I like a look of Agony

POEM TEXT

I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it's true—
Men do not sham Convulsion,
Nor simulate a Throe—

The Eyes glaze once—and that is Death—
Impossible to feign
The Beads upon the Forehead
By homely Anguish strung.

SUMMARY

The speaker claims that they like to see pain on other people's faces because they know it's a genuine emotion. No person, the speaker argues, fakes spasms of anguish.

Once a person's eyes glaze over with suffering, the speaker observes, that's it: pain is as absolute as death, and just as impossible to fake. Sweat pops out on suffering people's brows as if the personified, humble figure of Pain itself were stringing a sweat-bead necklace there.

THEMES

PAIN AS TRUTH

In Emily Dickinson's "I like a look of Agony," the speaker explains why they value the experience of witnessing other people's pain. Because people can't fake the physical signs of pain, the speaker argues, a "look of Agony" is more trustworthy than just about any other expression. Through images of sweaty brows, clouded eyes, and violent convulsions, the speaker suggests that pain, however terrible, has a redeeming quality: it's one of the few things in life that definitely isn't false!

Pain, the speaker observes, is a feeling that can't be faked—unlike most. Pain speaks for itself, creating an involuntary "look of Agony," "beads" of sweat, and "glaze[d]" eyes. These reactions, the speaker notes, are "impossible to feign," inherently truthful. The implication, then, is that a lot of other emotions *are* easy to fake (and therefore commonly faked). As a result, the speaker believes these emotions to be less genuine than visible reactions to pain. Pain, unlike other feelings, is hard either to deny or to simulate.

Because pain is honest, the speaker suggests, it has value. Pain might be terribly unpleasant, but it also cuts through the illusions and fakery of a lot of day-to-day life. Precisely because pain is so overwhelming and involuntary, the speaker "like[s]" to see it on people's faces: if someone is in pain, they're also having an honest experience, neither deceiving other people nor deceiving themselves.

Pain also reminds people that they're mortal and not always in control: pain, the speaker notes, is next door to "Death," an experience in which the body takes over and the mind becomes incapable of controlling the body's reactions. "Anguish" is thus "homely"—a word that can mean ugly, down-to-earth, and strangely cozy, all at once. In other words, "anguish" might seem pretty awful, but it's also grounding, humbling, and honest, cutting through people's lies and their delusions of control.

There is thus a unique truth to be found in human pain. The speaker enjoys witnessing pain because they value its authenticity. It is interesting to note, however, that the speaker doesn't seem particularly interested in *feeling* agony themselves—just seeing other people experience it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it's true—

In these straightforward opening lines, the speaker makes their central point plain: the speaker enjoys seeing "Agony," or extreme pain, written across other people's faces because expressions of pain aren't faked.

Despite the rather troubling nature of what the speaker's actually saying—the fact that they like witnessing pain is a little unconventional, to say the least!—the actual sound of these lines is rhythmic and predictable. The poem will mostly use common meter: lines that alternate between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. Iambs are metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm; tetrameter means there are four iambs per line, and trimeter means that there are three. Here's how that sounds in these opening lines:

I like | a look | of a- | gony
Because | I know | it's true—

The steady pulse of this meter sounds a lot like a beating heart. This accessible, singsong effect makes the speaker's words all the more surprising and powerful. Despite the fact that the speaker is presenting a controversial and perhaps disturbing opinion, the rhythm of the words makes the message itself more palatable. In a way, this meter might trick the speaker's audience into calmly accepting what they're reading.

LINES 3-6

Men do not sham Convulsion,
Nor simulate a Throe—
The Eyes glaze once—and that is Death—
Impossible to feign

In these lines, the speaker connects the idea that pain is somehow truthful to the fact that it's pretty hard to fake the physical manifestations of pain. To do this, the speaker builds upon their earlier argument about the genuine nature of "a look of Agony" by explaining that people don't "sham Convulsion." To "sham" means to pretend or fake something, while "convulsion" refers to a spasm or fit of sorts. In the next line "throe" refers to a violent struggle. Altogether, the speaker is saying that if they see someone caught up in a violent rush of pain, then they can trust that it's not an act.

The beginning of the next stanza connects the power of pain to that of an even greater force: death. The speaker describes the physical manifestations of death as similarly impossible to fake—and, of course, they are, since death takes over the human body! The speaker makes this connection between pain and death so clear because it further supports the speaker's argument: that pain, like death, produces physical effects that are so strong they simply can't be faked.

The overall implication here is that a lot of the emotions people display in daily life *are* faked. Pain and death, in this speaker's view, cut right through everyday falsity, and that's why the speaker "like[s] a look of Agony."

Over the course of these lines, the speaker also establishes a loose ABCB rhyme scheme, in which the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme with each other, while the first and third do not. As is common with Dickinson's poetry, the rhymes here are far from perfect: "Throe," for example, is a slant rhyme with the word "true" from the first two lines.

LINES 7-8

The Beads upon the Forehead
By homely Anguish strung.

Like the image that they suggest—a string of beads, like a bracelet or a necklace—this poem's last two lines join together all the different parts of the speaker's argument.

The "beads" the speaker refers to are a metaphor for sweat breaking out on the face of someone wracked by pain; "Anguish" strings these "beads" across the person's forehead.

When a person is facing extreme pain, they often sweat: this is an automatic physical response to agony, a reaction that cannot be simulated or faked. Similarly, a sick or dying person's skin is clammy. The speaker reinforces the relationship between these two conditions by leaving the immediate cause of the sweat unclear. "Anguish" or "Death"? In the speaker's mind, the two are quite close.

These closing lines also make pain itself a character in the poem: "homely Anguish," personified, actively *strings* beads of sweat along sufferers' foreheads. Notice, too, that Anguish is presented as "homely," a word that might at once suggest ugliness and a strange coziness: Anguish seems like an unpleasant but intimate companion. And Anguish's bead-stringing itself seems like an incongruously cozy activity, a fireside craft.

The speaker thus doesn't portray the expression of pain as a simple reaction, but as a complete loss of agency, a surrender to an overpowering but matter-of-fact force. This image reinforces the speaker's argument that when pain takes over a person, that person gives up control over their emotions and expressions: they're in the hands of "Anguish" now. This makes them unable to lie, of course. Their bodies and faces become canvases on which agony paints its truth.

And it's for this reason that the speaker "like[s] a look of Agony": in a world of fakery, it's deeply real.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

In the first line of "I like a look of Agony"—a line that, given Dickinson's habit of not including separate titles for her poems, becomes the poem's effective title—the words "like" and "look" are alliterative. They also both have a single syllable and share consonance of the /k/ sound. As a result, they make the poem's opening line more musical and memorable.

When the speaker says "I like a look of Agony," they lay out the argument that will guide and define the next seven lines. By connecting the words "like" and "look" through sound, the speaker establishes the close relationship between their own enjoyment (of seeing agony written on other people's faces) and the expressions (the "look") of pain that they go on to describe in the rest of the poem.

The speaker thus uses alliteration to open their argument with a statement that is at once clear, punchy, abstract, and confusing. This decision sets the stage for the speaker to explain the rationale behind this surprising feeling. And the sonic connection between "like" and "look" is crucial to the poem's main point: the speaker's belief that they can perceive truth through pain.

The other moments of alliteration in the poem are quite subtle

and fall in its final three lines. As with the shared /l/ sounds of line 1, these alliterative moments add rhythm and emphasis to the speaker's language.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "like," "look"
- **Line 6:** "feign"
- **Line 7:** "Beads," "Forehead"
- **Line 8:** "By"

METAPHOR

The poem's single metaphor helps to ground an abstract thought with an image.

Like a lot of Dickinson's work, "I like a look of Agony" is quite philosophical. Rather than telling a story or describing a moment, this poem presents readers with something more like a psychological examination of human behavior. Throughout the poem, the speaker mostly discusses big ideas like "Agony," "tru[th]," and "Death."

The metaphor that closes the poem thus helps readers to understand the speaker's thoughts in a more tangible way. By describing the sweat that gathers upon a sufferer's forehead as "Beads"—that is, the kind of beads that would make up a necklace or bracelet—the speaker helps readers to really picture the physical effects of "Agony." (Note that this is also a pun, using the word "Beads" to refer to both beads of sweat and the beads of a necklace.)

The speaker then builds upon this metaphor by personifying pain as a jeweler: "homely Anguish" strings these beads together and places them on the human face. The image of pain actively decorating someone's face with sweat makes "Anguish" seem like a curiously matter-of-fact and everyday figure, doing her hobbies. She also seems like a person without much sympathy for the human sufferer she's decorating!

The metaphor here thus both grounds the speaker's reflections and makes them even more unsettling.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "The Beads upon the Forehead / By homely Anguish strung."

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment adds to this poem's sense of spontaneity, suggesting that the speaker's overflowing thoughts can't be constrained. That said, given Dickinson's idiosyncratic use of punctuation, it's not always clear whether certain lines here are meant to be read as enjambed or not. For example, the poem is often printed with a comma at the end of line 1, implying a pause. At the same time, the phrase doesn't reach its conclusion until the end of line 2—meaning that it probably feels to readers more like enjambment:

> I like a look of Agony,
> Because I know it's true—

The same can be said for line 3, which finds its conclusion only in line 4. As a result, the poem feels both smooth and controlled at the same time.

By contrast, there's a clear stop implied after lines 2, 4, 5, and 6. The *absence* of end-stopping at the poem's conclusion thus feels particularly noticeable: the speaker wants readers to pay special attention to the poem's closing metaphor, which spans two lines with a single enjambed sentence:

> The Beads upon the Forehead
> By homely Anguish strung.

When "Anguish" strings beads of sweat across sufferers' foreheads, the speaker insists, the victims of pain have no choice but to succumb: they cannot fake their expressions or pretend they feel any other way than, well, anguished. The shape of these words, similarly "strung" across the line break, reinforce this central idea of the poem. Because pain is so powerful that it dictates human behavior, the behavior it produces can be trusted.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Agony, / Because"
- **Lines 3-4:** "Convulsion, / Nor"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Forehead / By"

END-STOPPED LINE

Many of the poem's lines are end-stopped, creating a measured and regular pace. End-stopping creates space between the speaker's thoughts, separating the different components of their rather abstract philosophical argument into structured, logical steps.

For example, take a look at the end-stops in the first four lines:

> I like a look of Agony,
> Because I know it's true—
> Men do not sham Convulsion,
> Nor simulate, a Throe—

Again, there's some ambiguity here as to whether lines are truly end-stopped or not, thanks to Dickinson's idiosyncratic use of punctuation. Still, the clear, distinct pauses at the ends of lines 2 and 4 keep things feeling neat and orderly. It's almost like the outline of an essay, with a thesis statement and supporting evidence!

But there's another side to these end-stopped lines too.

Dickinson's specific *kind* of end-stopping, which heavily features her famous em-dashes, also gives the poem a frantic, tense quality. Take a look at this end-stop, for instance:

> The Eyes glaze once—and that is Death—

That dash feels more like a gasp than a firm conclusion. End-stops thus shape the poem's argument, rhythm, and tone all at once. By making the speaker's thoughts seem both orderly and anxious, sensible and frantic, the end-stopped lines suggest that this poem is at once a measured philosophical statement and an expression of intense feeling.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "true—"
- **Line 4:** "Throe—"
- **Line 5:** "Death—"
- **Line 6:** "feign"
- **Line 8:** "strung."

CAESURA

The poem's single caesura creates rhythm and drama. Dickinson's poetry often breaks up lines in strange, unexpected places with commas or her famous em-dashes, creating strange, halting rhythms that catch readers off guard. That's the case with the bold em-dash in line 5:

> The Eyes glaze once— || and that is Death—

Here, the speaker moves from discussing pain to discussing death—a pretty striking and shocking development in their argument! The caesura in this line creates room for readers to fully absorb that transition.

At the same time, the dash here creates a dramatic effect, almost like a gasp. Read out loud, the line sounds like the speaker themselves is overcome by the sheer weight of what they're saying.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "once—and"

PARALLELISM

The use of parallel structures in this poem helps to draw attention to the speaker's central idea: agony is the most revealing and truthful of all the expressions that can cross a person's face.

For instance, consider the shape of lines 3 and 4:

> Men do not sham Convulsion,
> Nor simulate, a Throe—

Here, the speaker is essentially saying the same thing in two slightly different ways: you just can't fake the way a person writhes when they're in terrible pain. Using a similar sentence construction both times makes the speaker sound as if they're working through a logical argument, gathering related examples.

And take a look at the way the speaker shapes the second stanza:

> The Eyes glaze once—and that is Death—
> Impossible to feign
> The Beads upon the Forehead
> By homely Anguish strung.

The parallel phrasing of "The Eyes" and "The Beads" encourages readers to think of the two images together. Both these phrases are examples of the ways in which pain physically manifests: in the "glaze[d]" eyes and sweaty brows of sufferers. Both "The Eyes" and "The Beads" ultimately display the truth that "Agony" reveals.

Perhaps these lines also encourage readers to think about "Eyes" and "Beads" of sweat in similar *visual* terms: both are round, wet, and helplessly expressive!

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "do not sham Convulsion"
- **Line 4:** "Nor simulate a Throe"
- **Line 5:** "The Eyes"
- **Line 7:** "The Beads"

VOCABULARY

Sham (Line 3) - Fake, pretend. (The word can be a noun or a verb; here, it's a verb!)

Convulsion (Line 3) - A spasm of pain.

Simulate (Line 4) - Pretend, imitate.

Throe (Line 4) - A kind of involuntary movement often produced by pain.

Glaze (Line 5) - Film over, become hazy or misty.

Feign (Line 6) - To fake, to pretend.

Beads (Line 7) - Dickinson is punning on the word "beads," comparing droplets of sweat to the beads of a necklace.

Homely (Line 8) - This word can either mean "ugly" or "cozy and familiar"—and perhaps both meanings, strangely, are relevant here!

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Like many of Emily Dickinson's poems, "I like a look of Agony" is split up into two four-line stanzas, also known as quatrains. These quatrains also use the meter and rhyme scheme of a ballad (as many of Dickinson's poems do).

This simple, musical form turns up everything from nursery rhymes to pop songs. Along with Dickinson's careful use of caesura and end-stopping, the ballad stanzas here give the poem's strange and abstract ideas a clear structure.

METER

This poem is written in loose common meter (one of Dickinson's favorite meters). Poetry in common meter uses alternating lines of iambic tetrameter—that is, lines of four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm (for eight beats total)—and iambic trimeter, lines of three iambs (for six beats total). Here's how that sounds in lines 5-6:

> The Eyes | glaze once | —and that | is Death—
> Impоss- | ible | to feign

Common meter lends the poem a simple, relatively predictable rhythm. The poem feels straightforward and musical, for the most part.

But this rhythm is a little off-kilter at times, with some of the even-numbered lines lacking the full eight beats expected of iambic tetrameter. Line 7, for instance, is missing its final stressed beat:

> The Beads | upon | the Fore- | head

This ever-so-slightly off-balance meter suits this poem's unusual (and perhaps unsettling) worldview.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem uses the rhyme scheme of a ballad stanza:

> ABCB

In other words, the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme with each other.

The rhyme scheme of this poem, like its meter, is predictable enough to create some musicality, but *just* off-kilter enough to disrupt its own patterns. The words "true" and "Throe," for example, aren't exact rhymes—they're slant rhymes. The rhyme scheme in the second stanza is even less regular. Although "feign" and "strung" sound somewhat similar, calling them true slant rhymes might be a stretch. The teetering rhyme scheme makes the poem feels a little uneasy—fitting for a poem that talks about the "throe[s]" of pain.

SPEAKER

Most of Dickinson's speakers are cryptic, and the speaker in "I like a look of Agony" is no exception. It's certainly possible to interpret the speaker as Dickinson herself, as many readers do; Dickinson was a deeply introspective person who wrote often about anguish and death.

That said, the poem itself doesn't give readers any specific details about who the speaker is or even what they want. The only thing readers know about the speaker is the argument they're making in the poem. Readers can perhaps extrapolate that because the speaker values truth so much (enough to enjoy expressions of pain, at least, because they're uniquely genuine), the speaker feels a certain way about the rest of the world. If truth is so important and rare to the speaker, readers can potentially assume that the speaker is relatively cynical about other people and other people's emotions.

This is a common theme among Dickinson's speakers: they often seem disillusioned with their societies and value a kind of honesty and self-expression that, they imply, is very rare.

SETTING

This poem is so abstract that it really doesn't have a setting! The entire poem is more or less a thought experiment: rather than having any sort of narrative or transporting readers to a certain time or part of the world, it takes place entirely inside the speaker's own argument. One could imagine the poem being set mostly in the speaker's mind—it sounds like an intimate conversation, or even an internal monologue.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson was an American poet who lived from 1830-1886. She was relatively unknown as a writer during her lifetime and many of her poems were written on scraps of household paper. Though she often circulated her writing among friends, only 10 of her poems were published before her death. "I like a look of Agony" first appeared in *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, a collection of the poet's work published in 1890.

Although Dickinson's poetry typically uses regular meter and rhyme, the content of her poems tends to be imaginative and abstract. She was influenced by the elaborate conceits of 17th-century English Metaphysical poets like John Donne as well as by the later Romantic poets, including William Wordsworth, whose work often focuses often on individuality and emotion. Her Protestant upbringing also influenced her writing, as can be seen in her frequent use of common measure—a.k.a. hymn meter, so-called because it is the rhythm featured in many

church hymns.

At the same time, Dickinson was a wholly unique and formally experimental writer, turning often to slant rhyme, unconventional capitalization, and idiosyncratic punctuation in her work. Dickinson's poetry also often explores themes related to mental illness, despair, and death. Her poem "I measure every Grief I meet" makes for an interesting companion piece to "I like a look of Agony," in that it similarly explores the speaker's relationship to other people's pain.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As a woman living in 19th-century Massachusetts, Dickinson enjoyed more freedoms than many early modern scholars typically assumed, but was still constrained by various social conventions of her time. Dickinson also came of age during an era of religious revivalism in Massachusetts. While she wasn't necessarily atheist or agnostic, Dickinson's relationship with her family's Protestant faith was certainly complicated. Her poetry's tongue-in-cheek explorations of religion, society, and science subvert many of the strict expectations of her time and express the curious and rebellious spirit for which she was known throughout her life.

Dickinson was also famously reclusive. Some speculate that she had chronic medical issues, mental and/or physical, that kept her isolated. She also experienced the deaths and illnesses of many loved ones throughout her life, which undoubtedly informed her poetry's preoccupation with grief and mortality.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Dickinson's Biography — Learn more about Dickinson's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)
- Dickinson's Influences — Learn more about Dickinson's poetic influences. (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Emily-Dickinson)
- Dickinson's Health — Check out this page from the Emily Dickinson Museum's website focusing on the health issues that may have plagued Dickinson and her loved ones throughout her life. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/emily-dickinson/biography/special-topics/emily-dickinsons-health/)
- Her Own Society — A reading of Dickinson in the context of her literary relationships. (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/08/04/her-own-society)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- A Bird, came down the Walk
- After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
- A narrow Fellow in the Grass
- An awful Tempest mashed the air—
- As imperceptibly as grief
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- Before I got my eye put out
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I dwell in Possibility –
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I like to see it lap the Miles
- I measure every Grief I meet
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- I started Early — Took my Dog —
- I taste a liquor never brewed
- It was not Death, for I stood up
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- Safe in their Alabaster Chambers
- Success is counted sweetest
- Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
- The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
- There is no Frigate like a Book
- There's a certain Slant of light
- The Sky is low — the Clouds are mean
- The Soul has bandaged moments
- The Soul selects her own Society
- They shut me up in Prose –
- This is my letter to the world
- We grow accustomed to the Dark
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

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