I felt a Funeral, in my Brain Study Guide

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain by Emily Dickinson

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" was first published in 1896. Because Emily Dickinson lived a life of great privacy and only published a handful of poems in her lifetime, the exact year of its composition is unknown; most scholars agree that it was written around 1861.

Like many ofDickinson's other poems, "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" explores the workings of the human mind under stress and attempts to replicate the stages of a mental breakdown through the overall metaphor of a funeral. The common rituals of a funeral are used byDickinson to mark the stages of the speaker's mental collapse until she faces a destruction that no words can articulate. As the metaphorical funeral begins and progresses, the speaker's "mind" grows "numb" until her final remark stops in mid-sentence. The poem is a staple inDickinson's canon and reflects her ability to replicate human consciousness in a controlled poetic form. Like her poems "After great pain, a formal feeling comes□", " 'Hope' is the thing with feathers□" and "I felt a Cleaving in my Mind□", "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" uses concrete language and imagery to explore abstract issues.

The event that the funeral is used to describe, however, does not have to be interpreted as a mental breakdown. The poem allows for other readings of what constitutes the "funeral," such as an individual's being assaulted by an idea that threatens to destroy all of his or her dearly held assumptions or a mind's inability to cope with the pressures placed upon it from the outside world. The poem's ambiguities allow for multiple readings, all of which, however, converge in the idea that the speaker's brain is ceremoniously "laid to rest" by the poem's conclusion.

Author Biography

Like Shakespeare, whose poetry has become an integral part of world literature but whose personal life remains very much a matter of speculation, Emily Dickinson left behind very few clues about herself besides the wealth of poetry found only after her death. She was born Emily Elizabeth Dickinson on December 10, 1830, inAmherst, Massachusetts, the second child of Edward and Emily Dickinson. Her grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson (1775-1838), was a pillar of Amherst society, building the town's first brick house and co-foundingAmherst College; his son Edward (Emily's father) served as the college's treasurer for thirty-seven years. Edward also served for many years in the Massachusetts legislature and spent two years in the United States Congress in the House of Representatives.

Dickinson's father was a stern, Puritanical man who sought to defend his children and church from the growing threat of radical ideas, among them New England transcendentalism, a philosophy set forth largely in the works of the essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882). In one of her many letters,Dickinson described her father with the words, "His Heart was pure and terrible and I think no other like it exists." Indeed, Edward Dickinson felt that women (his two daughters included) ought to stay at home and leave the running of the country to their husbands and brothers. Despite these seemingly provincial views, Edward did ensure that his daughters received excellent educations; Emily attended Amherst Academy (where she studied both the liberal arts and sciences) and then Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (now called Mount Holyoke College) for a year before withdrawing in 1848, possibly because she found the coursework unchallenging.

After her withdrawal from academic life, much ofDickinson's biography becomes speculative; however, the growth of her skepticism concerning the god in whom her father so ardently believed can be attributed to her receiving a copy of Emerson' s *Poems* in 1850. Emerson's radical ideas about the divinity of man and his explorations of Eastern philosophy struck a chord inDickinson's mind, and she remained a disciple of Emerson's for the rest of her life. When, exactly, she began seriously composing verse remains a matter of some debate. It is known that, in 1862, she sent some of her poems to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a prominent essayist whom she had never met and who showed little initial appreciation for her work (although he did gradually befriendDickinson and help get her work in print after her death). In her lifetime, less than twenty of her poems were published and to no great acclaim. One was even mistakenly attributed to Emerson himself.

Although she was never outgoing, after the death of her father (in 1874), Dickinson withdrew from the world, never leaving the grounds of her father's house and, according to legend, dressing only in white. She did, however, continue a number of friendships through her numerous letters and continued to compose verse. Just how much verseDickinson had been composing was discovered when, after her death from Bright's disease on May 15, 1886, her sister Lavinia discovered almost two thousand poems written on small slips of paper and sewn together in little booklets. One of these

was "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain." These poems were published in a number of editions (with many textual variants) until the definitive three-volume edition of her *Poems* was released in 1955. While the "myth ofAmherst," as she was sometimes called, seemed to have had an uneventful personal life, the life of her intellect was surely an adventurous and tumultuous one.

Poem Text

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,

And Mourners to and fro

Kept treading—treading—till it seemed

That Sense was breaking through—

And when they all were seated,

A Service, like a Drum—

Kept beating—beating—till I thought

My Mind was going numb—

And then I heard them lift a Box

And creak across my Soul

With those same Boots of Lead, again,

Then Space—began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,

And Being, but an Ear,

And I, and Silence, some strange Race

Wrecked, solitary, here—

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,

And I dropped down, and down—

And hit a World, at every plunge,

And Finished knowing—then—

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4

"I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" is a poem in whichDickinson attempts to render into formal poetic language the experience of a mind facing its own collapse; the opening stanza presents the metaphor of a funeral that is used throughout the poem to convey the sense of this breakdown to the reader. *Brain* here refers to both the concrete physical organ and to the abstract idea of the speaker's mind; such dual meanings are used throughout the poem to convey the physical and mental effects of the breakdown. Losing one's reason is like a funeral: the final interment and burial of rational thought. The mourners can be read as symbols of the events or ideas that bring on the speaker's collapse; such events or ideas are incessant (they keep "treading□treading") and continue until the speaker begins to realize what is happening. Her "sense" (or knowledge) of what is occurring begins "breaking through" to culminate in some kind of understanding about her impending devastation. Like the word *brain,* which has two meanings, the word *sense* can also refer to the speaker's physical senses, which are likewise affected by the mourners plaguing her mind.

Lines 5-8

As the opening lines set up the funeral as an overall metaphor for the speaker's breakdown, subsequent stanzas refer to specific parts of the funeral ritual to further convey the speaker's experience. This stanza dramatizes the speaker's growing fears and mental instability primarily through the use of sound. The mourners are all seated, representing a quiet moment, perhaps marking the end of the speaker's initial panic or mental chaos. However, the respite is short-lived, and the "Service, like a Drum" begins a fresh assault on both her physical senses and mind. The sound of the drum, like the tread of the mourners, is another attack on her sanity, an attack so fierce that she feels her mind "going numb." Numbness is a physical sensation that stands as another example of the speaker's struggle to convey her experience in understandable physical terms.

Lines 9-11

The speaker is now in what seems to be a state of shock, stunned and still like a corpse being readied for burial. However, in terms of the metaphorical funeral, her senses are still working, and again she uses the sense of hearing to describe the next stage of her breakdown. She hears the pallbearers "lift a Box," the coffin in which, perhaps, her formerly sane self is contained. These men then "creak across" her soul, which calls to mind the previous sounds of "treading□treading" and "beating□ beating"; like those sounds, this creaking is unpleasant because it is the result of men with heavy "boots of

lead" trampling over her. What is being trampled upon is the speaker's soul; the scope of the breakdown has expanded to include her entire conception of her own existence.

Lines 12-16

These lines describe the moment in the speaker's collapse when she passes from the recognizable world of rationality to a state of mind con-veyable only through similes and metaphors, even more strange than those previously offered. In the real, physical world, church bells are sometimes rung as a coffin is carried to a burial plot; these same bells are ringing here but are so loud that the speaker can only describe the sound as if all space is beginning to "toll." Note how the sounds of the poem have grown increasingly louder and more menacing. The tolling is so loud, in fact, that "all the heavens" seem to be one great "bell," and the speaker seems to be an "ear," open to the barrage of noise that assaults it. As the speaker now has no hope of shutting out the dreadful tolling of the bells, the speaker's soul has no hope of shutting out the madness that has possessed it. As funeral bells toll to mark the end of a human life, so the bells toll here for the figurative death of the speaker's reason and sense of self.

The speaker then finds herself "wrecked" in some "solitary" place; this place may be physically the inside of her coffin (a most solitary place, indeed) or a figurative mental place, a description of which is too difficult for her to convey. All she can say is that she is "wrecked, solitary" there. The noise that has been growing throughout the poem is still present, so much so that silence seems a part of "some strange race" that she can no longer recognize. The ambiguity of the speaker's physical and mental location in these lines suggests the difficulty of using concrete language to talk about abstract mental processes, a difficulty that will overcome her in the poem's final line.

Lines 17-20

The poem's final stanza concludes both the metaphorical funeral rites and the description of the speaker's breakdown. The mourners have come, the service has been heard, and the pallbearers have carried the casket to the cemetery. The casket being lowered into the burial plot is used to metaphorically describe the final stages of the speaker's ruin; however, while in earthy funerals a casket is rested on planks to support it prior to its being lowered into the earth, here the figurative "Plank in Reason"□the last flimsy bulwark against total insanity and devestation□snaps. As a casket is normally gently lowered into its dark earthen plot, here the speaker's mind plummets into the darkness of madness, dropping "down and down" into more indescribable depths.

Each time the speaker thinks she has reached the limits of how much she can withstand, she finds that there is still another world awaiting her further down; with each plunge she is thrown deeper into madness until she has "finished knowing." Now she can no longer trust her previously held assumptions about her own mind nor can she further describe her own mental processes in suitable terms. The poem's final word,

"then," is ambiguous: either the entire poem is told from the point-of-view of one who has survived the mental "funeral" but who is now "finished knowing" anything for certain or the speaker's ability to continue her story has (like everything else) been destroyed, and she has moved to a mental place that regular, ordered language cannot describe. Either way, the poem depicts the terrors of mental collapse in language that, by its ambiguous nature, reflects the difficulties in conveying the very events that cause and comprise it.

Themes

Madness and Sanity

"I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" is a poem that, in part, presents the impending mental collapse of its speaker, a collapse thatDickinson likens to the rituals of a funeral to ultimately explore the figurative "death" of the speaker's sanity. The word *felt* in the poem's opening line suggests that the first throbbings of the collapse could be physically perceived; this merging of physical sensation and mental perception is sustained throughout the poem. By comparing the speaker's mental breakdown to a funeral,Dickinson suggests the horror and finality of such an event.

The funeral's participants and rites can be read as metaphors for the speaker's impending collapse; as the figurative funeral proceeds through its recognizable stages, the speaker's sanity becomes more endangered until it finally "dies." The mourners that the speaker feels repeatedly "treading□ treading" in her brain are like the first recognizable signs (to her) that all is not well with her mind, despite the fact that her sense of what is happening to her is "breaking through" the sounds of the mourners' footsteps. The funeral service here is not a peaceful eulogy or tearful farewell but an unpleasant sound "like a drum" that plagues her mind with its "beating□beating" until she reaches the point where she cannot stand any more of it, and her mind grows numb. At this point, she has no hope of fending off her approaching breakdown. Her mind is described here in physical terms ("numb") to suggest its nearly incapacitated state. The carrying of the casket to the gravesite□the next logical step in the funeral rite□is used to convey the increased mental and even spiritual anguish of the speaker, for the pallbearers "creak across" her soul with "boots of lead" as they carry their mournful burden.

The tolling of the church bells is presented as a nearly indescribable source of pain: "all the heavens" are like one great "bell," and her entire being is like a single "ear." At this point, the speaker's trauma has become so intense that she is "wrecked, solitary, here" in a place where her ability to describe her own mind has become almost totally diminished. The lowering of the casket into the ground is compared to the final onslaught of insanity; the poem ends with the speaker being "finished knowing" anything for certain. All of her previously held assumptions about her own mind and soul have been metaphorically buried, like the remains of her sanity.

Doubt and Uncertainty

WhileDickinson's poem can be read as a description of its speaker's mental collapse, this is not the only valid interpretation. Indeed, "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" can also be read as a depiction of an individual's complete loss of religious faith. In this light, the funeral described is not one for the speaker's sanity but for those religious or spiritual assumptions previously embraced by her. While the cause of such a loss is never

mentioned, the effects of it are described as devastating. Funeral rites are very often religious ones, and the "service" here can be read as an ironic metaphor: the speaker's loss of faith can only be described using religious terms. Words like "service," "soul" and "heavens" all suggest the paradox of a person attempting to describe the loss of her beliefs using language that once took its meaning from those beliefs.

The pallbearers' "creaking across" the speaker's soul with "boots of lead" suggests a system of belief being metaphorically trod upon, and the entire universe tolling like a single bell suggests that the speaker finds her recent loss of faith both inescapable and undeniable. The poem's end thus presents a person who is "finished knowing" what she once took as an article of faith before the "plank in reason broke," that is, before her last hold on her previously held beliefs was destroyed, and she was plunged into the depths of doubt and skepticism. AsDickinson herself wrote elsewhere:

To lose one's faith□surpass The loss of an Estate□ Because Estates can be Replenished□faith cannot□

Style

"I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" is written in alternating lines of iambic tetrameter (four iambs per line) and iambic trimeter (three iambs per line). While this is one ofDickinson's most often used meters, its specific usefulness here lies in the ways that it reinforces in the reader's ear the steady progression of the forces that cause the speaker's mental or spiritual breakdown. In a poem such as this, where the sounds heard by the speaker are used as metaphors for her state of mind, the meter takes on added importance. In the first stanza, for example, the steady beat of the mourners' footsteps ("Kept treading□treading□till it seemed / That Sense was breaking through") is reinforced by the treading sound of the lines.

The same is true for the "Service, like a Drum" in stanza two, which "Kept beating□beating□till I thought / My Mind was going numb"; the steady rhythm of the drum hits the reader's ear and helps him or her better appreciate the sounds that eventually cause the numbness described by the speaker. Stanza three employs the meter for the same purpose when it depicts "those same Boots of Lead" that "creak across" her soul. The final stanza's description of the casket being lowered into the earth□and of the final mental blows delivered to the speaker□contains the line, "And I dropped down, and down□," another example of how Dickinson uses the unvaried meter of the poem to heighten the sense of the reader's steadily approaching and unavoidable devastation.

Historical Context

Although biographers have debated the different ways in whichDickinson's reading habits affected her work, almost all concur that the single most important author that influenced her poetry was the American philosopher, poet, and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882). To understand the intellectual climate ofDickinson's time, one cannot avoid an examination of this important American thinker.

Emerson was one of the founders of transcendentalism, a loose but dynamic philosophy which, in many ways, was a reaction to what its followers saw as the stifling Puritanism of America's past and, specifically, the rigid attention to reason urged by eighteenth-century enlightenment writers. Above all, transcendentalists believed in the divinity of human beings and the supremacy of the individual. Unlike enlightenment thinkers, who held that the world could only be perceived and understood through observation and rationality, transcendentalists were more like the European romantics in their focus on intuition as a means of discovering the truths of human existence. Transcendentalists also believed in the oversoul: a force present in all the universe that embodies truth, wisdom, and, above all, virtue and goodness. (Emerson's poem "Brahma" is an examination of the workings of the oversoul.)

One aim of human life was to harmonize one's individual soul with the oversoul; such a harmony would result in the fulfillment of that person's potential. Such an idea was shocking to hard-and-fast New England Calvinists, who held that God acted as a judge of man's sinful actions and doled out harsh but fitting punishments. The beauty and force of nature as an absolute good was another transcendentalist tenet, as was the value and virtue of complete self-reliance. Many of these ideas were articulated at length by Emerson in his *Essays: First Series* (1841), *Essays: Second Series* (1844), *Poems* (1846), and *Representative Men* (1850). Dickinson received a copy of Emerson's *Poems* in 1850, and the ideas behind such lines as "Beauty through my senses stole; /I yielded myself to the perfect whole" (from "Each and All") and "Beauty is its own excuse for being" (from "The Rhodora") surface throughout Dickinson's work and the work of many other New England authors who lived during Emerson's career.

Much of Emerson's work urges his readers to look to the best artists and poets for a greater understanding of both the world and themselves. For example, in his essay "Circles," he states, "All the argument and all the wisdom is not in the encyclopedia, or the treatise on metaphysics, or the Body of Divinity, but in the sonnet or the play." The great value placed here on verse as a means by which humans could better understand their worlds□a means even more powerful than the "Body of Divinity"□was a shocking one that would have certainly delightedDickinson, whose poems often express religious frustrations and doubts.

There are even remarks in Emerson's work that echoDickinson's decision to pursue a solitary life of the mind. In the essay "The Celebration of the Intellect," for example, Emerson commands, "Keep the intellect sacred. Go sit with the hermit in you, who

knows more than you do," and in his essay "The Poet," Emerson tells potential artists, "Thou shalt leave the world, and know the muse only.

Thou shalt not know any longer the times, customs, graces, politics, or opinions of men, but shall take all from the muse." Finally, in his poem "Saadi," he offers the aphorism, "Men consort in camp and town / But the poet dwells alone." While the exact extent to which Dickinson responded to Emerson's individual remarks is a matter of conjecture, she did adopt something of a transcendentalist attitude in her decision (like Henry David Thoreau, who lived alone at Walden pond for awhile) to withdraw from a world founded on materialism and logic and, as she herself described in one of her poems, "dwell" in the "possibility" of discovering the truths of human existence.

Critical Overview

While some authors' reputations ebb and flow according to the times and critical caprice, the reputation of Emily Dickinson has only grown stronger since the posthumous discovery of her poems. Most critics would agree with Dickinson's recent biographer Cynthia Griffin Wolff, who (in *Benet's Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature)* calls Dickinson "certainlyAmerica's greatest woman author and possibly its greatest poet of either gender." Generally, critics are fascinated byDickinson's ability to present various states of mind through the use of different images that convey complex mental processes to her readers. Writing in the Introduction to *Modern Critical Views: Emily Dickinson,* Harold Bloom, one of the twentieth century's most preeminent critics, states thatDickinson presents her readers with "the most authentic cognitive difficulties" formed in "a mind so original and powerful that we scarcely have begun, even now, to catch up with her." The number of articles and books being written aboutDickinson today is a testament to the truth of Bloom's remark. "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" has fared equally well among critics. In his important study ofDickinson's tragic poetry, *The Long Shadow,* Clark Griffith praises the poem for its embodiment of "emotional and psychological states in a hard, specific language" and concludes that the poem foreshadows "the principles and techniques of modern symbolist poetry." In his book *The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry,* David Porter states, "On the experience of psychic breakdown, perhaps no poetic expression surpasses the aptness of metaphor or the psychological authenticity of the progression of mental collapse" asDickinson's poem. John Cody, a psychiatrist whose book *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* offers a psychoanalytic reading of the poem, calls it "powerful" and praises Dickinson for her ability to make the reader "feel each tormenting increment of a gathering depression until vitality reaches a nadir, and reason gives way to a numb and psychotic state of reality severance." Finally, the aforementioned Cynthia Griffin Wolff, in her extensive critical biography *Emily Dickinson,* praises the way that the poem "taunts with its invitations and frustrations, and ultimately forces us to ask what we know, how we know whether 'life' and 'death' are susceptible to understanding." These critics and many others thus praise the poem for its sharp insights into what happens to a mind facing its own destruction.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Moran is an educator specializing in American and British literature. In this essay, he examines the ways in whichDickinson faces the difficulty of conveying complex mental processes in concrete language.

William Wordsworth's famous preface to his *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) contains his much-quoted definition of good poetry:

Since Dickinson cannot truly replicate insanity, she instead chooses to portray it as a physical sensation; imagine trying to convey the sense of a terrible headache to one who has never had one, and then the logic behindDickinson's choice of metaphor becomes clearer.

Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion, similar to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does actually exist in the mind.

In other words, the poet's task is to recreate an emotion or sensation from a removed point-of-view (since someone feeling intense emotions cannot pause and then carefully compose a piece of verse) and, through the language of his or her poem, replicate that emotion or sensation in the mind of the reader. This definition suits many types of poems by many types of poets: a poet who seeks to replicate a sense of sorrow, for example, can use language that will create a sense of sorrow in the reader and thus have his work meet Wordsworth's criteria. Wordsworth's definition does, however, raise an interesting question about those poets who seek to replicate complex mental processes, for very few people (if any at all) actually think in words or phrases (much less poetic ones), and therefore any poetic replication of an individual's mind must, by its very nature, fall short of the process being described. Such poets offer their readers an imitation of the mind's working□not a poetic production and then recreation of the mind itself. This makes the subject of the poet's contemplation a difficult thing to convey, since, by its very nature, poems are ordered, grammatical, and formalized, completely unlike the human mind, which is often disordered, un-grammatical, and free-flowing.

Dickinson faced this challenge of replicating consciousness in a number of poems, among them one in which she attempts to convey the sensation of memory loss or even the loss of one's rational powers:

I Felt a Cleaving in my Mind□

As if my Brain had split□

I tried to match it□Seam by Seam□

But could not make them fit.

The thought behind, I strove to join

Unto the thought before□

But Sequence raveled out of Sound

Like Balls□upon a Floor.

Here, the inability to think is likened to a "cleaving in the mind," but even this is a questionable representation of the event, for to truly replicate something like the event being described would require language that created the same experience in the reader. If this happened, there would be no poem, only a scattering of images that did not form an artistic and aesthetic whole.

How a poet conveys the workings of any individual's mind is a tricky business, but the challenge becomes greater when the poet attempts to portray a mind on the brink of insanity or a total breakdown of rationality. Even Shakespeare faced this problem: in *Hamlet;* for example, the title character pauses during his assault on Ophelia (and on the duplicity of women in general) to state, "Go to, I'll no more on't: it hath made me mad." This moment of self-realization is certainly dramatic but psychologically suspect, for could a mind so tortured by its own destruction look outside itself and comment on its failures?

The same problem occurs in a comic vein in *Twelfth Night,* when Feste the clown is asked to read a letter from the "mad" Malvolio and does so in a loud and "mad" voice; after being asked by his mistress why he reads in such a tone, Feste remarks, "I do read but madness. And your ladyship will have it as it ought to be, you must allow *vox,"* or the letter to be read in a presumably mad voice. The problem here is the same as in *Hamlet:* if Malvolio is truly mad, how can Feste hope to convey this madness to his listeners without some sort of "vox" or other device? Neither Hamlet nor Feste are recollecting the insanity before them in tran-quility but are instead forced by their creator to tackle a problem that he himself has a difficult time surmounting.

In literature, even the maddest of the mad often speak and think in ways that, viewed objectively, seem sane by virtue of their own self-recognition and orderly presentation. Shakespeare seems to have tackled the problem to some degree in *Othello,* when the title character□faced with the "proof" of his wife's infidelity□speaks in jumbled and fragmentary prose before falling to the ground in some sort of seizure, but even this is a physical depiction of Othello's breakdown and not a depiction in words of the experience of the breakdown itself.

Dickinson's "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" presents the same problems to its author and reader. IfDickinson is truly interested in replicating the experience of madness (or any mental, emotional, or spiritual breakdown), her method is very strange, since the poem is written in a regular meter with a regular rhyme scheme and regular grammatical structures. Presumably the speaker is telling her story from a point in time after her mental collapse, an idea that justifies the poem's form only if the reader interprets the final line ("And Finished knowing□then□") to mean "I finished knowing anything for sure

after that terrible incident" and not the equally valid interpretation in which the final "then□" marks the speaker's transition to a mental state where the representation of one's mind through language becomes impossible.

So how, then, is a reader to approach the poem? First, a reader must recognize the poem as un-Wordsworthian in its aims and design: while the sensitive reader will surely feel the horror of the speaker's predicament, the reader and speaker will never truly meet in that place where the poet's subject of contemplation really does exist in the reader's mind. (This is not to dismissDickinson's achievement in this powerful poem, but to clarify how it should be read.) The reader must then understand that the poem is an attempt to formalize a complex and devastating mental process in familiar, recognizable images and sensations. If the poem seems a failure because it does not succeed in Wordswor-thian terms, this is only because no poem depicting madness can fully replicate its subject; the best a poet can do is describe what the subject is like in a way that will make the reader appreciate it more fully than he or she did before reading about it.

Once a reader understands how to approach the poem, he or she can then examine the ways in whichDickinson uses familiar poetic devices to replicate the subject of her contemplation. The images chosen here byDickinson all relate to a funeral: a common ritual, the devastating emotional nature of which is appropriate for a poem about the devastation of the speaker's mind. The funeral is entirely metaphoric; it is something like what the speaker felt in her brain when her mental troubles began. The metaphor of a funeral is also appropriate since a funeral is a ritual in which various stages and rites are completed before the final interment of the body; this corresponds to the various stages through which the speaker's mind passes before its final interment into the graveyard of madness. For example, the mourners that keep "treading□treading" in her brain (with their "Boots of Lead") represent the first signs of the impending catastrophe. SinceDickinson cannot truly replicate insanity, she instead chooses to portray it as a physical sensation. Imagine trying to convey the sense of a terrible headache to one who has never had one, and then the logic behindDickinson's choice of metaphor becomes clearer.

At this early stage of her breakdown, the speaker seemed to feel that "sense was breaking through,"and that some of her reason was battling with the mourners who plagued her. This moment is very much like Hamlet's "It hath made me mad" in its self-reflexiveness. However, the word *sense* can also refer to the five senses, in which case the remark about her sense "breaking through" conveys the idea that her breakdown can only be portrayed in terms of an explosion of physical feeling, and physical pain is something that many readers can appreciate and imagine more easily than mental collapse. Either way, the funeral has begun and will not end until the speaker's mind is buried.

The remainder of the poem uses familiar components of the funeral ritual to convey the speaker's increased mental pressures and eventual devastation. After the mourners have arrived, the service begins. This service, however, is not a softly spoken prayer or eulogy, but rather something "like a Drum" that incessantly keeps "beating□beating" in

the speaker's ears until she finds her mind is "going numb." Again,Dickinson resorts to the language of physical sensations to convey the impossible-to-replicate mental processes. This mingling of the mental and the physical is continued whenDickinson moves to the next stage of the funeral ritual: the carrying of the casket to the gravesite. The pallbearers "creak across" the speaker's soul with "Boots of Lead." Again, the impending breakdown is likened to loud noise, and this noise grows intolerable when the next part of the ritual, the tolling of the funeral bell, begins.

The bell here is so loud and threatening that it seems "As all the Heavens" are one great bell and the speaker's whole being is "but an Ear." The physical pain that must accompany such a situation is used in place of an outright description of mental pain. The bell is so loud, in fact, that silence seems a member of "some strange Race." The speaker cannot recall a time when she could not physically hear the tolling of the bell, as she cannot mentally recall what her mind was like before its "funeral" began. The casket sits ready for burial and the speaker sits on the verge of total mental destruction.

Appropriately enough, the final stanza uses the last part of the funeral ritual to dramatize the final stages of the speaker's breakdown. Caskets are often laid upon wooden planks before being lowered into the earth, but the casket in the speaker's brain proves too heavy for such supports. In terms of the physical metaphor, the speaker's mind has "broke"□its last vestiges of mental support have proven no match for the weight of the breakdown. The casket's dropping "down and down" is like the speaker's descent into madness where she hits a "World, at every plunge." In terms of a conventional funeral, a dropping casket would eventually hit the world after falling the proverbial six feet, but this is no conventional funeral. Instead, the casket keeps "hitting bottom" only to find that there is another world beneath it. Just when the speaker thinks she has reached the limits of mental endurance, she learns that her casket can still drop another few feet. Thus, the problem of depicting the stages of derangement or mental collapse is sidestepped byDickinson's use of physical imagery and sensation.

The poem's final line, however, presents an ambiguity (mentioned earlier) that demands examination. The speaker ends by stating that she "finished knowing□then□" a remark fraught with ambiguity. Either she "finished knowing" anything for sure and now lives as one who will never again assume anything about her own brain, or mind, to be certain or her breakdown has brought her to the point where she can no longer use conventional (or poetic) language to describe her experience. The first alternative is somewhat more comforting than the second since it implies that the speaker has had some sort of epiphany about her own mind and is now mentally strong enough to convey her experience in rational, ordered language. However, the second alternative is more in keeping with the overall problem of portraying consciousness: physical metaphors and sensations might be used to describe the onset of one's collapse, but even Dickinson herself seems to be defeated by the challenge of depicting a mind that has already dropped "down, and down." (Had she used a period instead of a dash after the last word, the problem would be solved.) As the poem stands, a reader must be satisfied withDickinson's evocation of "powerful feelings" rather than powerful thoughts to (in Wordsworth's terms) "gradually produce" in the reader some understanding of what a funeral in the brain would be like. The impossibility of Dickinson's truly replicating

the breakdown in Wordsworth's terms, however, should be regarded as somewhat of a blessing since no reader would want to read a poem capable of truly inciting a breakdown similar to the one experienced by its speaker.

Source: Daniel Moran, Critical Essay on "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Goldfarb has a Ph.D. in English and has published two books on the Victorian author William Makepeace Thackeray. In the following essay, he seeks to illuminate the obscurity of "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" in part by considering its narrative structure.

This is a baffling little poem, and the more it is read, the more baffling it becomes. It inspires a wide variety of responses. Some critics see it as a depiction of a real funeral. Others say that even if it originates with a real funeral about someone's physical death, the funeral image becomes symbolic and metaphorical, representing something else: some sort of agony or perhaps the process of going mad. Some critics see the poem as depicting the extinction of consciousness after death and find the poem despairing. Yet others seeDickinson as suggesting that some new way of perception can be attained after death (if the poem is about death), and they see something more positive going on. One critic (Robert Weisbuch, in *Emily Dickinson's Poetry)* says the conclusion of the poem is neither positive nor negative.

What are readers to make of all this? It does seem that Emily Dickinson has left things deliberately vague here, and perhaps that is part of her point: she is talking of the difficulty of knowing and understanding. But although there are difficulties, it does seem that the poem is telling readers that the difficulties can be worked through. At the end, the poem seems to take readers to a better place although a lot depends on the meaning of the phrase "Finished knowing" in the last line. By "Finished knowing," does the speaker mean she can no longer know anything (a rather negative conclusion) or does she mean she now knows everything she needs to know, that is, that she has finally figured things out (a much more positive suggestion)? Or does she mean she has finished with knowing because she has moved on to some better form of perception, such as feeling or intuiting or somehow connecting with the universe more successfully than through conventional forms of knowing (again a more positive view)? Has she moved from "lawyer's truth" to "the poet's truth of never knowing," as Jerome Loving puts it in *Emily Dickinson: The Poet on the Second Story?* This essay will tend toward the two positive views of the poem's ending, largely because of the last line of the first stanza and also because the structure of the poem conveys a positive sense of resolution after crisis.

Looking at the first stanza, the first point to note is that the funeral seems very much to be in the speaker's brain: the mourners "treading□treading" back and forth are, as readers learn in the third stanza, creaking across the speaker's soul; they seem to be inside her. That is, the funeral would seem to be symbolic, metaphorical, a dream-like representation of something else but not of a descent into madness, as critics like Clark Griffith and Paul J. Ferlazzo argue (in, respectively, *The Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry* and *Emily Dickinson).* Joan Kirby (in her book *Emily Dickinson)* seems closer to the truth when she says that what is being depicted is the passing away of old thoughts, old ways of thinking, old approaches to the world. Or as Weisbuch puts it, it is the depiction of "a crucial change in ... consciousness."

The key to understanding this crucial change may be in the last line of the first stanza, which says that as a result of the heavy tramp of the mourners, "sense was breaking through." It is as if the funeral is allowing some barrier to be destroyed so that some new sort of understanding can reach the speaker. The speaker seems to be imagining the death of something in her brain, the death of some old ways of thinking. Now, death of course is painful, even metaphorical death; so is the giving up of old ways□and the speaker does seem to be in pain, especially in stanza two, when the funeral service beats "like a Drum . . . beating□beating," until her mind seems to be going numb. But the pain in this poem seems to be a necessary price to pay for progressing to a better state; the pain is part of getting rid of old ways in order that the speaker can advance to something new.

The poem in fact reads like a miniature narrative, beginning with a crisis (the funeral and the pain), moving toward a climactic encounter, and then achieving resolution. The speaker is like the hero in some archetypal drama, beset by painful forces, and then somehow reaches a better state after an almost mythic confrontation. True, the speaker seems fairly passive in all this; it is not she, but the mourners whose tramping allows Sense to break through. Still, if the mourners are simply symbolic entities in the speaker's brain, then they are a part of her breaking through the barrier that is also part of her: it is a struggle with herself.

The immediate result of the struggle, of breaking through the barrier, is that the speaker finds herself in a surreal and terrifying landscape in which (beginning with the last line of stanza three) space begins to toll, the Heavens turn into a bell, and the speaker herself becomes simply an Ear. And she feels "wrecked" and "solitary," as if having endured an almost unendurable situation, that internal struggle represented by the funeral and the mourners.

Something gravely important has happened. What it is, is hard to tell. The poem resists being pinned down. But the tolling suggests some sort of life passage, some movement into a new stage of existence. It could be referring to life (or extinction) after death, as some critics (like John B. Pickard in *Emily Dickinson: An Introduction and Interpretation* and George Monteiro in "Traditional Ideas inDickinson's T Felt a Funeral in My Brain"'), who see the funeral as a real funeral, argue. But it may be more general than that; it may simply signify any major transition.

It is interesting that in this transition there is the struggle and the terror and then a pause, as the speaker sits wrecked and solitary, having come through some wrenching experience. But the pause is brief. "A plank in Reason" breaks to begin the final stanza, again conjuring up the image of a funeral, as if the speaker is in a coffin being placed on planks before being lowered into the ground. The plank is part of reason, though, and it gives way. This seems to mean that conventional rationality is left behind, and the speaker moves into a different realm of perception, plunging down into unconscious realms where the hero in archetypal narratives goes to discover new truths. The speaker does encounter new worlds and, in the ambiguous last line, finishes knowing.

It's true that the speaker hits the new worlds, which sounds like a rather painful process. And she is dropping down at the end, which could be seen in a negative light. There is perhaps a mix of negativity and positiveness here. But the whole movement of the poem seems to be toward new discoveries. First there is sense breaking through, then there is the encounter with the tolling heavens, and finally there is the discovery of world after world. How many new worlds does the speaker hit? The poem is all about the difficult process of moving on in one's life, and as such, for all the pain it evokes, it creates a positive feeling. It is also about the difficulty of understanding, and perhaps that is why it is itself so difficult to understand.

Source: Sheldon Goldfarb, Critical Essay on "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Pineiro is a published poet and the supervisor of English at Montgomery High School in New Jersey. In the following essay, he considers the death of reason in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain."

In Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,* both Tom and his pal Huck Finn get the chance to witness their own funerals and experience the heartfelt loss of those they leave behind. After creating the evidence of their feigned death, they are lucky enough to experience what most people have fantasized about at one time or another, they observe the world's response to their leaving it. They are able to see and hear the sobbing mourners crying over how much they will miss them; how unfair it was for their short lives to be ended so soon, and so on. Nevertheless, the boys are not dead, and their experience is fully external, the fantasy complete without the actual loss of life.

In "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" Emily Dickinson also employs the perspective of a deceased narrator although in this case the experience is fully internal, and there is no rejoining the living to exploit what is learned at the ceremony. In fact, Emily Dickinson's narrator's disembodied voice is so internalized it cannot make sense of the experience in any way other than to feel it inside her brain in the form of footsteps and drum beats. It is a completely claustrophobic affair, where the narrator is at the center of the experience, yet completely detached from it.Dickinson's from-the-grave narrator is most limited in her experience because she has no context from which to build the meaning. She has only the muffled sounds of footsteps and the creaking of the box, her coffin, from which to draw any inferences about her predicament. Once the ability to build meaning becomes clearly futile, the voice collapses in on itself, dropping down and away from meaning until she "finishe[s] knowing."

The two most popular interpretations of the poem are: it is a poem about the transition from life to death; and it is a poem about the loss of reason, a slipping into a senseless void of insanity. Arguably, Emily Dickinson might have conceded that these are in fact not opposing views at all. Whether it is death or insanity,Dickinson sees it the same: the incapacitation of a transmitter's receiver leaves meaning ungrounded, floating senselessly in the void.

It is a curious thing to go to the trouble of granting a narrator the power to speak from the grave and then not allow her to make sense of anything. For readers trying to assert some meaning, perhaps this is the narrator's ultimate function: to dramatize that being is defined as one's ability to make sense of the world around him or her. In a later poem, "This is my letter to the World," Dickinson offers thanks to nature for having provided her with the tools necessary to assert some sense to the universe: "The simple News that Nature told / With tender Majesty." In, "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," her narrator is cut off from the world and "the simple News" of it, leaving her very little from which to derive an interpretation of her situation. The voice from the coffin is sealed off from the metaphors and concrete expressions of truth exhibited through nature and the world surroundingDickinson's typically very speculative narrators.

Stanza one opens with the paradoxical notion of a concrete experience that takes place entirely at the nexus of abstract being, "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain." The choice of the word *brain* over the word *mind* is significant, for the mind is not a physical organ but a process that occurs within it. Therefore, the process of the brain, the ability to make sense of the surrounding world and even a person's existence within it, seems to be breaking down to its most base elements, its container.

Lines two and three of this first stanza move into a description of the funeral service, ignoring the limitations that it has established for itself in the first line by being only a brain. With the narrative perspective clearly entombed within itself, it has no alternative but to describe what it feels and how things seem. This perspective stands in sharp contrast to another ofDickinson's dead narrator perspectives, the voice in "I heard a Fly Buzz when I died." In the latter example, she posits the narrator on a deathbed absorbing the scenario around her, including the mourners' tears, the light from the window, and the "stumbling buzz" of the either sympathetic or opportunistic fly. In the above lines, readers do not see the world around the perspective but rather, like she, they only feel distant, muffled vibration.

And Mourners to and fro

Kept treading□treading□till it seemed

That Sense was breaking through□

Things only seem to be, and the distinct characteristics of the mourners are withheld. The "sense" of which the narrator speaks is derived not from sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste but rather some experience of vibration, which the narrator reports in the next stanza:

And when they [the mourners] all were seated,

A Service, like a Drum□

Kept Beating□beating□till I thought

My mind was going numb□

Since there is no intermediary between what is going on outside the brain and the brain's interpretation of the experience, the reader may even wonder if there is any experience at all other than the waning pulse of a dying or slowly ceasing nerve center. What seems to be the narrator's final experience is simply this dying pulse of electric energy making one last reflexive connection to the mind's strongest tool of interpretation□memory, the memory of the funerals of others.

In stanza three, the narrator, in effect, repeats her earlier report regarding mourners footsteps but this time seems to be releasing the perspective of an entombed, internal self into perhaps an even more frightful, detached, abstract void.

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

The narrator has shifted the perspective from its seat in the physical brain to an abstract and elusive vantage point, the soul. The blurring of the concrete and abstract continues and builds momentum. Earlier, the narrator feels the funeral through the to and fro treading of the mourners; a physical brain experiencing the sensation of physical footsteps. Now, the box (presumably a coffin or the sense of enclosure), a concrete object, creaks across her soul, an abstract concept. The image is the poem's equivalent of the Zen koan: "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" The paradox highlights the deterioration of sense and is echoed in the stanza's final line, "Then Space□began to toll." How can space, which is the absence of matter, begin to toll without anything within it to react? The dash in this stanza's last line seems to mark the place for some missing concrete element needed to catalyze meaning.

By stanza four, what was initially a report of purely physical sensation and a remaining connection to the concrete world seems to slip away toward utter detachment. The last thing to go is the sensation of the pulsing organ itself, or better, the echo of what was once a pulsing organ dynamically absorbing existence and making sense of it.

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

Significantly, the line reads "Heavens" as opposed to *Heaven,* suggesting that a vast, wide open emptiness of space is intended rather than a resting place or afterlife for the departed. The continuing loss of the stuff of meaning is marked by the race with "Silence" experienced by the narrative "I," who is now reduced to being but an ear. The detachment from existence is nearly complete as "Wrecked, solitary, here□" suggests those in the race become one□"solitary"□and even the faint hint or pulse of a memory of an earthly experience ends with a convergence of being and silence "here."

Finally, the narrative voice, completely cut off from concrete existence and the stuff of meaning, collapses in on itself with a swift succession of the word *and* repeated at the beginning of each line in the final stanza.

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

The "thumping of "And" that is concentrated in [this stanza]," says Cynthia Griffin Wolff, in her critical study *Emily Dickinson,* emphasizes that events in these lines occur "without pause, without yielding insight, without any logical relationship to one another, without any ordering of importance." The "and" beats create the feeling of life being "swept remorselessly along in the swift current of time, swept over the edge, perhaps to come to rest in some unfathomed end, perhaps merely to fall forever ... [in an] undefined descent beyond understanding."

Amidst this freefall into nothingness, the narrator offers one more paradox to consider, the knowledge of (or at least the sensation of the knowledge of) "Finish[ing] knowing."

Dashes surround this final moment and the final word *then* as if to mark the black-hole limbo wherein the echo of the voice continues to reside in silence. Ironically, the poem underscores its author's understanding of her own poetic process by showing the demise of it.

Source: Paul Pineiro, Critical Essay on "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Adaptations

 A two-cassette set entitled *Emily Dickinson: Poems and Letters* features a recording of "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" along with seventy-four other poems. It was released in 1989 by Recorded Books, Inc.

Topics for Further Study

Research modern psychological explanations of what happens to the human mind when it is faced with clinical depression or some other mental illness. Explain howDickinson's poem depicts these mental events in poetic terms.

Explain howDickinson's depiction of the human mind may have been influenced by the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Research the ways in which groundbreaking scientific ideas were first received, such as those put forth by Galileo (whose 1632 work *Dialogue on the Great World Systems* posited the sun as the center of the solar system) or Charles Darwin (whose 1859 work *On the Origin of Species* proposed the idea of natural selection). Explain howDickinson's poem dramatizes some of the early reactions to these radical ideas.

Read Emerson's essay "The Poet" and then explain howDickinson's work adheres to the ideals put forth within it.

Research the ways that a woman's role was defined in nineteenth-centuryNew England. Explain howDickinson's life suited (or revolted against) the roles assigned to her by her era.

What Do I Read Next?

Dickinson's "After great pain, a formal feeling comes□" (1861) describes the after-effects of profound physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual agony.

Dickinson's "To lose one's faith□surpass," (1861), like "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," explores the results of spiritual devastation.

Like the speaker of "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," the title character of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601) faces the breakdown of his rational faculties.

Dickinson's "Much Madness Is Divinest Sense□" (1861) treats the theme of insanity in a much different way than "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain"; here, madness is likened to the spirit of non-conformity.

The American novelist William Styron's *Darkness Visible* (1990) is a memoir of his battle with madness, specifically, clinical depression. The book is remarkable for the ways in which Sty-ron depicts his struggle to understand the workings of his own mind.

Robert Burton's famous psychological treatise *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) examines various states of melancholy, a general term used byBurton to describe different mental illnesses.Burton's book offers a fascinating glimpse into early psychological scholarship.

T. S. Eliot's complex poem *The Waste Land* (1922) extends the various breakdowns experienced by the speaker ofDickinson's poem to the entire twentieth century.

Further Study

Anderson, Charles R., *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise,* Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960.

Anderson's book examinesDickinson's poetry by examining what he sees as its four major concerns: art, nature, the self, and death. The book also features a short biographical sketch ofDickinson.

Matthiessen, F. O., *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman,* Oxford University Press, 1968.

While Matthissen's renowned survey of American literature only mentionsDickinson in passing, it is an invaluable study of the ways in which Emerson affected the nineteenth-century literary scene.

Robinson, John, *Emily Dickinson,* Faber and Faber, 1986. This short book is both a study of Dickinson's work and an examination of the intellectual climate of theNew England in which she lived and wrote.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

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