After great pain, a formal feeling comes –

POEM TEXT

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
The stiff Heart questions 'was it He, that bore,'
And 'Yesterday, or Centuries before'?

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
A Wooden way
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –

SUMMARY

After intense emotional trauma, people feel stiff and solemn. Their senses are numb—almost as though they are attending a funeral, or are graves themselves. Their hearts feel tense, and they wonder if Christ felt like this on the cross—though they're unsure if the crucifixion happened yesterday or hundreds of years ago.

They go through their day on autopilot, their feet moving around robotically. They don't have a clear sense of where they are, where they're going, or how they got to be in their current state. They feel a sort of crystallized sense of calm, stupefied as stone.

This numb state won't last forever. But even if people survive it, they'll remember it in much the same way that people freezing to death remember the snow: first there's a sharp pain, then numbness, then release.

THEMES

THE NUMBNESS FOLLOWING EMOTIONAL TRAUMA

The poem examines the feeling of numbness and paralysis that comes after trauma. The speaker describes how, in such an "Hour of Lead," the nerves feel stony and solemn, the heart seems to stiffen, and the feet move in a confused, mechanical way. In other words, the poem argues that moments of intense pain are followed by an almost zombie-like detachment from the world.

The speaker describes this detachment by saying that, after trauma, people's "Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs." The word "ceremonious" evokes the solemn and formal atmosphere of a funeral, while "Tombs" implies cold lifelessness. Building on this image, the speaker says that the sufferer sinks into "A Quartz contentment, like a stone." Such a person seems coldly calm in the wake of trauma, their emotions crystallized; they are so hardened and numb as to resemble stone. They thus go through the motions of life mechanically, without a sense of clarity or purpose.

The speaker further illustrates this emotional numbness by comparing it to the experience of hypothermia—that is, freezing to death. The "great pain" someone experiences is like the initial blast of "cold" that a hypothermia sufferer feels, followed by physical "stupor" (numbness and physical paralysis), and finally, by death itself—"letting go." The speaker isn't necessarily saying that this emotional state leads to *literal* death, and in fact calls the numbness that follows pain an "Hour of Lead" that may be "Remembered if outlived"—implying that this state is temporary. Perhaps "letting go," then, means moving on and moving past whatever trauma cause this numbness in the first state.

Unfortunately, that "if"—"Remembered, **if** outlived"—signals that the speaker does not seem to think that "outliving" this leaden hour is guaranteed. The speaker thus leaves readers in limbo—implying that it's possible to survive this kind of detached suffering, but also that it's possible to be destroyed by it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-13

SUFFERING, TIME, AND MEMORY

The poem explores not just emotional suffering, but also the relationship between that suffering and memory. The speaker describes how acute distress warps one's sense of time, and how memories of past pain so often feel like they are happening in the here and now. In pointing out that pain blurs the distinction between past and present, the speaker also casts doubt on people's ability to ever fully let go of great suffering.

The speaker is discussing the feeling that comes *after* "a great pain"—not the "great pain" itself. Right away, then, it's clear that

the poem is concerned with memory and the past.

The speaker goes on to compare present emotional suffering to the suffering of Christ on the cross, yet doesn't seem to be able to clearly *distinguish* between these two events—asking, "'was it He, that bore,'" before wondering, "And 'Yesterday, or Centuries before'?" This is, in part, because of the confusion that accompanies such post-trauma numbness; without a strong sensory connection to the world, the poem implies, the sufferer's sense of time grows jumbled.

So deep is the sufferer's lack of feeling that their "heart" can only stiffly "question[]" if this "formal feeling" what Christ felt on the cross. The heart can't even be bothered to recall *when* this happened, casually wondering whether it was "yesterday" or "centuries" ago.

This temporal confusion is clearest in the poem's final stanza. People who survive a great emotional trauma, the speaker says, will remember it as "Freezing persons, recollect the snow." The tenses in the final lines emphasize this lack of distinction between past and present. "Freezing" is a present participle—it describes a state that is happening *right now*. However, the "Freezing persons" that the speaker describes seem to be merely *recollecting* a past trauma, not actually experiencing it.

So why are they *still* freezing? The speaker seems to be suggesting that there is little difference between remembering an extreme emotion and reliving that emotion (sounds a bit like the way psychologists describe traumatic flashbacks!). Even if people do outlive a "great pain" (and the "Hour of Lead" that follows it), they may still vividly remember their suffering and relive it in their minds. In other words, great suffering is something that can be outlived, but not forgotten.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 10-13

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –

The poem starts off with two lofty, vague phrases that might seem confusing at first, as the speaker refers to "great pain" and the "formal feeling" that follows such pain. The first of these phrases simply refers to intense shock or trauma, but the speaker never bothers to specify the nature of the original "great pain" any more than that.

Perhaps this "pain" refers to heartbreak or grief over the loss of a loved one; given the morbid references in the following lines, death certainly seems to be on the speaker's mind!

But the speaker never clarifies what, exactly, this pain is because that's not the point here. The speaker doesn't seem interested in that pain itself, because the poem isn't focused on what people experience *during* a trauma. Instead, it's looking at the "formal feeling" that comes *after* said trauma.

"Formal" is the opposite of "casual"; it connotes the idea of ceremony or tradition, of stiffness, seriousness, and coldness. Basically, then, the speaker is saying that after great trauma comes a feeling of emotional numbness or paralysis; people seem suddenly to close themselves off or shut down.

The speaker personifies a sufferer's "Nerves" in order to illustrate this feeling further, saying that these nerves "sit ceremonious." Think about how you'd sit during a formal ceremony of some sort, like a wedding or graduation: quietly, a bit rigidly, immobile. And while the mention of ceremony here might briefly bring to mind images of a fancy, thrilling event or black-tie gathering, any positive connotations are quickly squashed by the comparison of these "Nerves" to "Tombs"—a simile that evokes a funeral. The sibilance of "sit ceremonious" recalls the quiet, hushed atmosphere of a funeral as well.

What actually does it mean to "sit" like a "Tomb"? Well, tombs are cold, inanimate objects, often dug into the earth. To "sit like Tombs" thus suggests being still and lifeless, forever in the cold and dark.

Imagine shocked, stricken people standing around an open grave. They aren't weeping, or tearing their hair out in grief; instead, they're stiff and solemn, seemingly unable to express, or perhaps even, feel their anguish. This is the kind of "formal feeling" the speaker refers to.

The iambic pentameter in these lines adds to this sense of rigid formality. Iambic pentameter is perhaps the most common meter in traditional English poetry. It consists of five iambs, feet made up of one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable. This gives iambic lines a steady, rhythmic feeling—almost like the beat of a funeral march (da-DUM da-DUM). Take line 1:

After | great pain, | a form- | al feel- | ing comes –

The meter isn't perfect here, but it's iambic enough to evoke that stiff beat. The trochee (stressed-unstressed) of "After" and spondee (stressed-stressed) of "great pain" suggest the force of such pain, the way it trips the speaker up before returning to the iambic plod.

The alliteration, especially in the first line, also emphasizes this rhythm. Notice how the /f/ sounds of "formal feeling" come at the beginning of a stressed syllable and draw readers' attention to this important phrase.

LINES 3-4

The stiff Heart questions 'was it He, that bore,'

And 'Yesterday, or Centuries before'?

Like the sufferer's rigid nerves, their "Heart" is stiff. This Heart also seems to be confused, and is asking some odd questions. Hearts can't literally ask questions, of course, and the speaker is being metaphorical, personifying the "Heart" as a being with agency. Hearts typically symbolize emotion, and as such this questioning heart implies the sufferer's emotional confusion. Notice how this also creates a sense of brokenness, as if the sufferer is made up of distinct parts that can't quite communicate with one another.

The Heart's actual questions, in turn, are likely allusions to the crucifixion of Christ. The Heart seems to be comparing its own suffering to Christ's suffering on the cross, essentially asking, *was this how Christ felt?*

It's worth noting here that the Christ's agony on the cross probably aligns more with the sufferer's initial "great pain" than the stupor that the Heart is *currently* experiencing. The exact framing of this question also doesn't seem to fully distinguish between its own pain and Christ's pain, asking whether it was Christ who in fact "bore" that "great pain" in the first place—either just yesterday, or hundreds of years ago. It's like the Heart in this "formal" state has completely lost its sense of identity and time; it's so numb and listless that it doesn't even remember when this "great pain" happened.

So far, the poem is quite dark. But there's a very subtle glimmer of hope buried in this allusion: in the Bible, Christ was raised from the dead and then ascended to Heaven. His crucifixion has thus long been a symbol of the redemptive power of suffering, perhaps suggesting that there's a light at the end of the tunnel here.

In fact, these lines might even suggest that Christ, or God, or some kind of higher power, can help the sufferer bear whatever pain they're facing. If God helped the sufferer through their initial anguish, maybe God will help them through this stupor, too. Or, maybe not; the rest of the poem will go on to suggest that overcoming this stupor is possible, but not guaranteed.

Finally, these two lines make the poem's rhyme scheme clear—for now at least. The first stanza has been a quatrain, or four-line stanza, with an AABB rhyme pattern.

LINES 5-7

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
A Wooden way
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –

The feet of someone dealing with this "formal feeling," the speaker says, move mechanically, or automatically. The speaker is again turning to one part of the sufferer's body (this time their feet) to illustrate the way the sufferer is moving through life. Such a person is on autopilot, in other words; they aren't really *experiencing* life, but rather just going through the motions.

The description of the sufferer's "Wooden" path, or "way," further emphasizes this zombie-like state. The word "wooden" connotes stiffness and clumsiness, and what exactly the "way" here refers to is a bit ambiguous. The speaker might be literally describing the gait caused by that "formal feeling"—that is, saying one suffering moves about in a "wooden manner"—or referring to a metaphorical path that someone suffering from such a feeling takes through life. (Or both—these options aren't mutually exclusive!)

Either way, it's clear that the person suffering from emotional numbness is thoroughly detached from the world. The next line says that this "Wooden way" is made up of "Ground, or Air, or Ought." It makes sense that the sufferer could be walking on "Ground"—that's what people usually walk on. But they definitely aren't walking on air, or ought—whatever that means!

In fact, "ought" can have several meanings:

- It can express a sense of obligation, like the word "should";
- It can mean "anything";
- Or, weirdly enough, it can mean"nothing."

The speaker seems to be saying that the sufferer is generally unaware of what they're doing. They might be walking on the ground, or on air, or anything at all! "Ought" might also express a feeling of regret; maybe the sufferer is ruminating about what they *should* have done to prevent the pain that led to this situation in the first place.

Notice the change in meter and form here as well. For one thing, this stanza has five lines, rather than four. It's also no longer in iambic pentameter. In fact, it's actually in multiple meters: the first line is in iambic tetrameter (four feet per line), the next line is in iambic dimeter (two feet), and the next is in tetrameter again! Here are lines 5-6 as an example:

The Feet, | mechan- | ical, | go round –
A Wood- | en way

The rhyme scheme is also totally weird—none of the first three lines rhyme at all, despite the rhyming couplet pattern established by the first stanza.

Basically, there's a mix of order and disorder in this stanza. On the one hand, the continuing iambic pattern of unstressed and stressed syllables maintains a sense of order, rhythm, and formality. (Here, this pattern might reflect the rhythm of footsteps.) The alliteration in "A Wooden way" helps emphasize this order, as does the polysyndeton in line 7 : "Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –".

On the other hand, the varying line lengths, new stanza structure, and irregular rhyme scheme create a sense of disorder. If the iambic rhythm recalls steady footsteps, the changing line lengths might represent irregular footsteps,

sudden stops, or quick changes in direction.

It's like the ice has thinned; the reader can perhaps sense, momentarily, the pain and confusion beneath the sufferer's numbness.

LINES 8-9

Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

It doesn't really matter how the sufferer got into this state, the speaker says here. What matters is that the sufferer is currently overwhelmed by numbness.

In fact, the sufferer is so numb and emotionless that they resemble a stone. They've sunk into a kind of coma-like state: a "Quartz contentment." The word "contentment" may seem like an odd choice here, since it usually describes a state of happiness or satisfaction. It could be that the sufferer just *appears* content because they're so zoned out and numb. Or, maybe, the sufferer is so numb that they don't even recognize their numbness! Or, in yet another interpretation, maybe being numb is better than feeling a lot of pain.

The speaker's choice of "Quartz" as the mineral of comparison is also notable. Quartz is a hard crystal that, when white or clear, can resemble ice. This fits well with the wintry atmosphere of the poem's final lines, as well as with the sufferer's emotionally-frozen state.

The alliteration and consonance in the last line also emphasize this imagery:

A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

The /k/ sounds and /t/ sounds" here are hard and sharp, just like the crystallized state they describe.

These lines also bring back the rhyme scheme that the first three lines of this stanza lacked. "Grown" and "stone" are perfect end rhymes, perhaps suggesting the "contentment" being described.

LINES 10-11

This is the Hour of Lead –
Remembered, if outlived,

The speaker calls the period of numbness that follows pain an "Hour of Lead." This metaphor, like the references to stone and tombs in the preceding stanzas, conveys a sense of numbness and heaviness. Because of its density, lead is often used as a metaphor for emotional burdens; people commonly describe hearts as "sinking like lead" after a shock, for example. Lead's dull, gray color also evokes emotionlessness, and its use in bullets and cannon shot might even evoke death.

Luckily, the speaker says, this leaden state won't last forever. "Hour" probably isn't literal here; it just means a "period of time." It is, however, a relatively short period of time—an "Hour of Lead" sounds a lot more manageable than a "Month of Lead" or a "Year of Lead"! Maybe, then, the speaker is implying that this suffering will pass quickly.

Things get a bit darker in the next line, however. "Remembered" seems promising at first—like "Hour," it implies that the suffering will eventually pass. Unfortunately, the speaker says that the suffering will be remembered *only* "if outlived"—that "if" signaling that surviving this leaden hour doesn't seem to be a sure thing!

Moreover, *remembering* suffering, as the speaker makes clear in the final lines, is no light matter. In fact, memories might be almost as intense as the experience itself.

Note that both these lines are in iambic tetrameter; the poem seems to be returning to a more formal, controlled rhythm. The rhyme scheme has also returned to its original AABB pattern.

The consonance in "Lead," "Remembered,", and "outlived" also adds to the sense of heaviness and finality in these lines.

LINES 12-13

As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –

The poem's final simile compares emotional trauma to hypothermia. Or, to be more specific, the simile compares the experience of *remembering* emotional suffering to the experience of *remembering* hypothermia.

Both emotional suffering and freezing, the speaker says, follow the same pattern: sharp pain, then numbness, "then the letting go –". The speaker seems to be describing the stages of grieving that follow trauma. First there's the initial shock of the "great pain," then the "formal feeling" or emotional stupor that the speaker's been describing throughout the poem, and finally there's the "letting go"—an ambiguous phrase that might connote healing and moving on, or exactly the opposite: giving up.

The fact that the "Freezing persons" are *recollecting* "the Snow" seems to imply that they *survived* their experience of hypothermia. Maybe, then, "letting go" just means "recovering" or "being rescued." But another reading of the line is that "letting go" refers simply to losing consciousness and, ultimately, dying.

It's certainly possible that the speaker means that suffering can end in literal death (either because the stress is too great for the sufferer's body, or because it leads the sufferer to take matters into their own hands). It's also possible that the speaker means that suffering ends in a more figurative death—that is, that it breaks the sufferer's spirit. And yet another possible interpretation is that pain leads to a more positive kind of letting go, in the sense of finally releasing oneself from, or simply accepting and moving past, trauma.

The timeline adds to the confusion. As mentioned above, the

freezing people are apparently "recollect[ing]" the snow—which suggests that the hypothermia *happened in the past*. But the speaker specifically mentions that the people are "Freezing"—which suggests that the hypothermia is still happening; how are these people *still* "freezing" if they're also *remembering* what it was like to freeze?

One possible interpretation is that the speaker is describing some kind of flashback—a vivid memory in which the sufferer relives a near-death experience. Maybe this present "freezing" refers to the way that trauma stays with people long after an ordeal ends, or to the way that people in a state of hypothermia/emotional numbness no longer feel the cold/"great pain" that led them to this state in the first place. Instead, they just *remember* that cold/pain even as they are *still deep within their trauma*.

The caesurae in these final lines echo the feelings that the speaker describes. Each pause creates a sense of suspense between these steps, suggesting a slow, halting progress through the stages of grief.

Despite all this confusion, the meter and rhyme are actually quite formal here. These lines are back in iambic pentameter, and the rhyme scheme has fully returned to the AABB pattern established in the first stanza. On the one hand, then, the poem has returned to the icy formality of the first stanza; on the other hand, it's unclear if the sufferer is healing or if they've essentially fallen apart.

SYMBOLS

HARD, SOLID MATERIALS

Throughout the poem, the speaker uses various solid materials to symbolize the sufferer's stiff, frozen state.

Different materials convey different aspects of this "formal feeling." The tomb mentioned in line 2, for example, specifically conveys a sense of cold lifelessness; tombs may be carved from stone or dug into the earth, and the image here evokes the way the sufferer's "Nerves" feel themselves buried, cut off from the world. The "Wooden way" in line 6 has a slightly different feel to it; think about the muffled, dull thud of walking on wood, as well as the robotic, stiff movement implied by a "wooden" manner.

Quartz, in line 5, adds a sense of sharp rigidity to the "formal feeling." Quartz is a crystal, and its mention here suggests that way that the sufferer's emotions have metaphorically "crystallized" into an unbreakable formation. Finally, in line 10, "Lead" represents the heaviness and dullness of this formal feeling.

Taken together, these solid materials symbolize a state of numb, emotionless frigidity.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Tombs"
- **Line 6:** "Wooden"
- **Line 9:** "Quartz," "stone"
- **Line 10:** "Lead"

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

"After great pain" uses several metaphors that evoke sufferer's emotionally frozen state.

In line 5, for example, the speaker's description of "mechanical" feet is metaphorical. The speaker is comparing the sufferer's feet to a kind of machine. This comparison highlights the sufferer's lifelessness and lack of emotion; they are robotic, on autopilot.

In line 7, the description of the sufferer walking on "Air, or Ought" is also metaphorical, since the sufferer cannot literally be walking on air or ought. "Ought" can mean "nothing," "anything," or "should." The speaker is illustrating the sufferer's uncertainty and mental confusion; someone who walks on air, or nothing, is someone who is lost, ungrounded. "Ought" might also imply that the sufferer is mentally ruminating on what they *ought* to have done to prevent the "great pain."

The phrase "A Quartz contentment" in line 9 contains an implied comparison between quartz, a hard crystal, and the sufferer's state of numb "contentment." (Note that this metaphor is also part of a larger simile: at the end of line 9, the speaker says that the sufferer's "Quartz contentment" is "like a stone".) By comparing the sufferer's state to quartz, the speaker highlights the sufferer's cold, calm numbness. People in the sufferer's state seem unable to feel anything at all—not grief, joy, nor even pain. They're so numb, in fact, that they even seem to be *contented*, or at peace, with their current state. At the very least, they don't seem to have the motivation or wherewithal to get out of their state. They are more like a mineral than a human being.

The phrase "Hour of Lead" is also metaphorical. The numbness that comes in the period after a shock, the speaker says, feels as heavy and dull as lead. Lead is an extremely dense metal, and in the 19th century, was commonly used to make bullets and weights. Someone in an "Hour of Lead" feels gray and weighed down by life.

Finally, "letting go" in the final line is a metaphor that compares the physical act of letting go of something to a more figurative surrender. Here, there are several possible layers of metaphor. "Letting go" might refer to dying (letting go of life). It might also

mean "letting go" of suffering, either emotional (as in the case of the sufferer) or physical (as in the case of the "Freezing persons"). In any case, “letting go” is a common metaphor that implies some kind of surrender and release.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “Nerves sit ceremonious”
- **Line 3:** “stiff Heart questions”
- **Line 5:** “Feet, mechanical”
- **Lines 6-7:** “A Wooden way / Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –”
- **Line 9:** “A Quartz contentment, ”
- **Line 10:** “Hour of Lead”
- **Line 13:** “letting go –”

ALLITERATION

The speaker uses alliteration throughout the poem to draw attention to words lines and images, and to strengthen the poem's rhythm.

In the first line of the poem, alliteration serves several purposes:

> After great pain, a formal feeling comes –

The repetition of the /f/ sound draws the reader's attention to the phrase "formal feeling." This makes sense, since the entire poem is about this "formal feeling"; the speaker is flagging the phrase as especially important. The alliteration also works with the /f/ sound in "After" to give the line a musical quality, which can make readers read more slowly. Like the /s/ sound in the following lines, the /f/ sound is sometimes considered sibilant, and can also create a hushed, quiet atmosphere. The "formal feeling" feels muffled, that /f/ subtly evoking the dull, fuzzy mind of someone in this state.

The alliteration also helps emphasize the poem's meter. This line is mostly in iambic pentameter (which means that it has five feet, each consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable). In the phrase "formal feeling," each /f/ sound falls on a stressed syllable, which makes the syllable ring out even *more* strongly. This helps strengthen the steady, *formal* rhythm in last half of the line—which, in turn, helps illustrate the "formal feeling" that the speaker is describing.

The speaker also uses alliteration in the second stanza, in line 6:

> A Wooden way –

As in the first line of the poem, each alliterative sound falls on a stressed syllable, which helps emphasize the steady, down-up rhythm in this line. Here, this steady rhythm might recall the down-up rhythm of a sufferer's footsteps.

The /w/ sound itself is also important here. The /w/ sound in "Wooden way" is soft, even dull. This might evoke the dullness of wood or the numbness of the sufferer. By contrast, the sharp /k/ sounds of "Quartz contentment" evoke the sharp, rigid, icy quality of the speaker's state.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “formal feeling”
- **Line 2:** “sit ceremonious”
- **Line 3:** “stiff”
- **Line 6:** “Wooden way”
- **Line 9:** “Quartz contentment”

CONSONANCE

Like alliteration, consonance emphasizes feelings or images throughout the poem.

An important instance of consonance occurs in the poem's final lines:

> As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
> First — Chill — then Stupor — then the letting go —

Here, the repetition of the sibilant /s/ sound draws attention to this final image and evokes the cold, hushed feeling that it describes. Sibilance can often evoke coldness, since the hissing /s/ sound can mimic the sound of wind or running water. It also creates a soft, hushed tone (think the “shh” sound of whispering), which might evoke the quiet of winter—or the stillness of death.

In fact, the speaker uses sibilance throughout the poem to create a still, quiet atmosphere. Lines 2-3 contain a similar repetition of the /s/ sound:

> The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs —
> The stiff Heart questions ‘was it He, that bore,’

Here, the /s/ sound might specifically recall the still, hushed sound of a funeral or graveyard. As above, this sibilance also adds to the musical quality of the lines, which might cause the reader to read them more slowly.

There are several other, less obvious instances of consonance throughout the poem. Lines 10-11 contain a repetition of the /d/ sound:

> This is the Hour of Lead —
> Remembered, if outlived

Unlike the /s/ sound at the end of the stanza, the /d/ sound seems to evoke heaviness and finality. This fits well with the death-like dullness of the sufferer’s current state.

The speaker uses consonance and alliteration to highlight another image at the end of the stanza:

A Quartz contentment, like a stone —

The hard /k/ sounds at the beginning of "quartz" and "contentment," together with the repetition of /k/ and /t/ sounds throughout the line, evoke the hardness and sharpness of stone.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "After," "formal feeling"
- **Line 2:** "Nerves," "sit ceremonious," "Tombs"
- **Line 3:** "stiff," "questions," "was"
- **Line 4:** "Yesterday," "Centuries"
- **Line 5:** "round"
- **Line 6:** "Wooden way"
- **Line 7:** "Ground"
- **Line 8:** "Regardless grown"
- **Line 9:** "Quartz contentment, like," "stone"
- **Line 12:** "persons," "recollect," "Snow"
- **Line 13:** "First," "Chill," "Stupor," "letting"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment occurs only a few times in the poem, most obviously at the ends of lines 5 and 6. These enjambments create a sense of movement and confusion that often contrasts with the poem's meter and thematic ideas about rigidity and stiffness. The poem is mostly end-stopped in deference to this rigidity, creating a sense of plodding, contained motion—making the enjambments all the more interesting.

In the second stanza, enjambments help illustrate the images the speaker is describing:

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
A Wooden way
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –

The poem's purposefully funky punctuation can make it hard to tell if a line is end stopped or enjambed, which also adds to the confusion of these moments. Technically, line 5 could end exactly where it does, with the speaker simply saying that the feet "go round." The pause created by the dash also makes the line feel end-stopped. Yet while the first line could be an independent sentence, the next lines clearly depend on that first line for grammatical sense. The speaker adds to the thought, creating an ambiguous moment that, regardless of whether readers take it to be true enjambment or not, reflects the stilted confusion of the formal feeling being described.

While end-stopped lines generally create a sense of finality, enjambed lines create a sense that the poem is continuing despite the breaks in its structure. Here, the enjambments evoke the fragmented movement of the feet.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "round – / A"
- **Lines 6-7:** "way / Of"

SIMILE

There are several similes in "After great pain," all of which illustrate the icy, death-like state that the sufferer is experiencing. The first simile occurs in line 2, when the speaker describes the nerves of a suffering person as sitting "ceremonious, like Tombs." This image combines two motifs that the speaker uses throughout the poem to describe numbness: stones and death. The feelings of the sufferer are so frozen that they resemble not just stones, but the stones used to mark death. The simile "like a stone —" in line 9 serves a similar function. The sufferer, apparently, is so frozen and emotionless that they resemble a rock.

The poem's most striking simile occurs in its final lines, when the speaker says that sufferers will remember their suffering:

As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow —
First — Chill — then Stupor — then the letting go —

This simile also illustrates a sufferer's numbness. They have already experienced "Chill" (that's the first "great pain"), and now are in a state of "Stupor." The next phase, "letting go" is ambiguous—and scary. It's not at all clear what happens after a sufferer lets go.

Note the discrepancy in tenses here. The speaker is comparing emotional sufferers to "freezing persons"—that is, people who are *currently* in a state of freezing. However, the speaker also says that the freezing persons are *recollecting* "the Snow," which suggests that the hypothermia has already taken place. The speaker seems to be implying that memories of trauma can be so intense that they feel like they are happening in the present. This might suggest that complete recovery from trauma (in the speaker's mind, at least) isn't really possible—even if they outlive the "Hour of Lead," the sufferer will still be haunted by memories of their pain.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –"
- **Line 9:** "A Quartz contentment, like a stone –"
- **Lines 12-13:** "As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow – / First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –"

POLYSYNDETON

In line 9, the speaker uses polysyndeton to highlight the sufferer's confused, wandering state:

Of Ground, or Air, or Ought —

Polysyndeton, in general, can create a sense of being overwhelmed. It's like all the items on the list are piling on top of one another. Here, the polysyndeton evokes the sufferer's own confusion; they don't know where they're walking, and with each "or," their bewilderment becomes more apparent.

The polysyndeton also emphasizes the sense of increasing unreality in the line. While it's possible to walk on ground, no one can literally walk on air or ought (in fact, it's not entirely clear what "ought" means!). With each "or," the line becomes more metaphorical—which makes sense, given that someone in the sufferer's numb, ruminating state might feel increasingly detached from reality.

Finally, the repetition of the coordinating conjunction "or" helps slow down the rhythm of the poem. Since the rhythm and meter in this stanza are somewhat erratic, this line might feel like a momentary return to the slower, steadier rhythm established in the first stanza.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "or," "or"

CAESURA

Caesuras occur throughout "After great pain." Like enjambments, they help create variation in the poem's rhythm. They also draw the reader's attention to certain words, and, especially in the poem's final line, create a sense of suspense. This line contains three caesuras:

> First — Chill — then Stupor — then the letting go —

Each pause creates a sense of suspense, which grows as the line goes on. The pauses also make the line sound fragmented, which creates a sense of hesitation, even distress.

Notably, the caesuras do not align perfectly with the meter of the line. Note how the dashes come in the middle of, rather than between, the iambs:

> First — Chill | — then Stu- | por — then | the let- | ting go —

It's like there are two rhythms going on here—one dictated by the meter, the other by the caesura. These conflicting rhythms create a sense of hesitation and distress. The reader cannot read this line in the way one would normally read a line in perfect iambic pentameter; the caesuras force the reader to pause in unexpected places.

Another interesting caesura occurs in line 7:

> Of Ground, or Air, or Ought —

Here, the pauses, which align with the polysyndeton and the meter, help slow the line down. This might echo the sufferer's slow, confused thinking, and the slow pace of their numb feet.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "pain, a"
- **Line 4:** "'Yesterday, or"
- **Line 5:** "Feet, mechanical, go"
- **Line 7:** "Ground, or Air, or"
- **Line 9:** "contentment, like"
- **Line 11:** "Remembered, if"
- **Line 13:** "First – Chill – then Stupor – then"

ALLUSION

The poem subtly alludes to the crucifixion of Jesus in the poem's third and fourth lines. According to the Bible, Roman officials executed Jesus by nailing him to a wooden cross. Three days later, however, Jesus rose from the dead and later ascended to heaven.

Here, the question "was it He, that bore" refers to Jesus's suffering on the cross. It also refers to the fact that Jesus not only *endured* his suffering, but in fact became closer to God *through* that suffering. In Christianity, the crucifixion thus often symbolizes the idea that pain can eventually lead to greater peace and closeness with God. By referencing the crucifixion, the speaker might be planting a seed of hope—perhaps suggesting that, even if people are utterly overwhelmed by suffering, this suffering may ultimately be transformative. Perhaps it even connects them to Christ himself.

Pain seems to have hijacked the sufferer's sense of identity and time; they don't know if they experienced their trauma yesterday, or on the cross, centuries ago. On the one hand, this might highlight the universality of the sufferer's pain. At the same time, the ambiguous phrasing of this allusion makes it clear that the speaker is not at all sure that this suffering will have a happy ending, or that God will help them through it.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "The stiff Heart questions 'was it He, that bore,' / And 'Yesterday, or Centuries before'?"

PERSONIFICATION

In lines 2, 3, and 5, the speaker personifies various parts of the sufferer's body. This personification creates a sense of fragmentation in the poem; it's as if the sufferer is made up of different body parts that function autonomously, independently of one another. These references to the sufferer's various body parts are also examples of metonymy, since the specific body parts stand in for different functions and feelings. The two devices thus work closely together in the poem.

In the second line, for example, the speaker personifies the sufferer's nerves as being able to sit. By capitalizing the word "Nerves" and giving them this ability, the speaker creates the sense that the sufferer's nerves are functioning by themselves, without the sufferer's say. This is again also an example of metonymy; the ceremonious "Nerves" are really a stand-in for the sufferer's sensations. Altogether, readers get the sense that the sufferer feels cut off from their own body.

In the next line, the speaker similarly personifies the sufferer's heart:

> The stiff Heart questions 'was it He, that bore,'
> And 'Yesterday, or Centuries before'?

Since hearts can't literally ask questions, this description is clearly figurative. As above, the capitalization of the word "Heart" also suggests that the heart is something separate from the sufferer, acting of its own accord. The "Heart" serves as a stand-in for the sufferer's pain and general emotions, which seem beyond the sufferer's control.

Finally, in line 5, the speaker uses personification to describe the sufferer's walk:

> The Feet, mechanical, go round —
> A Wooden way

Again, by capitalizing "Feet," the speaker is ascribing a human-like identity to something that is really just *part* of a human. And again, this makes it seem like the sufferer isn't really in control here. This is also another subtle example of metonymy. Though the sufferer's literal feet might be going around in circles, they are also functioning as a substitute for the sufferer's gait or walk.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –"
- **Lines 3-4:** "The stiff Heart questions 'was it He, that bore,' / And 'Yesterday, or Centuries before'?"

VOCABULARY

Formal (Line 1) - Conventional, done according to rules or traditions. Here the word "formal" evokes a sense of rigidity and lifelessness. It conveys a sense of disconnect from emotion; the sufferer is just going numbly through the rituals of life without showing, or even knowing, how they truly feel.

Ceremonious (Line 2) - Having to do with formal rituals or conventions. The word "ceremonious," like "formal," conveys a sense of rigidity and emotional disconnect. The description of nerves sitting "ceremonious, like Tombs" recalls a funeral or burial.

"He, that bore" (Line 3) - It seems likely, based on the context of the poem and capitalization here, that "He" refers to Jesus Christ. If this is true, then the heart's questions seem to be about Christ's crucifixion.

Ought (Line 7) - In contemporary English, "ought" usually means something like "should." However, ought can also be another spelling for "aught," an old-fashioned word that means "anything" or "everything." Strangely enough, "aught"/"ought" can also mean "nothing" or "zero." Here, all these meanings come into play. The sufferer doesn't seem to know where they're walking—on ground, or air, or anything, or nothing! It doesn't matter—it's all the same to the sufferer in this state. Ought could also convey a sense of regret—maybe the speaker is ruminating about what "ought" to have been done.

Quartz (Line 9) - A hard, crystalline mineral.

Contentment (Line 9) - A state of satisfaction.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem consists of three stanzas. The first and last are quatrains (meaning they have four lines), while the middle stanza is a quintain (it has five lines). The first and last stanza also feature the same rhyme scheme. The general structure of the poem is fairly rigid, then, which makes sense, given the "formal" and "ceremonious" state the speaker is describing.

However, the middle stanza, with its irregular meter and extra line, throws a wrench into this structure. This deviation might mirror a person's emotional struggle after a great shock; it's almost like a momentary glimpse of the raging feelings lurking beneath a sufferer's rigid numbness.

METER

The poem's meter bounces around throughout. It begins in iambic pentameter, meaning each line consists of five iambs—feet made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. This steady, da-DUM rhythm fits right in with the formality the speaker describes. It might even evoke the formal, rhythmic beat of a funeral procession. Here's the first line, for instance:

> After | great pain, | a for- | mal feel- | ing comes –

Right away, readers can see that the meter isn't perfect here. The first foot ("After") is actually a trochee, meaning it begins on a stressed syllable. The next foot contains two stressed syllables ("great pain"), making it a spondee. Even in this fairly traditional stanza, things aren't perfectly rhythmic or formal.

These slight deviations in the first stanza, however, are nothing

compared to those that follow. The second stanza breaks free from iambic pentameter completely (though it does maintain the same iambic pattern of unstressed and stressed syllables). The first line is in iambic tetrameter, which means that it has four iambs instead of five:

> The Feet, | mechan- | ical, | go round –

The next line has only two iambs, making it in iambic dimeter:

> A Wood- | en way

This pattern continues throughout the stanza: the third line is in iambic tetrameter, the fourth in iambic dimeter, and the fifth in iambic tetrameter. This irregularity in terms of line lengths creates a sense of unpredictability and confusion. It's like the poem (and by extension the sufferer here) is unsure of where it is going.

At the same time, the steady iambic, da-DUM pattern maintains a certain sense of order. The poem (or the sufferer) might be confused or distressed, but it's still marching forward, "mechanical[ly]" following the expected steps.

The final stanza returns to the more formal, recognizable meter of the first. Its first two lines are in iambic tetrameter, with minor deviations. The poem's final lines are in iambic pentameter:

> As Freez- | ing per- | sons, re- | collect | the Snow –
> First – Chill | – then Stu- | por – then | the let- | ting go –

The steadiness and renewed length of the final lines suggests the cool, calm "stupor" and sense of "letting go" being described.

RHYME SCHEME

The first and last stanzas have the same pattern of two rhyming couplets (albeit with different rhyme sounds in each), while the second stanza is all over the place. The rhyme scheme of the whole poem looks like this:

> AABB CDEFF GGHH

The couplets of the first and last stanzas feel relatively steady and predictable. The second stanza throws a wrench in things, however. The messy rhyme scheme here fits in with this stanza's irregular meter. Both suggest a feeling of confusion or imbalance, reflecting the idea that the sufferer here doesn't actually know where they're going (instead moving around either on the "Ground," in "Air," or through "Ought," whatever that means!). The final two lines here return to the couplet pattern, the satisfying rhyme between "grown" and "stone" evoking the "contentment" this person feelings upon stopping their wandering and accepting their stony, numb state.

Notice that Dickinson's rhymes are often imperfect or slant rhymes; they sound similar, but aren't exactly the same ("Lead" and "outlived," "comes" and "tombs," "round" and "stones"). Slant rhymes are a hallmark of Dickinson's poetry, and they add a sense of irregularity and movement to her verse. Even when a poem follows a formal rhyme scheme or meter, it never feels too static.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is anonymous. They don't tell the reader anything about their gender, age, or background, and this helps keep the poem's message universal; the speaker is presenting this "formal feeling" as something everyone goes through after trauma. At the same time, the vividness and specificity of the poem's language implies that the speaker has some personal experience with "great pain" and the "formal feeling" that follows.

It might be tempting to imagine that the speaker is Dickinson herself, especially given what historians have guessed about Dickinson's tumultuous personal life at this time period. However, there is no real evidence that the speaker and poet are one.

SETTING

The poem has no specific setting, which allows its message to feel universal and timeless. The speaker isn't talking about what happens after a specific "great pain," but after any "great pain." These numb feelings can strike anyone, anywhere.

More generally, the poem might be thought of as taking place in the period after some sort of emotional shock or trauma. And although the poem has no clear physical or environment, the speaker does refer to various metaphorical places as a way of illustrating the sufferer's state. The reference to "Tombs" and "formal feeling[s]" in the first stanza, for example, bring to mind a graveyard or funeral. The description of "Freezing persons" in the final stanza evokes somewhere isolated and icy. These metaphorical locations serve to highlight the death-like, rigid feeling that the sufferer is currently experiencing.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Dickinson had a wide range of literary influences, from the Bible to Shakespeare to the Romantic poets. Of all the literary movements that influenced her work, the most important was probably Transcendentalism, an American movement that emerged from Romanticism in the 1820s and lasted until the mid-19th century.

Like the Transcendentalists (whose ranks included fellow New Englanders Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau), Dickinson was deeply interested in nature, spirituality, and personal communion with God. She often described nature in ecstatic terms, turned away from conventional religious language and practices, and valued intuitive experience.

Unlike the Transcendentalists, however, Dickinson was not interested in developing a spiritual philosophy or an abstract system of thought. She was a writer of the particular and the personal. Her speakers do not often make proclamations about the general state of humanity; indeed, they are often frustratingly ambiguous, and sometimes seem to be as lost and confused as their readers.

Dickinson's own influence on contemporary is difficult to underestimate. She was a great literary innovator and constantly experimented with form and language, which influenced many 20th-century poets as they moved away from traditional verse. Her interest in personal experience, rather than abstract ideas, also influenced Confessional writers like Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, and Anne Carson.

It is worth noting that many of Dickinson's poems were not published until the mid 1900s, which meant that the full force of her influence was not felt until more than half a century after her death.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dickinson wrote this poem in 1862, just a year after the start of the Civil War. Unlike many of her contemporary writers, like Walt Whitman or Ralph Waldo Emerson, Dickinson wrote relatively little about the war, or the social and political movements surrounding it.

Despite this lack of explicit commentary, however, Dickinson was deeply affected by the war. Her father, a prominent Massachusetts politician, argued vehemently against slavery. Several of her friends and family members fought for the Union Army, including her eventual publisher Thomas Wentworth Higginson.

At the end of 1861, her brother Austin's close friend, Frazer Stearns, was killed in action in North Carolina. Dickinson's 1862 letter describing Stearns's death contains several echoes of "After great pain":

> *Austin is chilled—by Frazer's murder—He says—his Brain keeps saying over 'Frazer is killed'—'Frazer is killed,' just as Father told it—to Him. Two or three words of lead—that dropped so deep, they keep weighing—*

The Civil War years were also a highly productive time for Dickinson, who is estimated to have written around half of her poems between 1861 and 1865. She seems to have coped with the chaos and bloodshed of the war through personal creative acts, rather than through public proclamations.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Emily Dickinson Museum — In-depth information about Dickinson's life and poetry from the Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst, Massachusetts. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/emily-dickinson/biography/)
- Emily Dickinson Lexicon — An online dictionary of all of the words in Emily Dickinson's collected poems, published by Brigham Young University (https://edl.byu.edu/lexicon)
- Ada Limón — Watch a video of the contemporary poet Ada Limón reading "After great pain." (https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2832599676824242)
- Emily Dickinson's Letters — An 1891 Atlantic article about the poet's letters by her friend and publisher Thomas Wentworth Higginson. (https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1891/10/emily-dickinsons-letters/306524/)
- The Poem in Dickinson's Own Hand — An image of the manuscript of "After great pain" from the Emily Dickinson Archives at Harvard University. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/12174562)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- A Bird, came down the Walk
- A narrow Fellow in the Grass
- As imperceptibly as grief
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- I started Early — Took my Dog —
- I taste a liquor never brewed
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- Success is counted sweetest
- Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
- There's a certain Slant of light
- The Soul selects her own Society
- This is my letter to the world
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

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