

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,

Emily Dickinson

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 -

VOCABULARY

Mourners - people who grieve because of death

Treading - stepping on something

Sense - reason, logical thinking

Service - an event held for an important function, such as a funeral

Lead - a dull, heavy metal

Being - the state of existence

Toll - ring out, as in the sound of a bell

Wrecked - to be destroyed or damaged, a word often used to describe a ship that has washed up on shore after being damaged by a storm

Reason - the mind's capacity to be logical and rational

STORY/SUMMARY

Stanza 1: In my head, it felt like a Funeral was happening - mourners were walking backwards and forwards all over it, until it seemed that my mind started to make sense of it all.

Stanza 2: When the mourners finally sat down and stopped walking, a funeral service began - it was beating, beating, like a drum until I thought that my mind was going numb.

Stanza 3: And then I heard them lift up a box, which creaked across my soul, with the same heavy boots made out of lead, the universe began to make a heavy ringing sound.

Stanza 4: It was as if the whole of the heavens and sky were a bell, and our existence was just an ear, as if I was destroyed by the sound and abandoned on a distant shore, along with Silence - a strange, foreign entity that was wrecked along with me there.

Stanza 5: And then a plank snapped in my mind, as if it lost its ability to reason and think rationally, and I fell down and down - hitting different worlds at every step of the way as I was falling - and when I finished I finally knew.

SPEAKER/VOICE

The speaker explores her own psyche in this poem, as she uses **abstract imagery** to examine the effects of various different moods and experiences on her inner self. The poem likely assesses the feeling of grief or trauma, where the speaker is wracked by a strong, negative emotion as **symbolised** by the loud and intrusive funeral, which then resolves itself into a feeling of peace and harmony with the world.

LANGUAGE DEVICES

Visual image - "Mourners to and fro / Kept treading - treading" - the image of people walking back and forth in crowds across the mind gives the sense of chaos and confusion, perhaps also implying the feeling of pounding pain. The mourners may represent a memory that Dickinson had of attending a specific funeral, or they may be being used more **symbolically** to represent the idea of depressive or grief-stricken thoughts that pass like entities across the speaker's mind. This impression is further continued by the **auditory image** of a 'Drum' which further creates a steady painful beat. The effect is that the speaker's mind becomes 'numb', but also she feels that 'Sense' seems to be 'breaking through' - in a sense perhaps the pain in her mind and the chaos of her thoughts is a natural part of healing, as it represents the idea that her mind is searching for an answer or resolution that can help her out of her current turmoil. As the mourners continue in an **extended metaphor**, they "lift a Box" and the sound produces an **onomatopoeic** "creak across [the speaker's] soul" - as if it causes stiffness or rustiness as her soul opens, because it is so used to being shut up tightly. The poem then transitions to a loud ringing sound - "As all the Heavens were a bell / And Being, but an ear" - which implies that something in the speaker opened up to spirituality and the world again, and became receptive to knowledge and wisdom outside of herself in order to recover from the shocked state that she was in.

Pronouns - Dickinson underscores the theme of the individual against society through the use of pronouns - the speaker of the poem seems isolated and alone, always using the **first person singular pronoun 'I'**. Conversely, the 'mourners' who hurt her are a collective, referred to using the **third person plural pronouns 'they' and 'them'**.

STRUCTURE/FORM

Parallelism “Treading - treading”, “Beating - beating” - a range of continuous verbs are used and often repeated in order to give a sense of constant flux and momentum - at times imitating a thudding or pounding movement, perhaps evoking the idea of a headache or heartbeat. The final verb “**knowing**” also continues this sense of ongoing movement; though the poem ends the feeling stays with the speaker and continues on into the future.

Volta - The turning point in the poem comes in the final stanza:

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

This stanza is particularly abstract - it seems that the effect of the constant ‘drum’ of pain in the speaker’s mind causes her to finally snap - a “Plank in Reason, broke’. Perhaps in some ways she goes mad, as she no longer has control of her ‘Reason’ - which seems to be a manmade and rigid structure made of planks of wood. However, the effect is also liberating - the **plosive alliteration** of the phrase ‘I dropped down, and down’ sounds violent and forceful, but it also suggests a kind of liberation from her state of mourning, where her Soul seems to be shut up away from the world in a ‘Box’. The act of psychic release causes her to ‘hit a World, at every plunge’, suggesting that her mind once again becomes open to new places and experiences, rather than being restricted and enclosed.

Resolution - there seems to be an unfinished quality or a lack of resolution to the poem, where the phrase “And Finished knowing - then - “ is deliberately **ambiguous** - we are left wondering what it could be that she knew, and why she did not communicate this knowledge to her reader. Likely the intention is that only those who undergo this internal psychological process themselves can truly know how it feels to experience a sense of deep loss or trauma and come out the other side, with a sense of peace and restored harmony with the world around us - this type of process is so internal and emotional that it is difficult to verbalise and articulate or

explain. We could interpret the line variously that the state of 'knowing' into which Dickinson arrives may reference **a spiritual or psychological epiphany** - a kind of breakthrough that brings her out of her chaotic state of mind.

ATTITUDES

Sometimes instinct is more important than intellect - the poem starts with the verb 'felt', implying that feeling rather than thought is the primary subject. Finally, 'Sense' does seem to break through the difficulty and suffering that the speaker experiences, and the poem ends with a sense of 'knowing' - a heightened knowledge and awareness that brings a stillness and peace to the speaker's chaotic mind. The implication here is that the type of grief or loss that the speaker suffers is not going to be cured by logical, rational thought - instead, her recovery requires emotional processing and reliance on intuition and instinct.

Grief causes a kind of temporary madness - the idea that "Sense was breaking through" the state of the 'funeral' in the speaker's brain suggests that she was in a temporary state of insanity, because her mind and thoughts were disordered.

Insanity is often a matter of perspective - Conversely, many of Dickinson's poems which explore the theme of madness resolve that insanity is purely to do with being at odds with the social norm of the times, rather than something internal - the final stanza says that a "Plank in Reason, broke," which implies that in order for the speaker to achieve peace she must actually let go of her logical mind which thinks rationally, and instead give herself over to feeling and intuition - this process of letting go of 'Reason', the part of our minds which we could say is created by society and our social conditioning - is perhaps liberating as it leads to a sense of internal 'knowing' and peace with oneself.

Spirituality and seeking deeper connections with the inner and outer world can help us to overcome suffering - The speaker feels connected more to 'the Heavens', saying that her entire 'Being' is only an 'ear', a receptive vessel that tries to listen to the universe and attune its own self to it. At this point where she stops being psychologically isolated from the world around her and starts to connect more to a sense of spirituality, she also begins to find inner peace.

CONTEXT

Written in 1961, at the beginning of Dickinson's most creative period of writing - though the reasons are unclear, she underwent a process of withdrawing from society and spent almost all of her mature life at her family home in Amherst. Critics often believe that **Dickinson suffered an extreme shock or loss of someone close to her which caused her change in behaviour** and precipitated the withdrawal from society, as well as a creative outburst of poetry as she attempted to understand what had happened to her on a deeper level. Later in life Dickinson earned the **nickname "The Myth"** because so many townsfolk in Amherst had heard of her, but never met her personally because she was so disconnected from life in the town. She did however uphold communication with the outside world through letters, often messaging people that she respected and admired with her poems and her thoughts on the world.

The poem may also be more abstractly about the **American Civil War**, which began in 1861 and created panic and confusion in society, as well as mass suffering - close friends of Dickinson's fought and died in the war.

Mourning rituals - 19th Century mourning rituals were very complex and prolonged - both in Europe and the USA, which at the time had a culture drawn from European traditions. When a close loved one died, mourners were expected to wear black clothes and adopt a sombre attitude, because **mourning was seen as a public duty as well as a private practise**. There seems to be a dislike of the 'funeral' and the 'mourners' with their heavy 'Boots of Lead' in the poem; perhaps Dickinson is exploring the disconnection between her society's elaborate mourning practises - which seem to be for social display - and the grieving process in her own mind - which seems to be more connected to spirituality and recreating a harmony between herself and the universe.

Mysticism and Transcendentalism - Transcendentalism goes beyond a human centric vision of the world, trying to move beyond the self in order to recognise elements of the divine in the world around us. Dickinson was very much influenced by Transcendentalist writers, who were part of a popular counterculture in her contemporary society - in particular, critics often compare Dickinson's transcendentalist beliefs to those of Ralph Waldo Emerson - a writer whom Dickinson may have met personally, and whose ideas certainly influenced her own beliefs about the world. Emerson spoke of the need for **"the perpetual openness of the human mind to new**

influx of light and power...", and we can see that the poem here offers a similar sentiment - opening the mind to 'the Heavens' creates new, deeper knowledge about the world around us and the nature of our own being, leaving us more attuned to the universe.

THEMES

- **Madness**
- **Reason vs Intuition**
- **Grief**
- **Loss**
- **Trauma**
- **Harmony vs Dissonance**
- **Psychology**
- **Emotions**
- **Knowledge**
- **The Cosmos**
- **Spirituality and Mysticism**

TASKS:

- What do you think the speaker means by the phrase 'a Funeral, in my brain'?
- Investigate the tone progression in "I felt a Funeral, in my brain." How does Dickinson use tonal shifts to convey the speaker's descent into a mental and emotional breakdown?
- Explore the attitudes to psychology and grief in Emily Dickinson, paying close attention to the societal beliefs on mental health. How might these influences shape the themes portrayed in the poem?
- Analyse the imagery of the funeral procession and the imagery of the breaking mind in the poem. How does Dickinson use these elements to depict the speaker's mental unravelling?
- P.E.E. (Point, Evidence, Explanation) Paragraph: Write a paragraph analysing the impact of the final phrase "And finished knowing - then" on the theme of mental

breakdown. How does this line illustrate the finality and resolution of the breakdown experience?

POSSIBLE ESSAY QUESTIONS:

- Discuss the themes of mental breakdown and psychological disintegration in "I felt a Funeral, in my brain." How does Dickinson portray the unraveling of the speaker's mind through the extended metaphor of a funeral?
- In "I felt a Funeral, in my brain," Dickinson addresses the theme of altered perception during a breakdown. Discuss the poem's representation of the speaker's perception and the disintegration of reality.
- Compare the theme of mental breakdown in "I felt a Funeral, in my brain" with another Emily Dickinson poem that also explores themes of psychological distress. How do these pieces differ or converge in their treatment of mental health?