goes from paying attention to what's happening in his or her mind to actually being inside it: the speaker is standing on the floor of his or her own mind when it breaks. The previous stanzas have already helped to shrink the speaker in contrast to the immensity of the universe (recall, for instance, how the speaker becomes "but an Ear" in line 14), so in a way readers are prepared for the speaker to be shrunk even further. In this way, the speaker becomes a miniature inhabitant of the speaker's own mind.

As will soon become apparent, this floor breakage seems to collapse the division between the mind and the world. So as the speaker falls "down, and down," the speaker not only falls deeper into his or her own mind, but also deeper into the universe itself (what exactly this means gets explored in the poem's final two lines). This "down, and down" also acts as a last instance of diacope, which has been the poem's central technique for emphasizing the destruction of the speaker's mind through repetition.

LINES 19-20

And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing - then -

Line 19 contains one of the most striking images of the poem. As the speaker falls, he or she collides with entire worlds. Part of what's striking about this image is that it's both unprecedented and inexplicable—unprecedented in that up to now the poem has given no clues that there might be other worlds. Of course, the mysterious mourners and tolling Heavens have suggested entities that lie beyond the speaker's knowledge or control. Until now, however, it's been possible to say *the* World, *the* Heavens. Now, there's a whole multitude of Worlds and Heavens.

It might be too much to say that the poem predicts modern concepts of the multiverse, but something of the notion is present here. We can't say exactly what these worlds are, but they suggest monumental entities. This moment amounts to a sudden exposure to the unbridled expanse of the universe, or whatever it is people inhabit, that has remained hidden until now.

That reason's breaking *unveils* this expanse suggests that reason has some role in keeping it hidden. When the speaker confronts the full, multi-world extent of the universe, the speaker is "Finished knowing." The only verb in the poem to receive capitalization, this "Finished" marks a decisive moment. The speaker is unable to grasp these worlds, only to collide with them without attaining any knowledge. So, the final full-force exposure to the universe marks the end not only of reason, but of knowledge itself.

The poem ends by cutting itself off. The speaker says "then -" but doesn't follow it up. It's as if whatever happens to the speaker next cannot be put into words. This final, unspeakable stage could be thought of as death, or total madness, or an ultimate understanding of the universe that is too deep for words. It's a paradoxical note to end on, but one that also contains all the poem's main themes.

The dash at the end of the poem acts as a final openness. Whereas some of the previous stanzas ended on a dash, allowing a moment of silence before the beginning of the next stanza, now the poem enters a permanent silence. In this way, the silence that follows the poem gets incorporated *into* the poem. So, the poem doesn't really end, "then -": it ends, "then [silence]."

SYMBOLS

MOURNERS

In general, mourners symbolize sadness and loss. In this particular poem, however, they also take on an air of secrecy and mystery. They represent the parts of the speaker's mind that the speaker doesn't have access to. They're almost foreign to the speaker's mind, in fact, sudden apparitions that come to disturb the speaker's peace. Their pacing in "Boots of Lead" symbolize how intrusive, repetitive thoughts can bring one to madness and/or a state of numbness, of not being able to think of anything but those thoughts.

The mourners do three things: they pace, they sit for the

funeral service, and they lift the coffin (the "Box") for the funeral procession. If the funeral acts as a conceit for the death of something (reason, happiness, the self) within the speaker, then the mourners represent the mysterious forces that cause or aid that death.

The mourners also serve as a juxtaposition with the poem's later emphasis on isolation. That is, whereas the speaker comes to see him- or herself as alone in the universe, the presence of the mourners in the earlier stanzas suggests that the speaker contains a multitude within his or her own head.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Mourners"
- **Line 5:** "they"
- **Line 9:** "them"

BOX

The box, or coffin, lies at the center of the funeral, yet its contents remain unknown. As such, it symbolizes the speaker's inability to understand what's happening inside him- or herself. Even if readers do posit that the box contains, say, the speaker's reason, or the speaker's happiness, or the self, it matters that readers can't actually *see* that content; instead, readers have to guess at it. Reason thus remains obscured, hidden.

What's more, the box lies at the center of the funeral yet it only appears in one line of the poem. It directs the whole course of the poem while barely making an appearance. For that reason, it's possible to think of the box as what filmmakers call a MacGuffin. In literary theory, some writers might call the contents of the box an "absent center." That is, the death of whatever lies in the box has caused all these strange events to happen, yet it *itself* is almost a non-entity. It even drives readers to speculate as to what it is. Thought of in this way, that speculation becomes an intended effect of the poem, rather than a negative side effect. You could argue that it doesn't really matter what's inside the box, in other words, because the specific *content* isn't the point. What matters is how the box itself reflects the speaker's isolating sense of confusion and, perhaps doomed, search for reason and meaning.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Box"

POETIC DEVICES

CONCEIT

The most central device of "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" is its conceit, which occurs throughout the entire poem. The speaker compares his or her state of mind to a funeral. Right off the bat, this signals an inner sadness in the speaker, a sense of mourning. Additionally, because funerals involve multiple stages, this comparison gives the speaker room to flesh out this conceit as the poem progresses.

Particularly, the poem situates this funeral in the "Brain." This signals that the poem, on one hand, operates in an imaginary space. On the other hand, it locates that space directly within the head of this particular speaker. As the funeral proceedings go on, it's always clear that this is happening *inside* a particular person.

The stages of the funeral can be thought of as follows:

Stanza 1: The Wake
Stanza 2: The Funeral Service
Stanza 3: The Funeral Procession
Stanzas 3 and 4: The Funeral Toll
Stanza 5: The Burial

If funerals help the dead move on from this world to the next, then the poem's final stanzas accomplish a similar action. The speaker's falling in the last lines becomes a kind of burial. By the end of this burial, the speaker has effectively disappeared from the world.

So, what exactly is this a funeral for? Following the theme of madness, we could say it's the death of reason. With regard to the theme of despair, it's the death of happiness or of a sense of self. Or perhaps it represents obliteration in the face of the universe's unknowability. However you choose to interpret it, some part of the mind has died.

Furthermore, the funeral really depicts *two* ends. The first, we've already addressed: something has died in the speaker. That has already happened at the start of the poem. The second end is the end of the funeral, the actual *putting to rest*. This comes in the poem's final stanza, the explicit silencing of the speaker in the unfinished phrase "- then -." If funerals, in part, serve to guide the soul of the deceased into the next world, that's exactly what happens in this poem as well. The speaker's mind gets transported beyond the known world. And that's ultimately what the poem leaves readers with: a kind of transport, albeit an unhopeful one.

The conceit also acts as a transport in another sense: it becomes *literal*. Throughout the poem, the line between the metaphor's vehicle and tenor (that is, the line between the thing evoked for the sake of comparison, the funeral, and the subject being described, the speaker's state of mind) gets blurred; the metaphor seems to become real. Readers are so inside the speaker's inside, and the details of the funeral get so fleshed-out, that they might start taking the funeral seriously. Readers lose track of what certain aspects of the funeral might represent (who are the mourners? what is the service? what's in the box?). Instead, these elements become mysterious

entities with lives of their own.

In the hands of a poet with less control, some readers might see this as messiness. Here, though, the poem achieves such evocative images and insights that this confusion seems worth it. Indeed, instead of confusion we might think of this as a kind of *fusion*, a wedding of vehicle and tenor that exemplifies the power of language and metaphor to transport readers beyond mundane comparisons into a realm of greater insight.

Where Conceit appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

METAPHOR

The poem's use of individual metaphors weaves in and out of its use of conceit, and basically consists of the entire poem. For instance, when the speaker's soul creaks in line 10, the poem is metaphorically comparing the soul with a warped wooden floor. That comparison helps provide further detail for the funeral procession, which is part of the poem's central conceit, though the floorboards themselves are not necessarily integral to funeral metaphor.

In other words, from the guiding comparison of the speaker's state of mind to a funeral, all these other comparisons spring forth that help flesh out the speaker's world and provide idiosyncratic insights to the speaker's mindset. Basically *everything* that happens in the poem is a metaphor. Yet, paradoxically, it's also all literal. Very quickly we realize that what we took to be a conceit (the comparison of the mind to a funeral) the speaker takes literally.

Part of the reason for this is that the things the metaphors represent are pretty indistinct. Whereas a standard metaphor compares two nameable things (e.g. the sea is a blanket), in this poem we can't always name the subject of the metaphor. For instance, in lines 16 and 17, the speaker says "And then a Plank in Reason, broke / And I dropped down, and down." On a basic level, this line compares *reason* to *floorboards*. When those boards break, the speaker falls through them into a state beyond reason. On this level, the line's metaphorical function is clear. Yet on the other hand, what exactly does it *mean* for reason to *break*? What do those planks actually represent? What does it mean, more deeply, for the speaker to think of reason as a set of floorboards?

There's a certain *unspeakable* quality at the bottom of these metaphors: they represent structures of the mind, or of experience, or of the world, that readers can intuit but not necessarily name. It's as if these things *can only* be spoken about metaphorically. These complicated, layered metaphors thus reflect the speaker's own sense of confusion and isolation from the speaker's own mind (or "Soul" or "reason").

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

SIMILE

In a poem that's almost completely metaphorical, there are only two instances of outright simile. The first comes in lines 6-7: "A Service, like a Drum - / Kept beating - beating." Here, the funeral service in the speaker's mind gets compared to a drumbeat. Whatever words the service contains cannot be made out, as if they're muffled, garbled, or spoken in a language so foreign to the speaker that they sound more like percussion than actual words. Additionally, the "beating - beating -" parallels the "treading - treading -" of the mourners' pacing in line 3. This lends a physicality to this comparison. The speaker doesn't just *hear* the drum, but *feels* it as if the speaker's mind is actually being struck.

While the poem seems to offer a straightforward simile in this instance, it's actually couched in the poem's characteristic use of metaphor. First of all, notice how the initial term of the simile, the funeral, is itself *already* a metaphor (more precisely, it's part of the poem's central conceit). Second, notice how the second term, the beating, in turn echoes the pacing of the metaphorical mourners.

A similar effect happens with the poem's other simile in lines 12 to 13: "Then Space - began to toll, / As all the Heavens were a Bell." Here, the Heavens (the sky, but also with overtones of the Christian afterlife) get compared to a bell. The ringing of the sky causes all of space to ring as well. Yet that ringing of space plays off the previous sound of the creaking soul (itself, in turn, a comparison between the soul and floorboards). Then, the speaker uses this comparison of the sky to a bell to speculate on the nature of "Being." So again, this simile gets linked up with the poem's vast network of metaphors. In this way, simile helps draw attention to the complexly metaphorical nature of the poem.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "A Service, like a Drum - / Kept beating - beating -"
- **Lines 12-13:** "Then Space - began to toll, / As all the Heavens were a Bell,"

EPIZEUXIS

Epizeuxis functions as one of the poem's central rhetorical devices, because it makes so many parallel appearances. Mainly, it helps emphasize the way the speaker's mind has driven the speaker to madness through repetition. It occurs in lines 3 and 7.

The first instance, "treading - treading -" captures the incessant pacing of the mourners. Furthermore, it also embodies one of

the poem's repeated actions, that of constant striking which eventually causes something to break. Here, the force of the mourner's footsteps seems like it's going to break through the floor.

That force gets taken up with even greater emphasis in the next instance of epizuexis, "beating - beating -" in line 7. The sight rhyme between "beating" and "treading" creates a further parallel with line 4. Here the rhythmic effect is even more heightened because it enacts the repetitive pounding of the service's "Drum."

In the last stanza this beating finally does cause "a Plank" in the mind to break, and the speaker drops "down, and down." This is technically an instance of diacope, but in spirit it builds off the use of epizeuxis and acts as its culmination. Now the repetition emphasizes the endless falling the speaker experiences, which in turn causes the speaker to strike innumerable worlds, eventually reducing the speaker to silence.

Thus, as a whole we can read these instances of epizeuxis as verbal reflections of how this metaphorical funeral has driven the speaker to madness and an ultimate silence through repetition. They also relate to the poem's overall interest in providing a formal structure that acts as a counterpoint to the speaker's onset of madness. In other words, although the speaker may be losing his or her mind, the poem itself doesn't fall apart. In fact, it provides well-ordered devices like epizeuxis to highlight this process of unraveling. In doing so, it suggests that even the descent into madness follows a kind of logic—just one not that's accessible to the speaker.

Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "treading - treading -"
- **Line 7:** "beating - beating -"
- **Line 18:** "dropped down, and down -"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora serves as a unifying device throughout the poem. The word "And" repeatedly begins lines to an increasing degree, until completely filling the fifth stanza.

Since Dickinson uses dashes in place of periods, it's not necessarily possible to say where one sentence ends and another begins. In fact, we could interpret the poem as one long sentence. The word "And" allows this to happen, compounding the sentence. It acts as a coordinating conjunction that could essentially allow the poem to go on forever. As more and more surprising things happen, the anaphora of "And" helps cohere the poem.

Anaphora also provides a rhetorical gesture that guides the speaker through the poem. The speaker basically keeps saying, "And then *this* happened! And then *this*!" Related to the use of epizeuxis, this repetition of anaphora helps readers sense the speaker's fatigue. One inexplicable occurrence after another keeps happening within the speaker's mind.

Relatedly, "And" captures the procedural nature of these occurrences. Funerals, after all, are rituals with pre-determined events. There's a wake, *and then* there's a service, *and then* there's a procession, *and then* there's the tolling of a bell, *and then* there's the burial. In this way, the use of a conceit itself is intimately related to the use of anaphora. Once the initial comparison has been established, the poem has to go through all the steps that make that comparison meaningful. If the poem doesn't maintain a certain level of energy and inventiveness, those steps can quickly become tiresome, even *maddening*. There's thus a certain endlessness built in to the use of a conceit.

Dickinson's poem implicitly riffs on this effect. Her choices are always too interesting to allow us, as readers, to become bored. Yet the speaker's inability to escape to inevitable steps of the speaker's own conceit is part and parcel with the speaker's descent into madness.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "And"
- **Line 5:** "And"
- **Line 9:** "And"
- **Line 10:** "And"
- **Line 14:** "And"
- **Line 15:** "And"
- **Line 17:** "And"
- **Line 18:** "And"
- **Line 19:** "And"
- **Line 20:** "And"

ALLITERATION

The poem doesn't employ particularly dramatic alliteration. Rather, alliteration contributes to the cohesion of lines in a way that enables the speaker's distinctive word choice to come to the fore. In other words, alliteration has a unifying effect throughout the poem.

For instance, the first two lines employ the /f/ sound three times. The first two uses—"I felt a Funeral"—serve to amplify the word "Funeral," which serves as the poem's conceit. The next instance of alliteration, in line 3, draws more attention to itself, especially when considered with the additional effects of consonance: "Kept treading - treading - till it seemed." Here, the repeated /t/ sounds amplifies the epizeuxis of "treading - treading," and the phrase as a whole captures how the repeated pacing of the mourner disrupts the speaker's mind.

One of the most dramatic uses of alliteration comes in line 14: "and Silence, some strange Race." The repeated /s/ sounds (more specifically an instance of sibilance) heighten the dramatic effect of this line. It's also worth noting that /s/ sound

is unvoiced: it's made using airflow on the tongue and teeth, rather than the vocal cords. So, in this line in which "Silence" becomes the speaker's new state of being, the voice also begins to disappear.

The other instances of alliteration veer towards one or both of these types of usage. Sometimes the alliteration serves to unify a line or stanza and highlight important words (which often are capitalized as well). And sometimes it amplifies the repetitions in the speaker's mind that are driving the speaker to madness.

As a quick glance at the highlighted letters shows, the poem maintains a pretty consistent use of alliteration throughout. This demonstrates the poem's need to maintain a sense of order in contrast to the speaker's descent into madness. Alliteration can escape readers' conscious notice while still serving to unify the poem on a subconscious level. Similarly, the events in this poem follow a logic not necessarily available to the speaker's mind, but that still in some way helps guide the poem.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “f,” “F”
- **Line 2:** “f”
- **Line 3:** “t,” “t,” “t,” “s”
- **Line 4:** “S”
- **Line 5:** “s”
- **Line 6:** “S”
- **Line 7:** “b,” “b”
- **Line 8:** “M,” “m”
- **Line 9:** “th,” “th,” “B”
- **Line 11:** “B”
- **Line 12:** “b”
- **Line 13:** “B”
- **Line 14:** “B,” “b”
- **Line 15:** “S,” “s,” “s,” “r,” “R”
- **Line 16:** “Wr,” “s”
- **Line 17:** “R”
- **Line 18:** “d,” “d,” “d”

ASSONANCE

The assonance in the poem works very subtly, often barely perceptibly. It is there, however, and it serves to link various words and ideas.

Take a look at the fourth stanza for one of the more noticeable examples of assonance. First, "Heavens" and "Bell" share a short /e/ sound, foregrounding the link between the two (the heaves are like a bell). The short /e/ repeats like the note generated by a rung bell. So does the long /e/ sound in the next line's "Being" and "Ear." And again, in the line 15, the long /i/ in "I" and "Silence" and the long /a/ in "strange Race." All these mimic the repetitive ringing that characterizes a bell's toll. They also embody the repetition that marks the speaker descent into madness in general.

Notice also how in these three lines the assonance also grows closer and closer together. Three syllables separate the short /e/ sound in "Heavens were a Bell." Similarly with the long /e/ sound in "Being, but an Ear." Next, only one syllable separates the long /i/ sound in "I, and Silence." Finally, "strange Race" places the long /a/ syllables right up against each other. This closing in of the assonance creates a greater degree of tension in the stanza, like a bell that rings quicker and quicker.

Other instances of assonance play a more toned down role, most often to reinforce connections between words. For example, in the first stanza the short /e/ sound serves to link "treading" and "Sense," because the speaker thinks the treading will lead to sense. As one more example, the long /i/ in lines 7 and 8 ("I thought / My mind") draws readers' attention to the emphasis on the speaker's self. This phrase uses the first person twice ("I" and "my") in conjunction with the mind. We're reminded of the intensely internal and personal nature of what's happening in the poem.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “e,” “ea,” “ea,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 4:** “e”
- **Line 5:** “e”
- **Line 7:** “ea,” “ea,” “I”
- **Line 8:** “y,” “i”
- **Line 9:** “o”
- **Line 10:** “o,” “ou”
- **Line 11:** “o,” “a”
- **Line 12:** “a”
- **Line 13:** “ea,” “e”
- **Line 14:** “e,” “Ea”
- **Line 15:** “I,” “i,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 18:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 19:** “i”
- **Line 20:** “i,” “i”

CONSONANCE

Consonance serves a very quiet role in the poem. It mostly helps lines maintain their cohesiveness. One notable example of how consonance helps hold the poem together is in lines 3 and 7, each of which follows a parallel structure: In both these lines, the repeated /t/ sound emphasizes this structure:

> Kept treading - treading - till it seemed

and

> Kept beating - beating - till I thought

The other instances do a similar kind of work: articulating through sound the ways in which various phrases and ideas link

up. Look, for example, at the end of the poem. All of the last five words contain the /n/ sound: "plunge, / And Finished knowing - then." This repetition lends a sense of finality to the line. It also further amplifies the meaning of these lines. Just as the speaker's mind "short-circuits" in these lines, effectively ceasing to function and shutting down, the language does a similar thing. The /n/ recurs so many times the language overheats and must also shut down.

Consonance acts even more subtly that alliteration does. In its unifying effect it acts as a kind of foil to the speaker's madness. While the speaker's mind seems to fall apart, the poem hangs together. In fact, the poem hangs together in order to *cause* the speaker's descent into madness. Without a well-ordered poem, there could be no funeral conceit, no detailing of the speaker's journey.

That's one of the paradoxes of art like this. It represents disorder and the unspeakable through well-ordered words. We shouldn't think of this as a flaw of art, but part of its strength and interest for readers. Dickinson mastered the ability to journey into areas of the mind that had never been represented before, and then transformed that journey into evocative and ingeniously organized language.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “f,” “l,” “F,” “n,” “l,” “n,” “n”
- **Line 3:** “t,” “tr,” “d,” “ng,” “tr,” “d,” “ng,” “t,” “t,” “s,” “d”
- **Line 4:** “S,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 5:** “w,” “w,” “s”
- **Line 6:** “S,” “c,” “m”
- **Line 7:** “t,” “b,” “t,” “ng,” “b,” “t,” “ng,” “t,” “t”
- **Line 8:** “M,” “m,” “m”
- **Line 9:** “th,” “th,” “B”
- **Line 10:** “cr,” “k,” “cr,” “ss,” “S”
- **Line 11:** “s,” “s,” “B,” “s”
- **Line 12:** “S,” “c,” “b,” “t,” “t”
- **Line 13:** “B”
- **Line 14:** “B,” “b”
- **Line 15:** “nd,” “nd,” “S,” “c,” “s,” “s,” “r,” “R,” “c”
- **Line 16:** “r,” “s,” “r,” “r”
- **Line 17:** “k,” “R,” “r,” “k”
- **Line 18:** “nd,” “d,” “d,” “d,” “wn,” “nd,” “d,” “wn”
- **Line 19:** “nd,” “d”
- **Line 20:** “n,” “kn,” “n”

CAESURA

Emily Dickinson's use of the dash is probably her most recognizable stylistic trait. She employs it nimbly and flexibly, but we can characterize it broadly—especially in terms of this poem—as a caesura. It adds a breath or a beat between words, often at unexpected moments.

The first instance of the "Dickinson dash" comes in line 3. Here, a comma could have done the same grammatical work that the dash does. The dash, however, adds a dramatic flare, enabling readers to hear how this line would be spoken out loud. With a comma, the repetition of "treading, treading," would function like a kind of list (albeit a short and boring one). Instead, the dash signals a pause, an intake of breath, and restatement. It's a gesture that in other contexts can be used to comic effect (ex. "A cat driving a lawnmower - a lawnmower!"). In the poem at hand, however, it represents a certain frayed or crazed quality in the speaker's voice. It also helps draw attention to the repetitive nature of what the speaker's talking about here: namely, the pacing of the mourners.

It's also important to remember that Dickinson's original poems come down to us as handwritten documents. She very intentionally copied out her poems and bound them into booklets. So, when we look at her dashes in a typed version of this poem, we can recall that they were originally gestures of her writing hand. Whereas printed language requires us to make definite decisions about what letter or punctuation to use, the same does not pertain to writing. Case in point: in this version of the poem we use hyphens (-) to represent the dashes. Other editors have used en dashes (–), em dashes (—), or even italicized hyphens. In other words, Dickinson's dashes don't necessarily refer to conventional punctuation marks. They're distinctive signs she invented and continually re-invented through *writing* poems.

All this to say, just as the dashes can help heighten the spoken-ness of the poem, they also refer back to its handwritten-ness. They capture a certain form of silence or even frustration with language, a point where the writer gives up on trying to come up with words and simply strikes a line in the page. The final "- then -" emphasizes this with its double use of dashes, as the speaker's frustration with language reaches its highest pitch and language fails altogether.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “”
- **Line 3:** “ - ,” “ - ”
- **Line 6:** “”
- **Line 7:** “ - ,” “ - ”
- **Line 11:** “”
- **Line 12:** “ - ”
- **Line 14:** “”
- **Line 15:** “,” “”
- **Line 16:** “,” “”
- **Line 17:** “”
- **Line 18:** “”
- **Line 19:** “”
- **Line 20:** “ - ”

POLYSYNDETON

Polysyndeton is one of the techniques that enables readers to

think of the poem as a single sentence. Rather than keeping phrases separate, the speaker continually compounds them by inserting "And," "Then," "And then." As a result, readers build a picture of the procedural and ritualistic nature of this "funeral." It advances step-by-step.

Additionally, the gesture of these repeated phrases serves to underline the speaker's astonishment. It's as if the speaker is saying, "And then *this* happened, would you believe it!?" It emphasizes the successiveness of these events, how crazy it is that all these things happen one after another.

If polysyndeton functions partly as such a gesture, it also serves to *unify* the craziness of the poem. In fact, provides a kind of logic to these events. It helps link them together. Rather than saying "A. B. C.," the speaker says "A, and then B, and then C." The events don't happen as isolated incidents, but rather as part of a continuous narrative.

Look, for instance, at the final stanza, which contains a plethora of coordinating conjunctions. Without them, it would read:

> A Plank in reason, broke,
> I dropped down, down -
> Hit a world, at every plunge,
> Finished knowing -

The lines take on a different quality. They become sparser and less connected, as if the speaker is relaying separate events rather than telling a story. Notice also how the poem ends on "then." The word "then" isn't a coordinating conjunction, and so not technically polysyndeton, yet its use in this poem is related: it links one phrase to another and provides a kind of logic. Ending on such a word represents a final failure to connect. Another phrase should follow "then," yet it doesn't. The speaker's connective logic, which has allowed the speaker to relay these events to readers, falls short at the end of the poem.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “And,” “and”
- **Line 3:** “till”
- **Line 5:** “And”
- **Line 7:** “till”
- **Line 9:** “And then”
- **Line 10:** “And”
- **Line 11:** “again,”
- **Line 12:** “Then”
- **Line 14:** “And”
- **Line 15:** “And,” “and”
- **Line 17:** “And then”
- **Line 18:** “And,” “and”
- **Line 19:** “And”
- **Line 20:** “And,” “then -”

REPETITION

The poem employs a complex use of repetition, using a variety of words that all essentially refer to things happening in and to the speaker's "Brain": "Sense," "mind," "Soul," "Being," and "Reason." On a first gloss, all these words roughly refer to the speaker's consciousness. They help keep the speaker from saying the word "mind" six times in five stanzas. Yet each word also has its own definition. None of them really do mean the same thing, or have the same connotations. The subtle differences of the words capture the broader nature of the "mind." Another way of thinking about it is the idea of *slippage*: by purposefully varying word choice, the speaker causes one idea to slip into another.

It's possible to further break these words into two groups: "Sense" and "Reason" in one group, and "Brain," "mind," "Soul," and "Being" in the other. Let's look at that first group. Sense and reason refer to faculties, or capabilities, of the mind. While it's possible to read them as being synonymous, the use of "Sense" in the first stanza is ambiguous. It can mean reason (i.e. rationality, as in "good sense," "common sense," etc.). Or they can mean the senses (sight, touch, etc.), which would enable the speaker to grasp his or her situation. Yet again, they might refer to meaning (as in "making sense"). So, while reason and sense both represent parts of the mind or the mind's ability, they don't necessarily *mean* the same thing. Even so, they're both important because they help remind readers what's at stake in the poem: the speaker's sanity.

Similarly, "Brain," "mind," "Soul," and "Being" all refer to the experience of having a consciousness. By appearing throughout the poem, they keep readers aware that these events occur inside or in relation to the speaker's mind. Yet each one's usage implies that something slightly different is up for grabs. "Brain" emphasizes the physicality and inside-ness of the poem. "Mind" suggests the full range of faculties, including reason, that are at stake here, while "Soul" lends a theological tone to these faculties. And "Being" seems to strip away these faculties to some primal quality of simply *existing*.

By comparing how all these words relate yet also diverge, readers gain a sense of how the poem refuses to settle on any single set of ideas. Rather, it continues to probe at the nature of having a mind and reason, and what it might be to lose to some of these things yet still exist.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “Brain”
- **Line 4:** “Sense”
- **Line 8:** “mind”
- **Line 10:** “Soul”
- **Line 14:** “Being”
- **Line 17:** “Reason”

STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Stream of consciousness historically refers to a style that was developed after Dickinson's death, most famously by writers like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. Dickinson wouldn't have known the term, since it was coined by the philosopher and psychologist William James in 1890. Still, the term helps readers make sense of Dickinson's style and distinct flow of thought, especially since Dickinson's work can be thought of as a precursor to modernism, the literary movement that stream of consciousness is associated with.

First off, Dickinson's dashes add an improvisational energy to the poem, as if readers are witnessing someone coming up with this language in real time. Not that this should be read as a rough draft—Dickinson agonized over every word in her poems—but that the dashes signal pauses or gaps in the speaker's thought.

Additionally, the progress of the funeral emphasizes the role of the speaker's imagination. Rather than emphasizing the ritualistic and traditional nature of the proceedings, the speaker focuses on the surprising and mystifying details. This happens with the sudden addition of the "Boots of Lead," a detail that gets added later rather than earlier in the poem, as if suddenly discovered.

Or take the fourth stanza, where each line offers further speculation on the preceding line. In line 13, the speaker suggests that if space is ringing out, *that* must be because the Heavens are a bell. *Then*, the speaker thinks in line 14, that must mean existing is comparable to being an ear made to hear that ringing. And if *that's* the case, the speaker's not at all the kind of creature the speaker once imagined him- or herself to be (line 15). And *if* the speaker is this strange new creature, then existence is more like a shipwreck than anything else. It's as if readers are watching the speaker thinking through these ideas for the first time.

Rather than having a pre-meditated set of ideas or direction of thought the speaker wants to go in, the speaker discovers these things as she goes along. This quality makes the poem unpredictable. Just as the speaker has lost control of his or her mind, the poem itself follows a path beyond the control of the speaker.

Where Stream of Consciousness appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

PARALLELISM

Parallelism helps unify the poem and suggest connections between different phrases. The most prominent parallelism in the poems comes in line 3 and 7:

> Kept treading - treading - till it seemed

and

> Kept beating - beating - till I thought

These lines both employ epizeuxis in the repetition of "treading - treading-" and "beating - beating." That parallel structure emphasizes the constant, repetitive disturbances caused by these seeming intruders in the speaker's "Brain."

In addition to the strict parallelism of these lines, many other parallel structures exist in the poem. For instance, the first and second stanzas follow similar structures. Each stanzas' first line introduces a scenario (the funeral in the brain, the seating). Their second lines introduce a specific element of that scenario (the mourners, the service) that's left incomplete. Their third lines complete these elements with a verb (the mourners are treading, the service is beating). And finally, their fourth lines offer the speaker's commentary on the action (it seems like sense might break through, the mind might go numb).

There's also the more broadly parallel structure that the poem's use of anaphora affords. The repetition of "And" causes the poem to basically say "And then this happened, and then this happened," over and over. Neither this effect nor any of the poem's instances of parallelism cause the poem to become boring. Rather, they provide a coherent structure for us to follow as increasingly surprising things happen to the speaker. It also captures the very repetition that in part drives the speaker to madness.

All these parallel structures help connect the different events of the poem. We accept that one thing follows after another because the poem joins them up in that way. Yet this very effect can also be thought of as a form of madness. These events *don't* necessarily follow one another. A "Plank in Reason" breaking doesn't necessarily mean the speaker will fall through a void consisting of many different worlds. Rather, we participate in the poem's madness by accepting these things follow one after another in some kind of order.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-8:** "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain, / And Mourners to and fro / That Sense was breaking through - / And when they all were seated, / A Service, like a Drum - / Kept beating - beating - till I thought / My mind was going numb -"
- **Line 3:** "Kept treading - treading - till it seemed"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment occurs throughout the poem. There are a few instances of unpunctuated enjambment, while other instances involve phrases whose meaning spills over the line break, even if it is punctuated. Before jumping into what enjambment does here, it's worth noting that this is the kind of poem one might

expect to have lots of a certain kind of enjambment. As the speaker descends into madness, the speaker's mind seems to dissolve. In the hands of another poet, that dissolution might have been reflected in line breaks that split phrases and allowed the language to fray, just like the speaker's mind.

Dickinson, however, chooses to punctuate most of the lines. Not that readers should regard this as a missed opportunity, however; the speaker's language has other off-kilter qualities (its unexpected words choice, its leaps in logic). Furthermore, even when Dickinson does punctuate, she does so idiosyncratically. By ending most lines with a comma or a dash, the poem puts those off-kilter moments in counterpoint with a step-by-step quality. Readers come to see each line as the next phase in the speaker's journey—that there is, to employ a cliché, a method to her madness. The speaker's mind may become unhinged, but it does so in a very specific, almost ordered way.

Enjambment offers a suspension of the syntax: you need to read on to the next line to complete the meaning of the phrase. In relation to the step-by-step quality of the poem, this suspension emphasizes how one line connects to the next. Such suspension also represents the precariousness of the speaker's state of mind. It throws into doubt whether the speaker will be able to complete the phrase in the next line.

For instance, in line 7 of the second stanza, breaking the line on "thought" emphasizes both the speaker's reliance on thinking, and the speaker's uncertain state of mind. In other words, thought is the only way the speaker can understand what's happening, but the line break suggests that the speaker's ability to think is in doubt. Later, the enjambment in line 10 mimics the line's content: the mourners walk across the speaker's soul just as the meaning of line 10 crosses over to line 11.

In the second stanza, it's possible to interpret lines 5 and 6 as enjambed. The "when" of line 5 pushes the full meaning of the line onto the next—it's not clear what happens "when" the mourners are seated unless the reader continues on—while line 6 is arguably enjambed because line 7 doesn't make sense without it. The full meaning thus straddles multiple lines.

Thus, enjambment enables readers to see how the speaker's thought winds its way from stanza to stanza, and how fraught the winding is. At any moment, the speaker could lose his or her train of thought and drift into silence. And eventually, that's exactly what does happen.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "fro / Kept"
- **Lines 3-4:** "seemed / That"
- **Lines 5-6:** "seated, / A"
- **Lines 6-7:** "Drum - / Kept"
- **Lines 7-8:** "thought / My"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Box / And"
- **Lines 10-11:** "Soul / With"
- **Lines 15-16:** "Race / Wrecked,"

ANTITHESIS

The poem employs antithesis in lines 13 and 14 to emphasize the difference in scale. Line 13 offers a huge view of the universe, in which the sky and the afterlife become a giant bell. Then line 14 zooms in on a single individual, the speaker, and compares the speaker to the tininess of an ear. The speaker becomes even smaller than a human: in fact, the speaker is only a *part of* a human. This effect captures one of poem's central concerns: how human understanding gets dwarfed by the massiveness of an unknowable universe. This moment acts as one of the first open acknowledgements of the theme, which from this point onward comes to dominate the poem.

The word "but" in line 14 serves to highlight the speaker's pessimistic attitude towards this antithesis. If this line had followed a truly parallel structure, the speaker would have said "And Being were an Ear." Instead, the word "but" emphasizes the meagerness with which the speaker views this situation. This meagerness gets further mirrored by the metrical structure of these two lines. Line 13 has four beats while line 14 only has three. Thus, the poem's meter informs this moment of antithesis.

In addition to the contrast in scale, there's also a contrast in sound. Whereas the Heavens produce a great noise, the speaker can only listen. The speaker is—as the next lines state outright—rendered silent. And not just silent, but also passive. The sky *makes* noise, the speaker can only receive it. There's even a certain helplessness to the image of being an ear. Ears, after all, have to ride around on a person's skull all day. What they hear depends on where the person they're attached to goes. The bell-like Heavens, on the other hand, are ubiquitous. They envelope the world; they're everywhere. Thus, this moment of antithesis emphasizes what it's like to be a finite being confronting the vastness of the universe.

Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "As all the Heavens were a Bell, / And Being, but an Ear,"

VOCABULARY

Mourners (Line 2) - The mourners are the "people" who attend this funeral in the speaker's mind. They can be read as symbols of the distressing and mysterious forces that cause the speaker to begin to lose his or her mind.

Treading (Line 3) - Treading means walking. Here, it emphasizes the footsteps of the mourners, the noise of which

contributes to the speaker's burgeoning madness.

Sense (Line 4) - Sense has many resonances for this poem. It can mean reason, rationality, meaning, or even "the senses" (i.e. touch, sight, hearing, taste, smell). Think of "common sense," "nonsense," "making sense." The word evokes the many ways people use their minds to feel like they understand the world.

Service (Line 6) - The funeral service, whose proceedings become particularly vague and strange. Readers can think also how the poem's depiction of the service contrasts with the somber, Protestant funerals Dickinson would have attended in her own time.

Box (Line 9) - The box like refers to a coffin. Using the word box emphasizes the coffin's nature as a container. As readers, we have to wonder: *what's in the box?* The poem provides no clear answer.

Space (Line 12) - It's tricky to paraphrase what the speaker means by "Space" here. The word doesn't so much mean outer space as *all* of space in all its forms—as in, the air and ground and sky; the whole observable universe.

Toll (Line 12) - The ringing of a bell, often associated with church bells. Readers can also think of the practice of the funeral toll, which marks the burial of the deceased. The word therefore has a somber quality to it.

Heavens (Line 13) - The "Heavens" most directly reference the sky, but with strong overtones of the Christian afterlife (as in, "Thank heavens"). Readers might also think of the Heavenly singing that's supposed to happen in that afterlife, and connect it to the bell ringing in the poem.

Being (Line 14) - "Being" here means something like existence or consciousness. It has both theological and philosophical overtones. There's no one way of defining being, it's more of an open question—hence the relation to philosophy. Here, Dickinson posits her own answer to what it might meant to exist.

Race (Line 15) - "Race" here means something like "species." Think of alien races in sci-fi works, or the mythical races in fantasy novels. The speaker is throwing into question the nature of his or her own humanity.

Wrecked (Line 16) - Like shipwrecked. The speaker has been cast into a position of suffering and deprivation.

Plank (Line 17) - "Plank" suggests an array of planks, as in floorboards, the deck of a ship, a wall—anything in which wood is used to create a surface for support.

Reason (Line 17) - Reason can be thought of as the ability to find order and meaning, to think with clarity and logic. The precariousness of reason in this poem represents the tenuous hold the speaker has on his or her own reality.

World (Line 19) - There's no telling what these worlds are specifically. They represent massive, abstract entities the speaker encounters and collides with, but which the speaker can never understand.

Plunge (Line 19) - A sudden, dramatic fall. Readers might picture the speaker hitting a "World," then slipping off it and falling again until the speaker hits another one, slips off it, etc.

Knowing (Line 20) - The ability to know things has been at stake throughout the poem. To be "Finished knowing" means to no longer have the ability to know anything at all, as if that function of the mind has broken.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" employs a ballad stanza, with five quatrains following an ABCB rhyme scheme. Dickinson often employs this form. It provides a ready-made structure that provides some order to her imaginative improvisations. Here, even though the poem depicts a disordering of the speaker's mind, the *process* by which this happens has a kind of order to it, mimicked by the poem's formal order. Each stanza represents a distinct step along the way, corresponding to each stage in the metaphorical funeral:

1. The Wake
2. The Service
3. The Procession
4. The Funeral Toll
5. The Burial

The ballad stanza has a long history in English literature. Most prominently, it's often used in narrative poems. Dickinson doesn't always tell a story in her poems, but here she does. The stages of the funeral become events in the story that's taking place within the speaker's mind. In fact, readers might think of both poems and funerals as ritualized stories.

Related to the step-by-step nature of this form, the stanzas themselves tend to be pretty self-contained. That said, meaning does bleed over from one stanza to the next, especially between stanzas 3 and 4, where line 13 uses a simile to describe line 12. That said, each stanza tends to focus on its stage of the funeral. "Stanza" means "room" in Italian and that's exactly how they function here, like rooms in the speaker's mind.

METER

The poem follows the common meter, which is usually associated with the ballad. Common meter alternates lines of iambic tetrameter (the first and third lines) with lines of iambic trimeter (the second and fourth). For a perfect illustration of this, look at lines 9 and 10:

And then | I heard | them lift | a Box
And creak | across | my Soul

There are moments that roughen the meter slightly. For example, look at line 11:

With those | same Boots | of Lead, | again,

Here, "same Boots" can be read as a spondee, or two stressed syllables. The additional stress mimics the clobbering feeling of the boots that the poem describes.

A similar moment happens in line 15:

And I, | and Si- | lence, some | strange Race,

Here, the spondee comes at the end of the line. It throws off the balance of the line, mirroring how the speaker also feels off balance, unsure as to what kind of being he or she actually is.

Notice how the meter causes stanzas to take on the following structure:

1. longer line
2. shorter line
3. longer line
4. shorter line

This form allows the poem to play off the abruptness of each stanza's final line. Take a look at the last stanza's last two lines for the most striking example. Just as the speaker gets cut off at "then," so too does the meter cut off before providing the fourth foot that would have mirrored the previous line:

And hit | a World, | at ev- | ery plunge,
And Fin- | ished know- | ing - then - | FOURTH FOOT |

Instead, that fourth foot gets replaced by silence. In this way, the stanza's meter both mirrors and enables the poem's trailing off.

The second and fourth stanzas also exhibit this quality. In the second stanza, the shortened line mimics the numbness of the speaker's mind. And in the fourth stanza, it mimics the wrecked solitude. All these cases have a feeling that something's been stripped away from the speaker. The common meter, in this poem, therefore has the sense of mimicking a movement between fullness and this pared-back destitution.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows the traditional rhyme scheme of a ballad stanza: ABCB. The second and fourth lines rhyme, while the first and third don't. The rhyme scheme of the entire poem can be stated as follows:

ABCB DEFE GHIH JKLK MNON

Notice how some of these are slant rhymes. In stanza one, the speaker rhymes "fro" with "through," and in stanza five "down" rhymes with "then." This switching between full rhymes and slant rhymes is a hallmark of Dickinson's poetry. It lends her language an off-kilter quality that offsets what would otherwise be a traditional form. That is, this poem *could* have ended up sounding like, say, "Barbara Allen." Instead, techniques like slant rhyme help *downplay* the music of the form.

Furthermore, slant rhyme helps draw attention to the improvisatory feel of Dickinson's language.For instance, there's a moment of slant-rhyme between line 12 and line 13. The moment is especially noticeable because it's not part of the rhyme scheme, further emphasizing its improvised quality. Here, the repeated "oll'/"ell" sound mimics the ringing of a "Bell." Whereas full rhyme can feel inevitable, slant rhyme highlights the speaker's *attempt* to find words that sound similar. In this way, readers become conscious of the speaker's attempt to construct a story around what's happening in the speaker's own mind. We see the speaker thinking through these things in real time, rather than presenting a carefully polished account.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem could be anyone. Readers only glimpse the speaker through metaphorical events that happen deep within the mind—so, based on the poem itself, we can't really assign a gender or age to the speaker. This poem could apply to anyone who has felt their mind slipping away from them, or sensed contact with forces that seemed to lie beyond their understanding.

That said, Dickinson wrote poems as a daily practice, particularly during the period when this poem was written. When you read many of Dickinson's poems in a row, you come to feel as if you've gotten to know Dickinson herself. Dickinsons poems act as records of her introspection, speculation, and emotional swings. Readers could thus "her" to refer to the speaker as a way of gesturing at Dickinson's presence within the poem. Readers shouldn't read the speaker being Dickinson herself, but as a persona Dickinson has constructed for herself in this particular poem. The speaker both is and isn't her.

After all, Dickinson's poems—including this one—question the very nature of identity. As the poem progresses, it gradually strips away the speaker's mind until she (or he) is only "an Ear." In other words, perhaps the speaker has reached a point where it doesn't even make sense to talk about identity. At the end of the poem, the speaker has become silence itself.

SETTING

The setting is, to put it bluntly, the speaker's "Brain." The poem offers metaphorical renderings of events within the speaker's mind. The mind-space of these events might be thought of as a room or building where a funeral is taking place. The floorboards creak as a coffin gets carried through. Yet as the events progress, the speaker's mind gradually opens up to the outside world. The whole universe seems to ring like a bell. This opening happens seamless, so that readers can't tell where the speaker's interior world ends and the external world begins.

At the end of the poem, the speaker drops through an abyss that contains many worlds. It's possible to read this moment as both internal and external: internal in that it's a descent into madness, and external in that the speaker experiences a vision of the nature of the world. In fact, readers might think of this as a moment containing the most expansive setting possible—not just our world, but *every* world. On the other hand, the speaker can barely glimpse these worlds. The setting thus becomes expansive but also dim, barely perceptible.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The American Romantics and Transcendentalists are Dickinson's most direct literary precursors. These writers emphasized the power of the individual mind, a renewed connection to Nature, and the imagination. They might be seen as inspiring two directions of American poetry: Dickinson on one hand, and Walt Whitman (who was Dickinson's contemporary) on the other. While Whitman explored an expansive style meant to take in all of America, Dickinson explored a very interior style of poetry. She had read the poetry of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and generally picked up on the elements of Romanticism that focused on individuality, the mind, and perception.

Dickinson's poetry has older sources as well. She was very influenced by Shakespeare, and many of his rhetorical devices (such as polysyndeton) can be seen in Dickinson's own writing. Growing up in a religious community (and despite her contentious relationship with religion), meant Dickinson was also immersed in the Book of Common Prayer. Her poems can be thought of as engaging both with the form and contact of these prayers.

During her lifetime, Dickinson was published very minimally. When she was published, editors often tampered with her writing to make it confirm with their own aesthetic standards. One person to publish her was a good friend named Samuel Bowles, who owned and edited the *Springfield Republican*. Dickinson also corresponded with a literary critic named Thomas Wentworth Higginson, with whom she had a very passionate epistolary relationship.

In general, Dickinson's readers were the few friends and family she trusted with her poems. It wasn't until the twentieth century that Dickinson's poems became widely available in their original form.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dickinson's most active years partly coincide with one of the most tumultuous times in American history: the Civil War (1861 to 1865). Her father was a prominent lawyer and politician. Yet for all this, Dickinson's poems turn away from the political events and public life of her time (in direct contrast to Whitman's poetry, for instance). Instead, she focuses on the life of the mind.

Dickinson also grew up in a religious community. She came of age during the Second Great Awakening, a religious revival that engaged many of the same themes that Dickinson's Romantic precursors did. Dickinson herself was even swept up by this religious movement for a time. Though she ultimately rejected organized religion, her poems remain preoccupied with theological concerns. Many express wonder about the afterlife, often speculating—sometimes exuberantly—on what it's like to meet God and Jesus, if that is in fact what happens when people die (something she's not sure about). Dickinson also often questions the existence of God in her work—an activity that would have been scandalously at odds with her community. Yet though she can be irreverent, even blasphemous, as she tests out what exactly she believes, her mind was irrevocably touched by Christianity. In this poem, for instance, she subtly references the Christian afterlife in line 13.

We should also note that at this point, Dickinson's life had already been touched by the deaths of relatives and friends. Her cousin Sophia Holland and friend Benjamin Franklin Newton had both died, and their losses affected her deeply.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Biography of Dickinson — An extensive biography of Dickinson on the Poetry Foundation website. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)
- Emily Dickinson Museum — Biographical information on Dickinson and other resources from the Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst, MA. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/emily-dickinson/biography/)
- Visual Interpretation of the Poem — An attempt to visualize the poem through stop-motion illustrations on a white board. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-

Pf4ybnkYE)

- Dickinson's Original Manuscript — Photos of Dickinson's original handwritten manuscript, followed by scholarly excerpts about the poem. (https://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/dickinson/280.htm)
- A Reading of the Poem — A recitation of Dickinson's poem from Poetry Out Loud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7v1Rq35BGY)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- As imperceptibly as grief
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- 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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