

Notes on After great pain, a formal feeling comes - by Emily Dickinson:

Did you ever wonder about that weird lady down the street who never leaves her house? Like did you ever think, "What does she do in there all day? Watch soap operas? Quilt? Torture people in her windowless basement?"

Well, if you happened to live in Amherst, Massachusetts, back in the 19th century, then that weird lady down the street might have secretly been one of the greatest American poets of all time.

It's pretty well known that Emily was a total loner—well not totally, since she kept up with friends and family through a vigorous letter writing habit. Still, she spent most days in her home or tending the awesome gardens around her house. All this alone-time gave Emily the space she needed to create 1,775 of some of the greatest American poems ever.

What's crazy is that she barely tried to get any of these published. Was she shy? Nobody really knows, but it's probably a good thing. Because she didn't have a bunch of bossy editors trying to rein her in, Emily was able to write how she wanted to write. When you just so happen to be a genius, this is a very good thing.

"After a great pain, a formal feeling comes" is a poem that has all of Emily's eccentricities on full display. This one is downright experimental with dense conflicting images and an elastic use of meters. If an editor had seen this one, he seriously would've flipped out and the world would be short one intensely beautiful poem about the complex emotions that come after a trauma.

After Emily died in 1886, her sister Lavinia dealt with the trauma of Emily's death by going on a crusade to send her big sis's poems out into the world. Many of the poems were first published in 1890, but "After a great pain..." didn't see print until a 1929 edition of the Atlantic Monthly. Apparently, an editor saw this one back in 1890, and was like, "That's just crazy." It took the massive popularity of some Emily's more "accessible" poems to give this beauty a second glance.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

Sooner or later, everybody gets a shock. And we're not talking about the kind of shock you get when you try to slide a Hot Pocket out of the toaster oven with a fork. We're talking about the kind of deep emotional shock that comes when something seriously bad happens.

Maybe you miss the final shot at the big game even though you're awesome. Or it could be that you discover your Dad has a secret family in Costa Rica. Or maybe somebody close to you dies.

Whatever it is—no matter how huge or minuscule—the period of time right after the initial pain can be pretty crappy. You can feel lost, alone, and totally numb to the world.

Whenever you're feeling like this, "After great pain, a formal feeling comes" is a poem that's there for you. Don't expect it to be there with sunshine and roses, though. Nah, it's that friend who's there to say, "Look, dude, I know how you feel." As you read these lines that perfectly capture the conflicted feelings that come after a trauma, you'll know it's being straight up with you.

The poem tells us that big traumas are often followed up by periods of numbness. (Is that good or bad? Hard to tell.) The whole thing is this crazy kaleidoscope of contradictory images. Numb nerves, a confused heart, robot feet, people dying in the snow— all of these images come together to paint a vivid picture of the inner life of somebody who's totally messed up after experiencing something awful.

Lines 1-2

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

Well, at least the first three words aren't that cryptic. The speaker is setting us up to say what happens after we go through some kind of big trauma.

But what's up with this "formal feeling" thing? Could she be trying to get us to think about how people kind of suppress emotions on formal occasions like, oh say, a funeral? That would make sense since a funeral is a formal occasion that happens after a painful event like somebody dying.

The second line confirms our suspicions with "ceremonious" and "Tombs." These words definitely put us in a funereal frame of mind.

Notice how the speaker uses personification with "Nerves" by saying they do the human action of sitting.

She then piles a simile on top of the personification when she tells us that they sit "like Tombs."

All of this comes together to describe the "formal feeling" from line 1 and seems to be saying that it's a feeling of numbness.

Our nerves are what we feel with, right? So if they're like still gravestones, then they're not feeling much at all.

Add all that up, and it looks like the speaker is saying that after we experience something awful, we go numb.

On the technical tip, we also notice that these lines are in iambic pentameter. For a thorough breakdown of what that means for the poem, check out "Form and Meter."

There's also a bunch of sound games going on in these first two lines. For example, we've got assonance with "great pain" and alliteration with "formal feeling." You'll find much more on these and the poem's other sonic acrobatics in "Sound Check."

Lines 3-4

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

Again, the speaker uses personification on a part of the body. This time it's the Heart, which seems to be asking a question about who "bore" the "great pain" from line 1. There's a lot of fuzziness here, though. For one, the poem doesn't make it totally clear who the Heart is asking about. Is the "He" in line 3 the Heart, itself, or somebody else? Since the question is in quotes, we might assume that the Heart is referring to another person with "He"—unless the Heart is one of those weirdoes who talks about themselves in the third person.

Especially since "He" is capitalized, many think that the speaker's talking about Mr. Jesus Christ, himself.

It would make sense, not only because Emily's poetry is chock full of Christian imagery, but also because Jesus is a major symbol of suffering in, oh, all of Western literature.

We also notice that the Heart is described as "stiff," which means it's in the same boat as those numb Nerves from line 2.

As we get the rest of the Heart's question in 1.4, the fuzziness continues. Not only is the Heart confused about who bore the pain, it's also a little foggy on when the pain happened. It could've been yesterday, or a super long time ago.

So if the "He" from line 3 is Jesus, then it makes sense that the pain would've happened a long time ago, but how could it have been just yesterday? Is the speaker blurring the pain she bore with the pain of Jesus? Could she be alluding to Jesus to use him as a symbol of the suffering that every human being experiences?

It might be that by blurring time, she's showing how pain happens over and over again throughout the centuries, and that no matter when it occurs we always feel numb afterward. Like with any good poem, there's no way pinpoint exactly what these lines mean. All the ambiguity is great because it helps to get across the confused, discombobulated feeling we have when we're in a state of shock.

On the technical tip, we also notice that the poem is still in iambic pentameter and also that the last two lines of the stanza rhyme. (Again, go to "Form and Meter" more than you want to know about that.)

Lines 5-7

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

Man, if we thought the first stanza was discombobulating, then this one takes the cake (which is rude because we were saving the cake for ourselves).

Our best take on these lines is that they're describing the way we walk around like zombies through our everyday lives after something terrible goes down.

Again, the speaker mentions a part of the body—this time Feet, which are described as trudging around mechanically.

So after we go through something bad, the Nerves are numb, the Heart is confused, and the Feet just kind of phone it in.

In a way, this mechanical foot imagery connects with the deathly imagery from the first stanza. If we move like machines, then it's like we're only half-alive; we're existing somewhere between life and death.

Line 6 continues to describe this sluggish way of walking by describing it as "Wooden." Feet that are made of wood probably aren't too good at being feet. They're heavy, cumbersome, and unfeeling—ooh, we're back to numbness again.

Of course, the syntax here is confusing, so "Wooden" might not even be directly describing the feet. "Wooden way" could be describing the path that the mechanical mover is walking down. Still, it seems like the wood imagery has the same effect; it's a path of dull numbness.

Line 7 throws even more ambiguity our way by questioning if this "Wooden way" is even made of wood. Maybe it's made of dirt—something totally solid.

Then again it could be the air we breathe—something totally not solid.

Or it could be "Ought." Wait a sec. What the heck is "Ought"?

Well, "ought" is an auxiliary verb that we use to describe something we're supposed to be doing.

Example: We ought to be writing a paper on Emily Dickinson instead of playing Skyrim right now.

With that in mind, is it possible that the speaker is referencing the way that we numbly slog through our responsibilities after a big trauma?

We still have to do what we have to do, but in the direct aftermath of awfulness, our everyday lives can seem totally unreal.

Lines 8-9

Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

These last two lines of the stanza seem to be continuing to describe the feelings of confusion and numbness that the poem's been slathering us with.

"Regardless" can describe something that's done without any attention to what's going on. Example? Regardless of the fact that there were hungry dogs in pen, Johnny walked in wearing a suit made of bacon. (Too far?)

So it seems like whatever has "grown" has done so without regard for what's happening around it.

The poem doesn't bother to make it clear what it is that's grown, though. Is it the "Wooden way" from line 6? Could we be talking about the way a person in shock might walk through their everyday responsibilities without paying attention to anything around them? There's also just as good of a chance that it's describing those robot feet from line 5.

It all comes to the same thing no matter how you choose you look at it. The speaker is getting across a feeling of total disorientation.

"Regardless grown" could even be describing the "Quartz contentment" of line 9.

What's "Quartz contentment"? Well, as with everything in this poem it could be a lot of things.

For one, the mention of a stone like quartz reminds us of the "Tombs" from line 2, especially since the speaker adds the simile "like a stone."

Again, we could be getting at a feeling of deathly numbness that comes when we're in shock.

We also can't help but wonder why the speaker talks about quartz specifically.

Well quartz is kind of crystalline and translucent; if you look through it, you'll get a hazy view of the world, which totally works with the blurry vision the poem's been painting so far.

It's also interesting that the speaker uses the word "contentment," a word that's usually used to describe when we're happy and satisfied (like we feel after eating a particularly good lasagna). Here, the speaker flips the word on its head a bit and uses it to describe the total lack of feeling that can follow a trauma.

Before we escape this stanza, we'll also point out that the meter has gone bonkers. Gone are the steady days of iambic pentameter, although we do still end the stanza with a rhyme.

Lines 10-11

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

These lines are again getting at a feeling of emotional numbness, and they set us up to think about how we look back on these times if we manage to make it out alive. Oh, Emily, you always know how to cheer us up.

The mention of lead makes us think of the saying "heavy as lead," so we assume that an "Hour of Lead" is a period of time when we feel heavy.

Not the sort of heavy we feel after the Holidays—we're talking emotionally heavy, here. Many of us definitely feel like that when we're in shock, right?

Also, if you ever hear somebody described as "leaden," then that means they're being dull, heavy, or slow. This idea totally jibes with those mechanical feet from line 5, especially because it uses the image of a metal.

The image of lead also creates an interesting contrast with the quartz in line 9. While quartz is pretty and translucent, lead is ugly and opaque. It seems like the speaker just can't get enough of throwing contradicting images at us.

Once again, it feels like this is purposely done to get across a general sense of disorientation. An "Hour of Lead" is also contradictory in and of itself. An hour is a unit of time that moves forward, while a lump of lead stays put.

To us, this communicates the idea that time feels like it's standing still when we're in shock. Line 11 sets us up to think about how we might look back on this terrible time. Notice, though, that the speaker doesn't tell us living through this period is a done deal.

She says, "if outlived," and even puts a comma before the "if" to make sure we don't miss it. Placing a comma in the middle of a line like that creates a bit of a pause called a caesura, and here it puts neon lights on the fact that survival is not guaranteed.

Lines 12-13

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

The final lines close out the poem with a simile that—surprise, surprise—is a little unclear.

The speaker is kicking back to lines 10-11 and telling us that if we manage to survive the period of shock then remembering it will be the same as how people who freeze to death remember snow.

Question: how do people who've frozen to death remember anything? The simile directly contradicts "outlived" in line 11.

If somebody experiences "the letting go," (a.k.a. dying) then they haven't outlived anything.

It seems like the speaker is using this contradiction to again put us in a state that's between life and death.

Just like with the numb-y nerves in the first stanza and the robotic walking in the second, here we're put in a numb in between place.

The idea of numbness is hammered home by the image of snow. The feeling of freezing to death in a snowstorm—that's gotta be as about as numb as it gets.

Like in 11, the speaker also stops the show with a caesura. In line 12, she puts a comma between "persons" and "recollect."

There's no grammatical reason for this, but what it does do is put some space between the words.

The final line is caesura'd to the max.

Here, Emily's trademark dashes divide up the line, putting pauses all the way through. All this pausing in the midst of the line does a great job of slowing the poem down. This is especially poignant in the last line when the speaker is describing the stages of freezing to death, which can be a slow process.

Overall, this fracturing of the final lines seems like a great way to end a poem that gives us such a vivid picture of the fractured consciousness of a person numbly reeling from a big trauma.