It was not Death, for I stood up

POEM TEXT

It was not Death, for I stood up,
And all the Dead, lie down—
It was not Night, for all the Bells
Put out their Tongues, for Noon.

It was not Frost, for on my Flesh
I felt Siroccos—crawl—
Nor Fire—for just my Marble feet
Could keep a Chancel, cool—

And yet, it tasted, like them all,
The Figures I have seen
Set orderly, for Burial,
Reminded me, of mine—

As if my life were shaven,
And fitted to a frame,
And could not breathe without a key,
And 'twas like Midnight, some—

When everything that ticked—has stopped—
And Space stares all around—
Or Grisly frosts—first Autumn morns,
Repeal the Beating Ground—

But, most, like Chaos—Stopless—cool—
Without a Chance, or Spar—
Or even a Report of Land—
To justify—Despair.

SUMMARY

I knew that I wasn't dead, because I could stand up, and everyone who is dead lies down. And I knew that it wasn't nighttime, because all the church bells were ringing as they do in the middle of the day.

What I was going through couldn't have been icy weather, because it felt like hot winds were crawling over my skin. And it can't have been fire that I was experiencing, because my feet, which were stiff and cold as marble, could have kept the space around a church altar cool.

Even though what I was experiencing *wasn't* any of these things (death, night, frost, or fire), it *felt* like all of these things at the same time. The corpses I have seen prepared for burial reminded me of my own body.

It was as though my life had been sanded down so that it could fit into a frame and was then locked inside, suffocating with no way out. It was also, somewhat, like midnight.

It was like midnight when it seems that time has stopped, and you're surrounded by blank space staring back at you. Or, it was like those first days of fall, when deathly frosts stop the heartbeat of the earth.

Mostly, though, it was just like being in chaos without end. The chaos was detached and cool, without offering any possibility of escape. It was like being lost in the middle of the ocean, without seeing the mast of a ship or even hearing about land that might offer some relief or make such terrible anguish easier to understand.

THEMES

HOPELESSNESS AND DESPAIR

The speaker of "It was not Death, for I stood up" describes a terrible feeling that she never directly names. What she experienced *wasn't* death, the speaker says, but it *felt* like death. As the poem goes on and the speaker grapples with this nameless experience, the reader comes to understand that she is describing some sort of profound hopelessness and despair without a precise cause to "justify" it. Such despair, the poem suggests, defies description and understanding—and this very incomprehensibility is what makes it so terrible.

The speaker never explicitly tells the reader what she went through, which suggests that words fail when it comes to describing such hopelessness. Instead, she describes her experience by saying what it was *not*: it wasn't death, night, "Frost," nor "Fire," though in a way it felt like "all" of these. As the speaker recounts all this, she also seems to be trying to figure out what she *was* enduring—without success. Such deep despair, the poem implies, defies not only language, but also rational understanding itself.

Thus even as the speaker tries to work her way through her feelings logically, she keeps coming up short. She explains that she knows she *wasn't* dead because she "stood up," and she *wasn't* feeling *external* cold or heat, because she felt both at once within different parts of her body. This step-by-step reasoning only illustrates the fact that the speaker *can't* rationally understand what she was dealing with. Her pain

could never be reasoned out: it was past comprehension.

Ultimately, the poem suggests this profound hopelessness was so hard to endure precisely *because* it was so incomprehensible and all-encompassing. It felt as though time itself had "stopped" and a kind of illogical "Chaos" stepped in. In other words, the speaker's state of hopelessness was so profound that it took her beyond the rational progressions of time and daily life; nothing seemed to make sense.

At the end of the poem, the speaker compares her feeling to being lost at sea, without any sight of land. She says that even hearing a "Report of Land" would "justify Despair." In other words, if only she could find some root cause of her despair, she might be able to "justify" or understand her feeling, and therefore find it easier to bear.

But there's no sign of that metaphorical "land." Instead, the poem suggests that such profound despair is terrible because it *can't* be comprehended it's like being in the midst of an immeasurable sea, without knowing whether there is another side.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

It was not Death, for I stood up,
And all the Dead, lie down—
It was not Night, for all the Bells
Put out their Tongues, for Noon.

The speaker begins to describe a terrible feeling that she doesn't directly name. Instead, she describes this feeling by saying what it was *not:* she knows that "It was not Death" because she could still stand up, while "all the Dead, lie down." In other words, she was up and moving around rather than buried in the earth.

- But by comparing her experience to death, the speaker suggests that what she went through *felt* like death in many ways.
- Her feeling, the speaker suggests, included a profound sense of nothingness or numbness: the only thing differentiating her from "the Dead" was the fact that she could still stand up.
- The repetition of "Death" in a different form ("Dead")—an instance of polyptoton—reinforces the sense that the speaker's experience felt close to death.

The speaker then offers a second comparison to describe her feeling: she says that what she went through "was not Night." But just like she only knew that she wasn't dead because she could still stand up, the speaker emphasizes that she only knows that what she felt wasn't "Night" because bells were still ringing as they do in the middle of the day.

The speaker is referring to church bells that announce the hour, and she uses a strange and striking image to depict this: instead of just saying that the bells rang, the speaker says they "Put out their Tongues, for Noon."

- By "tongue," the speaker means the part of a bell that clangs against its walls.
- This personification is a bit disturbing, given that it makes the bells seem like they're mocking or laughing at the speaker by sticking out their "tongues."

The speaker, apparently, wasn't all that reassured to realize that it was not in fact the middle of the night; the image here suggests that everything around the speaker had grown alienating, uncomfortable, and strange. She was like a zombie, the walking dead, and her dark feelings of despair felt dramatically out of place in the middle of the day.

These lines set up a pattern that will be important to the poem as a whole: as the speaker lists what her experience was *not*, she uses anaphora to create rhythm and structure. Here, the phrase "It was not" repeats at the beginning of the first and third lines. This line calls attention both to the impossibility of describing the speaker's experience, and the insistent *presence of* this terrible experience, which the speaker can only describe through the repeating word "It."

This opening quatrain also establishes the poem's ABCB rhyme scheme. Although this rhyme scheme is a typical one for a poem written in quatrains (a.k.a. four-line stanzas), it's important to note that from the very beginning the poem both sticks to the rhyme scheme and diverges from it:

- "[D]own" and "Noon" create only a slant rhyme, not a full rhyme.
- This slant rhyme adds to the sense that something was "aslant" in the speaker's experience: something was fundamentally wrong or askew, and through the poem, she will attempt to describe it.

LINES 5-6

It was not Frost, for on my Flesh
I felt Siroccos—crawl—

The speaker continues to describe her experience by pointing out what it was *not*. Repeating the phrase "It was not" from the opening quatrain (and thus continuing the poem's use of anaphora), the speaker now says that what she went through "was not Frost," or external cold.

She knows this because it felt as though "Siroccos" (a type of hot wind that blows off the Sahara) were "crawl[ing]" over her skin:

- In other words, the speaker felt as though she hot winds were scorching her "Flesh."
- This image also subtly personifies the "Siroccos," giving them the power to "crawl" and torment the speaker. This, in turn, implies that the speaker's feelings weren't under her control but rather seemed to have a will of their own.

The alliteration, consonance, and sibilance of these lines help to bring their disturbing imagery to life for the reader.

> It was not Frost, for on my Flesh
> I felt Sirocos—crawl—

The /f/, /s/, and /sh/ sounds evoke the dry hiss of those hot winds over the speaker's skin. Sharp /c/ sounds, meanwhile, add a spikiness to "Siroccos" and "crawl," almost as though the hot winds are "crawling" over the poem itself.

LINES 7-8

> *Nor Fire—for just my Marble feet*
> *Could keep a Chancel, cool—*

The speaker says that what she experienced also wasn't "Fire." She knows this because her feet were like "marble," or as heavy, stiff, and cold as stone. By metaphorically comparing her feet to marble, the speaker also recalls the imagery of death from the poem's opening lines; marble is a stone that may be used for tombs or statues.

The speaker then evokes even more death imagery by saying that her feet alone would be able to "keep a Chancel, cool." A chancel is the area of a church surrounding an altar, so the image calls to mind a funeral service, with the speaker's body at the front of the church creating a chill.

It is worth noting, here, that while through these lines the speaker says what her experience was *not*, she also indirectly tells the reader a lot about what it was *like:*

- The imagery of "marble feet" and the "Chancel" of a church reinforce the idea that what the speaker went through felt in many ways *like* death: she implies that her experience was one of cold, numbness, and nothingness. The alliterative hard /c/ sounds in "could," keep," and "cool" emphasize a kind of hardness and coldness within the speaker's experience.
- The speaker also suggests that even though what she felt *wasn't* "Frost" or "Fire," it was *like* both of these things simultaneously: her feet were as cold as marble, but she still felt as though hot winds were "crawl[ing]" over her skin.

What seems clear is that the speaker's experience was terrible and harrowing—and all the more so because it eludes simplistic description. The sounds in these lines reinforce this sense that the speaker's experience can't easily be grasped or understood:

- While the poem juxtaposes the cold of "Frost" and the heat of "Fire," the alliterative /f/ sounds in these words link them together, emphasizing that the speaker has endured both of these feelings at the same time.
- This /f/ sound also repeats in the image of the speaker's "marble feet," connecting both sensations of "Frost" and "Fire" to the speaker's body.

As in the opening quatrain, this quatrain ends with a slant rhyme, here between "crawl" and "cool." The slant rhyme continues to suggest that something is fundamentally askew within the speaker's experience, and that this feeling can only be described indirectly.

The poem also resists a sense of even resolution by ending the stanza with a dash. In contrast to the first quatrain, which ended with a full stop, this dash propels the reader forward over the stanza break, enacting the speaker's ongoing attempt to describe her experience, while delaying a sense of closure.

LINES 9-12

> *And yet, it tasted, like them all,*
> *The Figures I have seen*
> *Set orderly, for Burial,*
> *Reminded me, of mine—*

The speaker goes on to say that although her experience *wasn't* death, night, frost, or fire, it "tasted, like them all." In other words, what she felt was in some way *like* all of these things, at the same time.

The speaker then explains that bodies she has seen prepared for burial reminded her of her *own* body during this terrible time.

- The image of "Figures," or corpses, being "Set orderly, for Burial" creates a haunting sense in the poem that the speaker felt as though *she* had died, except that she was aware that she had not.
- The idea of burial as "orderly" also painfully contrasts with the inner torment the speaker herself endured.

The image here is once again one of nothingness and absence: the people who have died are now only "Figures," rather than living human beings, that can be "set" in place.

- Through this comparison, the speaker implies that

too lost some fundamental aspect of her vitality.
- Again, she seems to have felt like the living dead or a kind of zombie, perhaps just going through the motions of life but not really there, or not feeling like she was in control.

The sounds of line 12 reinforce the connection between the speaker herself and these "Figures." Note the assonance of long /i/ sounds as well as the consonance of /m/ and /n/ sounds here:

Reminded me, of mine—

This sonic similarity suggests that the speaker's experience felt close to death itself.

Again, the speaker ends a quatrain ends on a slant rhyme: here, the long /ee/ sound in "seen" contrasts with the long /i/ of "mine." Although, in a way, these repeating slant rhymes create their own pattern in the poem, they also keep reminding the reader that something isn't right, subtly troubling and disrupting the close of each stanza.

Similarly, this stanza, like the previous, ends with a dash rather than a full stop. This denies readers a sense of resolution, and it also subtly enacts the speaker's ongoing struggle to name what she endured.

LINES 13-14

As if my life were shaven,
And fitted to a frame,

The speaker now attempts to describe what she went through with a series of new similes. In the first of these, the speaker compares her life in this time of despair to a plank of wood that had been sanded down (creating wood shavings) in order to be "fitted" into a frame. Alternatively, maybe the speaker felt like an animal whose protective fur had been sheared off.

Either way, the simile suggests that the speaker felt like all the edges and bumps in her life had been sanded off. The comparison to wood again implies that the speaker felt stiff and lifeless, while being "fitted to a frame" implies a feeling of restriction or of being thrust into a rigid container of sorts. It's as though all the joys and interesting bits of her life were whittled away so that she'd fit into a box. Perhaps the speaker even felt like she'd been put into a coffin.

The quick alliterative /f/ sounds in "fitted" and "frame" seem to snap together, reflecting the way that the speaker's smoothed out life fit right into that "frame."

LINES 15-16

And could not breathe without a key,
And 'twas like Midnight, some—

Building on the idea that she felt stiff, lifeless, and boxed in, the speaker goes on to say that it was as though her life "could not breathe without a key." This simile can be interpreted in a couple of ways:

- The speaker might be referring to the "frame" of line 14. That is, after her life was sanded down and stuffed into a "frame" (like a coffin), she could no longer breathe. She was locked in, lacking the "key" she needed to come back to life.
- The speaker also might be comparing how she felt to a kind of wind-up mechanical toy that needs a "key" in order to move around.

Either way, the speaker is saying that she felt trapped, lifeless, and suffocated, lacking whatever it was that she needed to escape this torment. In a sense, the "key" here symbolizes the cure for or path out of her despair.

- Remember that, throughout the poem, the speaker has struggled to name what it was she experienced directly. The mention of a "key" here reinforces the message that part of what was keeping her in this state was the lack of *clarity* or *understanding* that she needed to make sense of, and potentially break free from, her condition.
- The assonance of long /ee/ sounds in "breathe" and "key" reinforce the connection between finding this cure, this answer, and coming back to life.

The speaker goes on to a third simile, saying that how she felt "'twas like Midnight, some." In other words, even though the speaker has already said that what she went through *wasn't* night (because the bells rang like they do at "noon"), it was *like* "Midnight," or the deepest and darkest part of the night.

By moving from simile to simile in this stanza, the speaker reinforces the idea that what she truly felt eludes description. She can note that her feeling was *like* these terrible things, yet the similes also remind the reader that the speaker can't name what she felt *directly*. As the speaker continues to *try* to name it, then, the poem conveys just how terrible and complete the speaker's feeling was, and suggests it is all the worse for escaping an easy description.

The anaphora of "And" in these lines (which also is an example of polysyndeton) emphasizes the speaker's movement from comparison to comparison, enacting her attempt to find some way to name what she went through. The dash at the stanza's ending also contributes to this sense of momentum, and makes clear that, syntactically, the speaker's attempt to name her experience has inhabited one long, ongoing sentence (which will continue into the next stanza).

LINES 17-18

When everything that ticked—has stopped—
And Space stares all around—

The speaker continues to use comparisons to describe her experience. She builds on the simile from the preceding stanza, when she said that what she went through was "like Midnight." Now the speaker develops this idea of "Midnight," saying it's a time of night when "everything that ticked—has stopped."

- The sound ticking is associated with a clock; each tick marks another second gone by.
- By saying "everything that ticked," the speaker is referring to the passage of time and to life itself—which, of course, unfolds *over* time, with each tick of the clock. (Note how even the clipped, plosive sounds of the phrase "ticked—has stopped" convey the eerie noise of this ticking clock.)
- She's describing a sensation late at night when it seems like the whole world has ground to a halt, and perhaps even that time *itself* has stopped.

At this late hour, the speaker says, it also feels as though "space stares—all around."

- Readers can picture being awake in the middle of the night, surrounded by still darkness that seems to "stare" back at them blankly.
- The image both personifies "space" and emphasizes its *emptiness*; the speaker felt totally alone, surrounded by *nothing*. Basically, the speaker lost any sense of time or forward motion—and with that, any sense of logic, understanding, or connection to life.

Finally, note how the whispery sibilance of "stopped," "space," and "stares" evokes the utter silence and stillness of the midnight hour—and, in turn, of the speaker's despair.

LINES 19-20

Or Grisly frosts—first Autumn morns,
Repeal the Beating Ground—

In another simile, the speaker compares her feeling to "frosts" on chilly fall mornings. She describes these frosts as "Grisly," or gruesome—a word that subtly connects such "frost" to icy, "grisly" death.

- This similar also builds on the idea that fall ushers in winter; the first "frosts" of autumn are a signal of the season to come.
- Winter, in turn, is a season of darkness and dormancy that symbolizes death more broadly.
- The speaker, then, is saying that her despair felt cold and foreboding, like a signal that winter—a time of cold, numbness, and death—was coming.

These "frosts," the speaker goes on to say, "Repeal" or undo the "Beating" of the "Ground." Here, the speaker metaphorically compares the ground to a living person with a beating heart. The frosts undo the "beating" of this heart, bringing silence and nothingness to the earth. Likewise, the speaker suggests that her experience of despair seemed to silence her own heartbeat.

The consonance of growling /r/ and /g/ sounds in these lines are like a rough layer of frost that has covered the poem itself:

Or Grisly frosts—first Autumn morns,
Repeal the Beating Ground—

Also note that the ending of this quatrain is the first place that the poem introduces a full rhyme into its rhyme scheme: "around" rhymes exactly with "Ground." This introduces variation into the poem's music, but also creates a haunting sense of finality, as though that "repeal" of the "beating ground"—and of the speaker's sense of her own life—is not temporary.

Interestingly, in these lines the speaker repeats the word "frost" from line five. This subtly reinforces the idea that even though what the speaker went through *wasn't* "Frost" (as she said previously), it *felt* like "frosts," with all of their associations of coldness and silence.

LINES 21-24

But, most, like Chaos—Stopless—cool—
Without a Chance, or Spar—
Or even a Report of Land—
To justify—Despair.

Above all, the speaker says, what she was through was "most, like Chaos" that is "Stopless" and "cool"—that is, a feeling of unending, detached disorder, a kind of numb nothingness beyond words and understanding. Also note that "Stopless" isn't a real word, suggesting that the speaker can only come close to describing what she felt by moving beyond ordinary language.

In this line, a series of dashes punctuate the words, as the speaker moves from "Chaos," to "Stopless," to "cool."

- These abrupt pauses, or caesurae, convey the difficulty of speaking or naming the experience, almost as though the speaker is halting after each word and searching for a better way to describe things.
- The dashes also create a sense of being suspended within this "Chaos," or trapped within the experience the poem describes.

The sound patterns in the line reinforce this sense of entrapment, as the alliterative hard /c/ of "Chaos" repeats in "cool," and the sibilant /s/ at the end of "Chaos" recurs in "Stopless." The speaker's experience, the poem's music implies, is circular and all-encompassing.

- The speaker then emphasizes this by saying that she was "Without a Chance," or a way out.
- The speaker's experience, the poem suggests, was one of hopelessness so profound that it felt utterly inescapable.

Finally, the speaker introduces one last simile into the poem: she suggests that this all-consuming "Chaos" or terrible hopelessness was like being lost in the middle of a vast sea "Without" a "spar." A spar is the mast of a ship, so the speaker creates an image of being stranded in a vast ocean with no glimpse of any ship—any chance of rescue—in sight.

Building on this simile, the speaker says that she couldn't even hear a "Report of Land." In other words, she there was no place *outside* her experience that could in some way have oriented her. The lack of metaphorical land can be read in a couple ways:

- In saying there was no "Report of Land" the speaker might be saying that there was no chance of relief, no place to swim *toward*. She had no idea what to do to escape her suffering; if she had, this would have "justif[ied]—Despair," or somehow made her profound hopelessness easier to endure.
- Alternatively, the speaker might be saying that if only she could ground her "Despair" in something sturdy and concrete—that is, if she could *understand what caused it in the first place*—then she could "justify" it, or make it feel more rational and valid. Her feeling would be a response to *something*, and thus would at least make more *sense*.

Ultimately, though, the poem implies that the speaker's experience was so terrible because she *couldn't* envision any kind of "land" to hold onto.

SYMBOLS

THE BELLS

The bells in the poem symbolize daily life. Historically, the bells of a town church would ring at the beginning of religious services as well as at key points throughout the day. The bells, then, would mark the progression of time for the entire town, and act as a reminder of people going about their days as usual.

The speaker says that she knows that the despair she experienced "was not Night" because the bells were ringing as they normally do in the middle of the day. In other words, she knows life was going on and time was moving forward as normal, even if it didn't feel like this to the speaker herself.

Importantly, the bells in the poem are strange and distorted. The speaker personifies them, describing their ringing as the bells' "put[ting] out their Tongues." This might subtly suggest that the bells were mocking the speaker—that the fact that life was moving along as it always did felt like a discombobulating affront to the speaker's pain. The bells' ringing also imply that the speaker was cut off from the rhythms of daily life in her despair. She felt like it was "Night," even as the sounds of the world proved otherwise.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "the Bells / Put out their Tongues, for Noon."

FROST AND FIRE

In the poem, the speaker says that her experience *wasn't* "Fire" or "Frost." Yet she says that it was *like* both of these things, and she especially compares her feeling to "Frost" (or "frosts") and cold.

Cold symbolizes numbness and death. The presence of "Frost" in the poem, then, and the other references to feeling cold and chilled, suggest that the speaker felt as though she was dead; her despair filled her with a sensation of numbness and nothingness.

By contrast, fire usually symbolizes vitality and intensity. The speaker's mention of feeling "Siroccos," or intensely hot winds, on her skin suggests that despite her feeling numb and cut off from the world, she was still painfully aware of being alive. The imagery of fire and heat in the poem suggests how intense and enduring her suffering was.

On a broader level, fire and ice have traditionally been religious symbols of Hell and the end of the world. With her religious upbringing, Dickinson would have been aware of these symbols and their connection to ideas about the apocalypse. She would also almost certainly have been aware of the fact that in Dante's *Inferno*, Hell itself is frozen. In the poem, then, the presence of fire and frost might also imply that the speaker's experience was like being in a kind of emotional hell, and that it felt like the end of the world.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "It was not Frost, for on my Flesh / I felt Siroccos—crawl— / Nor Fire—for just my Marble feet / Could keep a Chancel, cool—"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Or Grisly frosts—first Autumn morns, / Repeal the Beating Ground—"

AUTUMN

Because autumn comes at the end of summer and ushers in winter, it often represents a period of emotional darkness and suffering.

The poem emphasizes this meaning by invoking an image of

"Grisly frosts" that appear in the morning at this time of year. These chilly mornings signal the irrevocable transition to winter, and the word "Grisly" makes the frosts sound gruesome and deathly (reinforcing the symbolic connection between autumn and the end of life). By comparing her experience to this time of year, then, the speaker suggests that she felt as though she were dying, and implies that at a certain level, there was no return from this experience.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-20:** "Or Grisly frosts—first Autumn morns, / Repeal the Beating Ground—"

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

As the speaker attempts to describe what she went through, she uses anaphora and broader parallelism to create a feeling of relentlessness. Repeating the same words and sentence constructions again and again, she illustrates her struggle to precisely name or describe what she went to; she keeps turning to comparisons that can't quite capture it.

Take the anaphora of the phrase "It was not" in lines 1, 3, and 5. This anaphora emphasizes that the speaker can't directly name what she experienced: she can only describe it through what it was *not*. The word "for" also repeats here, creating grammatical parallelism. This, in turn, shows the speaker is trying—and repeatedly failing—to work through what she experienced logically.

Anaphora appears again in stanzas 4 and 5, as the speaker starts three lines in a row with the word "And" (in what is also an instance of polysyndeton). Again, this repetition conveys that the speaker can't describe what she went through in a totally straightforward way. Each comparison leads to yet *another* comparison, as she attempts to put words to this terrible feeling. Readers get the sense that the list of comparisons could go on and on—that the speaker could add "and" after "and"—without capturing what she truly felt.

The repetition of "and" also links the comparisons together. It implies that the speaker's feeling encompassed *all* of these things: she felt like a sanded-down plane of wood, *and* like she was suffocating without a "key," *and* like she was in a kind of perpetual "Midnight." The use of anaphora, then, emphasizes just how terrible and also just how incomprehensible the speaker's feeling was, since no single, isolated comparison can fully capture it.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "It was not"
- **Line 3:** "It was not"
- **Line 5:** "It was not"
- **Line 14:** "And"
- **Line 15:** "And"
- **Line 16:** "And"

REPETITION

In addition to its use of anaphora, the poem repeats certain important words to emphasize how the speaker felt while going through this terrible time. For example, in the opening stanza, the word "Death" reappears as "Dead"—an instance of polyptoton, since the word repeats in a slightly different form. This repetition emphasizes the presence of death in the poem, implying that even though the speaker knows she *wasn't* dead, her experience *felt* like death in many ways.

Similarly, the word "Frost," which appears capitalized and in the singular form in line 5, repeats in line 19 as the plural "frosts." Again, although the speaker insists that what she endured wasn't *actual* frost, the reappearance of the word lets the reader know that this feeling was *like* frost: the speaker felt cold and numb, as though she was dead to the world.

Reinforcing this sense, the word cool directly repeats at the ends of lines 8 and 21. This repetition calls attention to the "cool" or cold quality of what the speaker went through. The speaker's experience was so terrible, the poem suggests, precisely because it *wasn't* emotionally charged: instead, it was a kind of blank numbness or nothingness, that is far harder to bear.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "It was not," "Death," "for"
- **Line 2:** "Dead"
- **Line 3:** "It was not," "for"
- **Line 5:** "It was not," "Frost," "for"
- **Line 7:** "for"
- **Line 8:** "cool"
- **Line 14:** "And"
- **Line 15:** "And"
- **Line 16:** "And"
- **Line 18:** "And"
- **Line 19:** "Or," "frosts"
- **Line 21:** "cool"
- **Line 23:** "Or"

SIMILE

The speaker uses a series of similes as she attempts to describe her experience. These similes illustrate how hard it is for the speaker to name what she went through, since the poem suggests that she can only describe it indirectly—through comparisons; she can only say what the experience was *like*

rather than what it *was*. At the same time, the similes do tell the reader a lot about what the speaker went through.

The first simile in the poem appears in stanza 3. After the speaker has said that what she went through *wasn't* death, night, frost, or fire, she goes on to say that her feeling "tasted, like them all." In other words, what she went through *felt* like death, night, and intense heat and cold, at the same time.

Then, the speaker uses a sequence of other similes to describe her experience. She says that she felt "As if [her] life were shaven," like a plank of wood that has been sanded down to "fit[] to a frame." This simile suggests that the speaker felt almost inanimate, like a piece of wood, made to fit into some rigid structure like a door frame—or a coffin.

She then builds on this idea by saying that it felt as though her life "could not breathe without a key." Having but stuffed into a frame of some sort, she felt suffocated, trapped, without the chance of escape. (Also note that "key" suggests some sort of cure or understanding.)

The speaker next compares her experience to "Midnight" when it seems that time itself "has stopped," and to "frosts" that appear at the beginning of "Autumn," signaling the beginning of winter.

Finally, the speaker says that her feeling was "most, like Chaos" that was "Stopless" or without end. In other words, the speaker felt as though she was in a kind of incomprehensible nothingness.

What all of these similes have in common is their connection to death, stillness, numbness, and cold. The speaker suggests that she felt almost like an object, or like she was frozen, and yet she was still painfully aware of being alive and unable to shift out of her condition.

Throughout the poem, these similes help the reader to imagine what the speaker felt like. At the same time, they reinforce the idea that the speaker still can't fully or directly name what it was that she went through. She can only describe it through comparisons, moving from one to the next as she attempts to find one that is adequate.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "it tasted, like them all"
- **Lines 13-16:** "As if my life were shaven, / And fitted to a frame, / And could not breathe without a key, / And 'twas like Midnight, some—"
- **Line 19:** "Or Grisly frosts—first Autumn morns,"
- **Line 21:** "But, most, like Chaos—Stopless—cool—"

METAPHOR

While the speaker primarily describes her experience by saying what it was *not*, she also uses several metaphors to illustrate what this experience *did* feel like.

First, in the second stanza, the speaker metaphorically compares her feet to "Marble." This comparison suggests that her feet felt as cold, stiff, and lifeless as stone. The comparison also links the speaker's body to a specific *type* of stone often used for statues and grave headstones, reinforcing the idea that even if the speaker *wasn't* dead, her experience *felt* a lot like death.

Then, in the fifth stanza, the speaker says that her experience felt like "Midnight," when "everything that ticked—has stopped." Here, the speaker uses a simile to compare her experience to "Midnight." But within this simile, the phrase "everything that ticked" can be thought of as a metaphor for time itself (given that "ticking" is a sound associated with a clock). This metaphor, then, suggests that within the speaker's experience, it was as though time itself came to a halt.

In another metaphor that echoes the sound of "ticking," the speaker describes the "Ground" as "Beating." Here, the speaker metaphorically compares the earth to a body with a beating heart. She implies that the frost, which brings winter, stops this beating—that is, that the cold stops the life of the earth itself. By extension, she again suggests that what she went through felt like a kind of death.

Finally, at the end of the poem, the speaker metaphorically depicts the "Chaos" she went through as a vast sea. She suggests that she felt as though she was lost in a metaphorical ocean of nothingness without the sight of a "spar" (a ship's mast), or a "Report of Land," which might offer some relief from her suffering.

These metaphors have several effects within the poem. For one thing, they illustrate how the speaker perceived herself and her surroundings while she went through this ordeal: she felt as inanimate as stone, like time had stopped, and that even the "heartbeat" of the earth was silenced. Finally, the speaker compares her internal world to a vast, ominous sea. These metaphors, then, show how the speaker's experience transformed both her internal and external world into something frightening and strange.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "my Marble feet"
- **Line 17:** "When everything that ticked—has stopped"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Or Grisly frosts—first Autumn morns, / Repeal the Beating Ground—"
- **Lines 22-23:** "or Spar— / Or even a Report of Land—"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem uses personification to illustrate how strange and disturbing the speaker's experience of despair was. Even as the speaker herself felt lifeless and numb, her surroundings seemed actively threatening and alive.

For example, in the opening quatrain, the speaker says that she

knew what she went through wasn't night because the "Bells" were still ringing as they do in the middle of the day. The speaker describes these bells, with a troubling, personified image: she says that they "Put out their Tongues."

- The tongue of a bell is the interior piece that clangs against the bell's cup-shaped exterior. But the speaker imagines that the bells are alive—and that they are sticking out their tongues at her!
- Since bells are associated with the passage of time and with ordinary, daily life, this image suggests that everything in the speaker's ordinary surroundings has become strange and alienating, mocking her internal state.

Similarly, in the following quatrain, the speaker says she felt as though "Siroccos"—or hot winds—were "crawl[ing]" over her skin.

- This description subtly personifies the hot winds, giving them the power to torment the speaker by "crawl[ing]" over her.

In the penultimate stanza, the speaker compares her experience to the middle of the night, when "space stares—all around."

- Here, the speaker personifies the emptiness of space and darkness. She conjures an image of being awake in the middle of the night, while the darkness and vastness of space seem to "stare" blankly back at her.
- This personification emphasizes again how isolated the speaker felt; even the empty space around her "stare[s]."

Finally, the speaker describes "frosts" that arrive on "Autumn morns" and "Repeal the Beating Ground." Here, the speaker subtly personifies both the frost *and* the ground: she suggests that the frosts have the power to "repeal"—to undo or annul—the "[b]eating," or heartbeat, of the earth itself.

- In other words, she suggests that the earth has a beating heart like a person.
- Meanwhile, the verb "repeal" is usually connected with human actions (such as the act of repealing a law). This word choice implies that the "frost"—and by extension the speaker's terrible feeling—has a human-like quality to "repeal" or undo life itself.

All this personification makes the speaker's surroundings seem disturbing. The personification of inanimate things—bells, space, and frost—also emphasizes how *inanimate*, and close to death, the speaker herself felt during this time.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "all the Bells / Put out their Tongues"
- **Line 6:** "I felt Siroccos—crawl—"
- **Line 18:** "Space stares"
- **Line 19:** "Or Grisly frosts"
- **Line 20:** "Repeal the Beating Ground"

IMAGERY

The poem uses visual and sensory imagery to illustrate how the speaker felt while going through this terrible experience. For example, the image of bells "Put[ing] out their Tongues" (which is also an instance of personification) shows how, during this time, the speaker experienced her surroundings as ominous and strange. The reader can hear the loud pounding of these bells marking the hour, and in doing so seeming to mock and haunt the speaker on her despair.

As the poem progresses, the images become increasingly disturbing and convey how close to death the speaker felt during this time. For instance, the image of her "marble feet" that "Could keep" the area around a church altar "cool" brings to mind a funeral service. Meanwhile, the skin-tingling image of the "Siroccos," or hot winds, "crawl[ing]" over the speaker's "Flesh," reminds the reader that even if the speaker felt numb and cut off, she was also acutely and painfully aware of being alive.

In the third stanza, the image of "Figures" of the dead, or corpses, who have been "Set orderly, for Burial" once again implies that the speaker felt numb and lifeless. And later, the image of the "Grisly frosts" on "Autumn morns" smothering the earth transforms what might be an ordinary image—of frost on the ground at the beginning of fall—into something frightening, suggesting that the speaker felt as though she were covered with frost, emotionally frozen, her heart barely beating.

All of these images, then, demonstrate how terrible the speaker felt while going through this period of profound numbness and hopelessness. The imagery makes clear that this experience transformed the speaker's internal and external world, rendering everything alien and threatening.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "all the Bells / Put out their Tongues, for Noon."
- **Lines 5-6:** "on my Flesh / I felt Siroccos—crawl—"
- **Lines 7-8:** "my Marble feet / Could keep a Chancel, cool—"
- **Lines 10-11:** "The Figures I have seen / Set orderly, for Burial,"
- **Lines 13-14:** "As if my life were shaven, / And fitted to a frame,"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Or Grisly frosts—first Autumn morns, /

Repeal the Beating Ground—"

JUXTAPOSITION

The speaker uses juxtaposition to emphasize just how extreme and incomprehensible her experience was.

For example, at the beginning of the poem, the speaker says she can tell that she wasn't dead, because "all the dead, lie down," while she was still able to stand up. Here, the speaker contrasts standing up with lying down—and by extension juxtaposes herself with "the dead." Yet this juxtaposition only emphasizes how *close* the speaker felt to death: the only thing differentiating her was that she could still stand.

Similarly, the speaker goes on to juxtapose "Night" and "Noon": she says that she could tell her experience wasn't "Night" because the bells were still ringing as they do at "Noon." This juxtaposition, though, shows how confusing and disorienting the speaker's experience was: for her, it felt like nighttime even in the middle of the day.

Then, the poem juxtaposes extreme heatt with extreme cold. The speaker says that what she went through wasn't "Frost" nor "Fire," but she also says that she felt as though "Siroccos" or hot winds, were "crawl[ing]" over her skin, and as though her feet were as cold as "marble." In other words, the speaker's experience encompassed *both* extremes of hot and cold, or at least something *like* hot and cold, at the same time. The speaker's experience is so terrible, the poem implies, because it can't be easily classified as one thing or the other.

Finally, at the end of the poem, the speaker says that her experience was like "Midnight" when it seems that time "has stopped." She then says that her experience was like "Chaos" that is "Stopless" or without end. Here, the poem subtly juxtaposes the words "stopped" and "Stopless." In doing so, it conveys how terrible and impossible to describe the speaker's experience truly was: it was like a kind of stillness or nothingness when everything "has stopped," and yet this nothingness was *without* stop, or without end.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-8:** "It was not Death, for I stood up, / And all the Dead, lie down— / It was not Night, for all the Bells / Put out their Tongues, for Noon. / It was not Frost, for on my Flesh / I felt Siroccos—crawl— / Nor Fire—for just my Marble feet / Could keep a Chancel, cool—"
- **Lines 17-18:** "When everything that ticked—has stopped— / And Space stares all around—"
- **Line 21:** "But, most, like Chaos—Stopless—cool—"

ALLITERATION

The poem is filled with alliteration that creates music and reinforces the poem's meaning. For example, when the speaker says that her feet were as cold as marble, and "Could keep a Chancel, cool," hard /c/ sounds alliteratively link "could," "keep," and "cool." These clipped sounds convey the stiff chill of the speaker's experience. Hard /c/ sounds appear again, with a similar effect, at the end of the poem, in the words "Chaos" and "cool"; these hard sounds again emphasize how stiff, numb, and cold the speaker felt.

In the fourth stanza, when the speaker compares her life to a plank of wood that has been sanded down, alliterative /f/ sounds link "fitted" and "frame." This alliteration seems to "fit" these words together, underscoring the speaker's sense of restriction and confinement.

Similarly, when the speaker compares her experience to the middle of the night, sibilant alliteration calls attention to the phrase "space stares." This sibilance creates a kind of hissing, hushing sound, conveying the silence in the middle of the night and the haunting quality of the speaker's experience.

Alliteration also calls attention to the poem's juxtapositions. For instance, alliterative /n/ sounds link "Night" and "Noon"—apparent opposites—while /f/ sounds connect the contrasting "Frost" and "Fire." This alliteration reinforces the idea that the speaker's experience felt like *all* of these extremes at the same time.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Death"
- **Line 2:** "Dead," "down"
- **Line 3:** "not," "Night"
- **Line 4:** "Noon"
- **Line 5:** "Frost," "for," "Flesh"
- **Line 6:** "felt," "crawl"
- **Line 7:** "Fire," "feet"
- **Line 8:** "Could," "keep," "cool"
- **Line 12:** "Reminded," "me," "mine"
- **Line 14:** "fitted," "frame"
- **Line 17:** "stopped"
- **Line 18:** "Space stares"
- **Line 19:** "Grisly," "frosts," "first"
- **Line 20:** "Ground"
- **Line 21:** "Chaos," "Stopless," "cool"
- **Line 22:** "Spar"

CONSONANCE

Much like alliteration, consonance adds music and meaning to the poem. For example, in the opening stanza, consonant /l/ sounds link "all" and "Bells," creating a smooth, liquid sound almost like a deep, resonant bell ringing. Then, the sharp /t/ sounds in "Put," "out," and "Tongues" subtly suggest how strange and threatening the world around the speaker is, those prickly sounds calling attention to how the bells seem to stick

out their tongues and mock the speaker.

In the second stanza, guttural /r/ sounds appear close together in words like "Frost," "Siroccos," "crawl," "Fire," and "marble." These /r/ sounds have a growling quality that almost seems to drag the lines themselves down. In doing so, the consonance suggests the heaviness of the speaker's despair.

The speaker also turns to sibilance, a specific form of consonance, towards the poem's end. Notice how slippery /s/ sounds mix with sharp, hard /k/ sounds, popping /p/ sounds, and liquid /l/ sounds in the final quatrain:

> But, most, like Chaos—Stopless—cool—
> Without a Chance, or Spar—
> Or even a Report of Land—
> To justify—Despair.

This intense consonance, mixing sharp and soft sounds, evokes the "Chaos" of the speaker's experience. The biting /p/ and /k/ sounds are like hard pops of pain bursting through the continual, subtly threatening hiss of those /s/ and /l/ sounds.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Death"
- **Line 2:** "Dead," "down"
- **Line 3:** "not," "Night," "all," "Bells"
- **Line 4:** "Put," "out," "Tongues," "Noon"
- **Line 5:** "Frost," "for," "Flesh"
- **Line 6:** "felt," "Siroccos," "crawl"
- **Line 7:** "Fire," "for," "Marble," "feet"
- **Line 8:** "Could keep," "cool"
- **Line 10:** "Figures"
- **Line 11:** "orderly," " Burial"
- **Line 12:** "Reminded"
- **Line 14:** "fitted," "frame"
- **Line 17:** "ticked," "stopped"
- **Line 18:** "Space stares"
- **Line 19:** "Grisly frosts," "Autumn," "morns"
- **Line 20:** "Repeal," "Ground"
- **Line 21:** "most," "like," "Chaos," "Stopless," "cool"
- **Line 22:** "Chance," "Spar"
- **Line 23:** "Report"
- **Line 24:** "justify," "Despair"

ASSONANCE

Assonance appears at key moments of the poem, creating music and calling attention to certain words and phrases. For example, the long /i/ sounds in "Reminded" and "mine" reinforce the sense that these figures of the dead reminded the speaker of her own body during this time (and this effect gets boosted by the consonance of /m/ sounds here as well).

Similarly, the assonance of long /ee/ connects "breathe" and "key" in line 15, reinforcing that the speaker's understanding (her finding the "key" to her suffering) is what she needs to overcome her pain. The same long /ee/ sounds appears as assonance in line 20, here adding a sense of emphasis and insistence to the way that those "Autumn" "frosts" stop the earth's metaphorical heartbeat.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Flesh"
- **Line 6:** "felt"
- **Line 7:** "feet"
- **Line 8:** "keep"
- **Line 12:** "Reminded," "mine"
- **Line 13:** "shaven"
- **Line 14:** "frame"
- **Line 15:** "breathe," "key"
- **Line 19:** "frosts," "Autumn"
- **Line 20:** "Repeal," "Beating"

VOCABULARY

Frost (Line 5, Line 19) - Ice crystals that form on the ground and other surfaces when the temperature drops below freezing.

Siroccos (Line 6) - Hot winds that blow from the Sahara in North Africa, across the Mediterranean.

Chancel (Line 8) - The area of a church surrounding its altar.

Figures (Line 10) - In the context of the poem, the word "figure" refers to corpses.

Shaven (Line 13) - If something is "shaven," this means it is shaved away. The speaker of the poem uses the word to suggest that she felt like a plank of wood that was sanded or shaven down to fit into a "frame."

Grisly (Line 19) - Gruesome or horrible.

Morns (Line 19) - An archaic term for "mornings."

Stopless (Line 21) - "Stopless" is an invented word that brings together the word "stop" with the suffix "less" meaning "without." In essence, the word means "without stop" or "without end."

Spar (Line 22) - The mast of a ship.

Report (Line 23) - An account or story of something. In the poem, the speaker means that she felt as though she was lost at sea, without even hearing that land existed somewhere.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem's 24 lines are broken into six quatrains, or four-line

stanzas. These quatrains evoke the musical forms of ballads and religious hymns, both of which influenced Dickinson's work. They also create a sense of order and measured pacing in the poem, contributing to the sense that the speaker is attempting to logically work through and understand her experience. At the same time, the poem suggests that this experience was so terrible because it *can't* be understood: it escapes both the speaker's rational grasp, and the apparently even container of the poem's form.

The poem's many dashes, though, contrast with this sense of measured, even pacing. After the first quatrain, which ends with a full stop, the rest of the poem is actually one long, continual sentence, punctuated with commas and dashes throughout, until the period at the very end. As the sentence continues, and the dashes propel the reader over line and stanza endings, the poem conveys the speaker's struggle to make sense of what she went through.

METER

"It was not Death, for I stood up" is written in ballad meter (a term sometimes used interchangeably with common meter, though there are minor distinctions).

In this meter, lines alternate between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. An iamb is a metrical foot with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern: da-DUM. Tetrameter means there are four of these iambs, four da-DUMs, per line, for a total of eight beats; trimeter simply means there are only three iambs per line, for a total of six beats.

Consider, for example, the poem's opening quatrain:

> It was | not Death, | for I | stood up,
> And all | the Dead, | lie down -
> It was | not Night, | for all | the Bells
> Put out | their Tongues, | for Noon.

It's possible to add some stresses on all the "nots" above, but broadly speaking the lines progress according to a pretty regular iambic rhythm.

The poem's use of this meter aligns it with both church hymns and the long tradition of ballads, which date back to medieval times. Ballads are songs used to tell stories and were often passed down over generations, acquiring the qualities of a legend or myth; the poem, then, sounds like such a song. Additionally, the regular meter creates a sense of even, measured pacing, illustrating the speaker's attempt to rationally understand her experience.

Interestingly, the poem also includes one variation in this metrical pattern. Line 13, "As if my life were shaven," has only seven syllables instead of eight, and ends on an unstressed syllable:

> As if | my life | were sha- | ven

This variation makes the line itself seem "shaven" down, much like the speaker's life felt. This metrical variation also lets the reader know that while the poem might create an *appearance* of control and steadiness through its meter, in reality the speaker's experience defies language and understanding.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem uses an ABCB rhyme scheme in each stanza, which is the standard rhyme scheme for ballads. In other words, the second and fourth lines in a stanza always rhyme with each other, while the first and third lines don't. Take stanza 1:

> ABCB

Arguably the pattern switches slightly in stanza 3, with the subtle echo between "all" and "Burial":

> ABAB

Overall, though, the pattern is very steady. At the same time, the poem uses slant rhymes in almost every stanza. In the first, for instance, "down" only partially rhymes with "Noon"; in the third, both "all"/"Burial" and "seen"/"mine" are again only partial rhymes. In fact, the poem only uses a full rhyme in stanza five, when "around" in line 18 rhymes with "Ground" in line 20.

Slant rhymes are very common in Dickinson's poetry, and here add to the sense that something is fundamentally wrong or askew. They help to convey the idea that she can't describe her experience *directly*, and also defer the sense of satisfying resolution or closure that comes with clear, full rhymes. This, in turn, subtly reflects the speaker's ongoing struggle to describe what she has endured.

The poem's sole instance of full rhyme, by contrast—in "around" and "Ground"—implies that this experience is so harrowing that it *does* have a sense of finality within it: like the "frosts" that signal the irrevocable transition to winter, the poem suggests that even if the speaker is *now* on the other side of what she endured, this experience has had some lasting, irrevocable impact on her.

Also note that, while the poem generally changes its actual rhyme *sounds* from stanza to stanza, one sound in particular repeats throughout the poem. The "crawl"/"cool" slant rhyme from then second stanza echoes "all"/"burial" in the third, and the word "cool" directly repeats at the end of line 21.

In fact, lines 6, 8, 9, 11, and 21, then, can all be read as ending with E rhymes:

> I felt Siroccos—crawl –
> [...]
> Could keep a Chancel, cool –
>
> And yet, it tasted, like them all,
> [...]
> Set orderly, for Burial
> [...]

But most, like Chaos—Stopless—cool—

This recurring sound haunts the poem, in a way, creating a sense that despite the variations in the speaker's description, the suffering she describes is all-encompassing and continual.

SPEAKER

Many readers view the speaker of the poem as a representation of the poet, Emily Dickinson. Dickinson wrote frequently about the psychological suffering and despair she experienced in her own life. She also often wrote about death (both speculating about her own, and grieving that of those she loved). One could imagine the poet having seen all too many "Figures [...] / Set orderly, for Burial," and connecting this image to her own experiences of grief and despair. For this reason—and for the sake of clarity and simplicity—we've gendered the speaker as female throughout this guide.

Of course, this is not the only way to interpret the speaker! There are no biographical details at all in the text itself, which keeps its message about the nature of despair feeling universal. Anyone who's experienced intense grief or sadness may resonate with the poem's images.

Dickinson wrote the poem in the summer of 1862, during the American Civil War, and some scholars have even suggested that the poem can be read as exploring the perspective of a traumatized soldier. These critics have noted that the poem is full of death imagery, and may reflect the sense of shocked numbness many soldiers have felt in the wake of battle. In this reading, the speaker could be an anonymous Union soldier, giving voice to the terrible experiences of war.

Regardless of the speaker's identity, what is clear in the poem is the profound hopelessness and suffering the speaker has endured. The poem powerfully evokes this suffering not by describing it directly, but instead by showing the speaker *struggling* to describe it, to give voice to a feeling that seems beyond words.

SETTING

Readers can think of the poem as taking place in the speaker's mind, or her inner world. As she tries to describe her mysterious feeling, she moves all over the place—from day, to night, to chilly autumn mornings, to the middle of the sea with no land or ships in sight.

All these disparate settings reflect the all-encompassing nature of the speaker's despair. The reader can imagine the "Siroccos" blowing off the Sahara in one line, and in another the "Grisly frosts" that arrive at the beginning of winter. The poem shows her attempting to navigate this inner landscape of suffering.

The literal, physical setting is a bit harder to identify, but some elements of the poem indicate that it is a fairly ordinary one—one, in fact, that resembles 19th century Amherst, Massachusetts, where Dickinson lived. For example, the image of the church chancel, or place around an altar, brings to mind the commonplace churches in such towns; the detail of the bells that ring at noon also evokes these churches. Additionally, the image of the frost on "Autumn morns" calls to mind the beginning of a New England winter.

What's important is that the speaker's *internal* experience of suffering makes everything about her *external* world—her physical setting—seem strange and troubling. Instead of the bells simply ringing, they disturbingly "[p]ut out their Tongues." The frost in the fall is "[g]risly," or gruesome, and the "Ground" itself is "Beating." The speaker's emotional experience, then, transforms her familiar, external world into something that is alien and ominous.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Dickinson published only a few poems during her lifetime, and sewed many others into handmade fascicles (a type of booklet). Dickinson included "It was not Death, for I stood up," which dates from the summer of 1862, in Fascicle Seventeen.

Several other poems in this fascicle deal with similar experiences of grief, despair, and death, including "I dreaded that first Robin, so" and "I felt my life with both my hands." Dickinson wrote throughout her life about profound emotional suffering, in fact, though she also often wrote about wonder, love, and the beauty of the natural world.

Though Dickinson published little during her lifetime, her work was frequently in conversation with both her contemporaries and writers of the past. For example, "It was not Death, for I stood up," like many of Dickinson's poems, uses a very traditional poetic form called the ballad. Of course, Dickinson famously put her own spin on things through her innovative use of slant rhyme, dashes, and unique, deeply imaginative figurative language. Dickinson was also influenced by a variety of writers ranging from Shakespeare and Milton to her contemporaries Ralph Waldo Emerson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and her work frequently drew on references to religious scripture.

Relatively unknown while she was alive, Dickinson is now considered a foundational American poet. Her work has influenced writers and readers both in the United States and around the world, and continues to be as challenging, original, and singular as it was when she first sewed the fascicles together in the 19th century.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As contemporary readers, it can be tempting to view the poem through the lens of modern psychology, and to use terms like depression or PTSD to describe the speaker's experience. Modern psychology and its associated vocabulary, however, didn't exist when Dickinson wrote the poem in the early 1860s, and it is impossible to know which (if any) of these modern terms she might have chosen to use.

Dickinson's contemporaries, meanwhile, would have been more likely to regard such an experience of suffering through a spiritual or religious lens. This context makes the poem, in some ways, even more striking: the speaker attempts to name a profound experience of emotional suffering, at a time when there were no official words or even frameworks for such an experience.

Some scholars have argued that the historical context of the American Civil War is also important to the poem. Dickinson wrote the poem in the summer of 1862, during a terrible time of the war, and some critics have suggested that the poem could actually be exploring the perspective of a traumatized Union soldier. The poem's pervasive imagery of death and the sense of numb shock the speaker describes suggest that this is a plausible reading.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Biography of Emily Dickinson — Read more about Emily Dickinson's life and poetry in this article from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)
- The Poem and the American Civil War — Some scholars have argued that the poem can be read as exploring the experience of a traumatized Union Soldier during the American Civil War. Read more in this article published at White Heat, a blog run by Dartmouth college. (https://journeys.dartmouth.edu/whiteheat/it-was-not-death-for-i-stood-up-f335a-j-510/)
- Manuscript and Audio of the Poem at the Morgan Library — View the original manuscript of the poem in Dickinson's handwriting, and hear the poem read aloud, at the website of the Morgan Library. (https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/online/emily-dickinson/24)
- Dickinson and Lauper — Read more about the poem—including a comparison between Dickinson and Cyndi Lauper—in this essay by the contemporary poet Robin Ekiss. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/68930/emily-dickinson-it-was-not-death-for-i-stood-up)
- Website of the Emily Dickinson Museum — Learn more about Emily Dickinson's life at the website of the Emily Dickinson museum, which is located at Dickinson's former home in Amherst, Massachusetts. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org)

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
- As imperceptibly as grief
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- 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'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
- They shut me up in Prose –
- This is my letter to the world
- We grow accustomed to the Dark
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Little, Margaree. "*It was not Death, for I stood up.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 29 Jan 2021. Web. 16 Mar 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Little, Margaree. "*It was not Death, for I stood up.*" LitCharts LLC, January 29, 2021. Retrieved March 16, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/emily-dickinson/it-was-not-death-for-i-stood-up.