I cautious, scanned my little life

POEM TEXT

I cautious, scanned my little life—
I winnowed what would fade
From what would last till Heads like mine
Should be a'dreaming laid.

I put the latter in a Barn—
The former, blew away.
I went one winter morning
And lo—my priceless Hay

Was not upon the "Scaffold"—
Was not upon the "Beam"—
And from a thriving Farmer—
A Cynic, I became.

Whether a thief did it—
Whether it was the wind—
Whether Deity's guiltless—
My business is, to find!

So I begin to ransack!
How is it Hearts, with Thee?
Art thou within the little Barn
Love provided Thee?

SUMMARY

I carefully, tentatively sifted through my humble life. Like a farmer removing the husks from grains of wheat, I separated the things that would eventually disappear from the things that would endure until people such as myself are laid to rest.

I put the things that would last into a barn, while the wind blew away the things that would have disappeared anyway. Then, one morning in winter, I returned only to find that my precious hay was no longer on the platform where crops are piled, nor was it up in the rafters. At that moment I went from being a flourishing farmer to someone full of doubts and distrust.

I don't know if someone stole it, or if the wind blew it away, or if God's somehow responsible for what happened—but I aim to find out!

So I start rummaging through the barn! How are you doing, dear ones? Are you somewhere inside the tiny barn love built for you?

THEMES

WRITING AND MEMORY

"I cautious, scanned my little life" can be read as a meditation on the limitations of poetry. The speaker's description of "winnow[ing] what would fade" from "what would last" sounds a lot like the process of writing—of committing one's most memories, thoughts, and ideas to paper. Like a "Farmer" storing their crops in a "Barn," the writer places these ideas into a poem in order to preserve them. Yet the speaker later returns to this metaphorical barn only to find that their "priceless hay" has disappeared—stolen by a thief, the wind, or even God. It's possible to interpret this theft in a few ways, but, in one reading, it illustrates how writing can lose its potency and meaning over time (for the speaker themselves and, perhaps, for future readers). The speaker's anxiety around how to keep their precious "hay" safe, and their distress upon its loss, thus suggest the limits of writing as a container for memory.

In this interpretation of the poem, writing is a way for the speaker to safeguard the things that matter most to them. The speaker separates out the meaningful, enduring bits of their life from the things that "fade" (such as petty emotions, maybe).

The speaker compares this process to a farmer separating wheat grains from the chaff. Just as a farmer lets the wind strip the dry husks from the nutritious grain, the speaker allows the ephemeral parts of their life to blow away, leaving only their most enduring feelings, ideas, memories, etc. behind. They then store these in a barn, which represents a poem: a formal structure created to contain the nourishing "grains" of the speaker's life. Just as this barn houses a farmer's crops, a poem house the poet's feelings, memories, loves, etc.

Yet the speaker returns to this barn one day only to discover that it no longer contains what it was built to protect: the “priceless Hay” that the speaker placed inside the barn has disappeared. If revisiting the barn is a metaphor for reading through old poems, the missing hay suggests that these poems no longer evoke the feelings that they were written to capture. Perhaps these poems are about a "Love" the speaker no longer feels, for example, or perhaps they simply failed to freeze in time the experiences the speaker had hoped to keep forever fresh.

The speaker can't seem to reconcile the amount of care and effort that went into these poems with the fact that they're suddenly missing their "Hearts"—the parts of the speaker's life

that they believed would "last." And this experience transforms the speaker: once a "Farmer," the speaker is now a "Cynic," or someone who's frustrated and riddled with doubt. Whereas they once cautiously, tenderly "scanned their little life," now they "ransack"—violently, destructively seeking what they've lost.

Writing, then, isn't exactly a failsafe means of storing memory. Instead, it's like a drafty, leaky barn with the door left open.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12
- Lines 17-20

THE DIFFICULTY OF FAITH

In "I cautious, scanned my little life," the speaker describes separating the fleeting parts of life from those that "last." The speaker puts those more enduring qualities into a metaphorical barn for safekeeping, but when the speaker returns to recover these precious goods, they're nowhere to be found. Bewildered by this loss, the speaker becomes a "Cynic" and begins to "ransack," violently searching for the "priceless Hay" they sought to preserve. This hay is often interpreted as a metaphor for the speaker's deep, enduring faith in God. In this reading, the poem illustrates the difficulties of holding onto faith in a world that tests it.

The poem begins with the speaker confidently dividing their life into "what would fade" and "what would last." The speaker carefully takes stock of their life, "winnow[ing]" (or sorting) the short-lived bits from the more enduring parts of themselves.

While the speaker never gives specifics, readers might consider the speaker letting go of fleeting bouts of anger or embarrassment and holding onto deeper ideas about their place in the world. Indeed, the speaker's description recalls the biblical metaphor of God using a "winnowing fork" to separate the wheat from the chaff—that is, believers from non-believers. This suggests the speaker is separating the earthly, material parts of their life from intangibles such as religious faith.

In any case, they store the more enduring parts of their life "in a Barn" for protection and let the fleeting bits blow "away." Yet despite their great care, when the speaker returns to the barn, the things they've saved are missing; their faith is gone.

That this happens in "winter" implies that the speaker's faith has disappeared during a difficult season of their life (winter is often used to symbolize death, hardship, or the end of something). Farmers store their grain in barns for the express purpose of getting them through such difficult seasons, and the poem thus suggests that the speaker's faith has gone missing precisely when they need it the most.

This loss of faith results in deep bewilderment and skepticism. The speaker has no idea who to blame for this loss. Was it "a Thief" in the night, or the same "wind" that "blew away" the less important parts of their life? The speaker even wonders if it's God's fault, and in doing so becomes a "Cynic." In other words, their faith has been replaced by questions and doubt.

The poem reaches no conclusions, instead allowing the speaker's doubt to exist alongside the possibility that they will someday regain their faith. The speakers says that it's their "business [...] to find" out what happened to their hay. They "ransack" (or rummage messily through) the barn in search of their once firm beliefs. And at the end of the poem, the speaker asks, "How is it Hearts, with Thee?" This question suggests that those hearts, the speaker's faith, are still beating somewhere—and it's up to the speaker to find them once again.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

I cautious, scanned my little life—

The poem begins with a rather vague proclamation: the speaker says that they "cautious"—or carefully, tentatively—"scanned" their "little life." In other words, they slowly examined their humble, insignificant life.

The caesura created by the comma after "cautious" immediately slows the reader down, evoking the very tentativeness implied by the word "cautious." The word "scanned" can then be read in two different ways:

- Most obviously, it means that the speaker examined or looked closely at their "life." In other words, they're taking stock of their life, sifting through it for... well, it's not clear yet!
- But "scanned" has a secondary meaning as well. In poetry, *scansion* is the process by which one determines a poem's meter. So when the speaker says that they "scanned" their life, it's also possible that they're making a pun. They aren't just looking closely at their life; they're turning it into poetry.

Speaking of meter, this first line of the poem is in iambic tetrameter. This means that the line is made up of iambs—poetic feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). Tetrameter means there are four of these iambs per line: da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM. Scanned, the first line looks like this:

I cau- | tious, scanned | my lit- | tle life—

It's also possible to read that first foot as a spondee, with two stressed beats in a row ("I cau-"). Either way, this meter gives the opening line a strong sing-song rhythm that pulls the reader into the poem.

Note, too, how the /l/ alliteration of "little life" creates some gentle music and emphasis. This emphasis subtly *contradicts* the speaker's humble assessment of their life; they're saying it's "little," or insignificant, yet the alliteration—and the fact that they think it's worth "scanning" in the first place—suggest otherwise!

Note that this first line, like many lines in this poem, ends in a dash. Dickinson's poetry is famous for such dashes. Here, as is often the case, the dash suggests a sense of hesitancy (or "caution") as the speaker tries to articulate what exactly they were "scann[ing]" their "life" for.

The dash also controls the poem's pacing. Like any punctuation mark, a dash slows the reader down and directs them on how to proceed. But unlike other forms of punctuation, a dash has a certain slipperiness to it. Here, the dash might suggest that this thought is breaking off and giving way to another, or it might suggest that the speaker will go on to elaborate on this thought in the following line. The only way to know for sure is to keep reading!

LINES 2-4

I winnowed what would fade
From what would last till Heads like mine
Should be a'dreaming laid.

The speaker elaborates on what they meant by "scann[ing]" their "life":

> I winnowed what would fade
> From what would last till Heads like mine
> Should be a'dreaming laid.

Winnowing is a process farmers use to remove the chaff (husks and other unusable debris) from wheat or grain. This process can involve throwing the wheat or grain into the air repeatedly, allowing the wind to pass through and carry the chaff away.

The speaker is using this farming metaphor to describe the process of sorting through their thoughts, feelings, and memories (all the things that comprise their "little life"). They do this in order to figure out which bits are significant enough to hang on to (perhaps by immortalizing them in a poem?) and which bits should be left to "fade."

The intense, whooshing /w/ alliteration of "winnowed what would fade" draws attention to this important metaphor. It also subtly evokes the sound of the wind moving through wheat, whisking away the useless chaff and leaving only the hearty, nutritious parts behind.

The speaker never explicitly says what their own "wheat"—the valuable, meaty part of their life—actually consists of, allowing readers to interpret the poem in a number of ways:

- Again, it sounds somewhat like they're referring to writing poetry, a process by which they sift through their thoughts/ideas/memories and commit only the most important ones to paper.
- At the same time, the speaker might more broadly be referring to the act of stripping away the material, ephemeral parts of their life (like their appearance, finances, and so forth), leaving behind only those parts that "last": the deeper beliefs that make them who they are.
- One of these enduring parts of the speaker's life might be their faith in God.

By now it's clear that the poem is written in common meter (which, perhaps not coincidentally, is also the traditional measure of church hymns): each four-line stanza (quatrain) alternates between lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. This means that the first and third lines of every stanza are made up of four iambs (again, four da-DUMs), while the second and fourth lines are made up of three iambs (three da-DUMs). Here are lines 3 and 4 scanned:

> From what | would last | till Heads | like mine
> Should be | a'dream- | ing laid.

Common meter also means that the poem follows a specific rhyme scheme in which every second and fourth line rhyme with each other, creating an ABCB pattern (for example, "fade" and "laid").

Altogether, the rhythm created by all this meter and rhyme is comforting and familiar. and it suggests the speaker's confidence and faith in those things they are counting on to "last"—be it their faith in God or their faith in poetry as a container for memory.

LINES 5-6

I put the latter in a Barn—
The former, blew away.

The speaker builds on the farming metaphor introduced in the first stanza. Having "winnowed" their life, they "put the latter" (i.e., the things they decided would "last") into a "Barn." The parts that "would fade," meanwhile, are left outside to be swept "away" by the wind.

The speaker wants to keep the lasting parts of their "little life"—their precious memories, their faith in God, etc.—safe, just as a farmer keeps their crop safe by putting it into a barn for the winter.

That barn itself might symbolize the poetry that the speaker writes to commemorate important moments of their life.

Poems, perhaps, provide a kind of structure for the speaker's feelings, ideas, perceptions, and so forth. It's also possible that this barn is meant to illustrate just how secure their belief in God's goodness is: this faith is stored away for safekeeping from the rest of the world.

Notice the punctuation in these two lines:

> I put the latter in a Barn—
> The former, blew away.

The dash after "Barn" has a very different effect than the period that follows "away." The period suggests finality: those things that have blown away are not coming back.

By contrast, the dash after "Barn" is less resolute; there's a sense that the speaker will come back to this thought in a moment. There's also a comma in the middle of line 6, creating a caesura between the words "former" and "blew." This caesura allows for the tiniest pause, one in which the speaker—and the reader—perhaps acknowledges all those things that the speaker let the wind take from them.

Though it's rather spaced out and subtle, /b/ alliteration connects "Barn" in line 5 with "blew" in line 6, highlighting the contrast between what happens to those things the speaker deems impermanent and those they expect to "last." That is, while the less important things get carried away in the wind, the stationary "Barn" should keep the rest firmly in place.

Finally, these lines continue the metrical pattern established in the first stanza of the poem. That is, line 5 is in iambic tetrameter (four iambs), while line 6 is in iambic trimeter (three iambs). The consistency of meter from stanza one to the first half of stanza two suggests that nothing out of the ordinary has happened so far in the poem; things are transpiring in just the way the speaker expected them to.

LINES 7-10

> *I went one winter morning*
> *And lo—my priceless Hay*
> *Was not upon the "Scaffold"—*
> *Was not upon the "Beam"—*

In lines 7-10, everything changes: those things the speaker carefully tucked into the "Barn" for safekeeping suddenly go missing.

The speaker explains that they returned to the barn "one winter morning" and found that their "priceless Hay" (a metaphor for those parts of their life they wanted to preserve) was nowhere to be found.

Listen to the meter of line 7, which subtly signals that something is about to shift in the speaker's world:

> I went | one wint- | er morn- | ing

While this line is still written in iambic tetrameter, it's also catalectic: it's missing its final stressed syllable, and as a result something feels ever so slightly *off* here.

Listen, too, to the strong /w/ alliteration in line 7: "I went one winter morning." This draws attention to this pivotal moment in the poem, and it also recalls the "winnow[ing]" wind that came and "blew away" other parts of the speaker's life. It's as though the wind has somehow made it into the barn, whipping the speaker's life into disarray.

Given that the speaker has been using metaphorical language throughout the poem so far, it seems likely that the "winter" they mention here is more *symbolic* than literal. That is, perhaps the speaker is returning to the "Barn" during a difficult, barren season of their life, a time when they are in particular need of their memories and/or faith.

Note the caesura that appears in line 8:

> And lo—my priceless Hay

The exclamatory word "lo" already expresses amazement or disbelief, and the dash that follows heightens the sense of asontishment at this moment. The pause here allows the reader to *feel* the speaker's bewilderment; it interrupts the line just as the shock of their missing "Hay" interrupts the speaker's life.

The next few lines are then filled with a sense of building panic. The speaker enjambs line 8, for example, and in doing so thrusts the reader swiftly past an entire stanza break:

> And lo—my priceless Hay
> Was not upon the "Scaffold"—

This enjambment evokes the speaker's growing panic as they realize that their hay is missing. The anaphora of lines 9-10 add yet more frantic energy to the poem:

> Was not upon the "Scaffold"—
> Was not upon the "Beam"—

The repetitive langue here suggests that the speaker is desperately looking around yet not seeing their hay *anywhere*. The dashes after each line also help to evoke the speaker's uncertainty and dismay.

"Scaffold" refers to a raised platform within a barn on which farmers pile crops, while "Beam" refers to the rafters or planks that support the ceiling of a building. The quotation marks around these words remind the reader that the speaker is still inside a *metaphorical* "Barn." On a figurative level, then, these lines suggest that the speaker's poetry has lost its meaning or that the speaker is struggling to maintain their faith:

- The structural components of the barn still exist, but

they're devoid of the crops they were built to support.
- Symbolically, this suggests that the speaker's poetry, prayers, etc. are still there, but they no longer inspire the intense feelings/faith that the speaker trusted them to preserve.

LINES 11-12

And from a thriving Farmer—
A Cynic, I became.

As a result of the sudden and unexpected disappearance of their "Hay," the speaker essentially transforms into a different person. They're no longer "a thriving Farmer" and instead have become a "Cynic." A cynic can refer to someone who's skeptical/doubtful or, in older usage, to someone who's rude/ungracious.

The speaker once dutifully nurtured their thoughts/memories/faith just as a "Farmer" tends to their crops; now, however, the speaker is confused, irked, and unsure of the value of tending to the metaphorical "crops" of their own life (i.e., those things that "would last").

The speaker is basically asking, *"What's the point of so carefully trying to preserve your thoughts, feelings, memories, and so forth if they can so easily disappear? Why try to save parts of your life in writing, if that writing is just going to become meaningless later on? Why tend to your faith in God if you can't count on that faith for comfort when times get tough?"* After all, if a "Farmer" were to find their "Barn" empty mid-winter, then surely they would find themselves equally dubious about the merits of farming!

Notice the syntax and punctuation of line 12:

> A Cynic, I became.

The comma after "Cynic" creates a caesura in the middle of the line. This pause not only emphasizes the word "Cynic," but it also evokes the way the speaker's life has been thrown off course by this sudden disappearance of their hay.

On the one hand, the strange word order here mostly seems to be in service of the rhyme scheme (the line needed to end on "became" in order to echo "Beam" from line 10 and thus maintain the poem's ABCB rhyme pattern). At the same time, the fact that the line ends on the word "became" rather than "Cynic" emphasizes the *transformation* of the speaker by this event. That is, on this "winter morning," their whole life *changed* as they began to question things they had previously taken for granted: the efficacy of poetry for preserving important thoughts and feelings, and the belief that God would always be a source of comfort.

It's also worth observing that while the poem maintains its ABCB rhyme scheme, the rhyme in stanza 3 is slant: that is, "Beam" and "became" aren't as obvious a rhyme as "fade" and "laid," for example. This imperfect rhyme echoes the somewhat disrupted meter in lines 7, 9, and 11—all of which are catalectic, meaning that they are missing a final, stressed syllable:

- I went | one win- | ter morn- | ing
- Was not | upon | the "Scaf- | fold"—
- And from | a thri- | ving Farm- | er—

These rhythmic imperfections suggest that the speaker's previously predictable, steady beliefs are being tested—and possibly even upended.

LINES 13-16

Whether a thief did it—
Whether it was the wind—
Whether Deity's guiltless—
My business is, to find!

The speaker again turns to anaphora in stand 4, as they wonder who or what stole their "Hay":

> Whether a thief did it—
> Whether it was the wind—
> Whether Deity's guiltless—

As with the anaphora of "Was not upon" in the previous stanza, this repetitive language conveys a sense of searching confusion. The dashes at the end of these lines also add to the feeling that the speaker is whirling around, frantically searching for answers.

Let's take a closer look at the potential suspects here:

- "A thief" suggests that someone broke into the speaker's barn and stole their hay. Perhaps this refers to someone else reading their poetry and misunderstanding its message, or to someone who caused the speaker harm and eroded their faith in God.
- Next, the speaker wonders if the culprit "was the wind." This recalls their statement earlier in the poem that the ephemeral parts of their life "blew away." If the wind also stole "what would last," then this would suggest that *nothing* can ever really be preserved. Memory, emotion, faith—it's *all* fleeting. And perhaps poetry isn't the protective container they thought it was.
- Finally, the speaker wonders if "Deity" (i.e., God) had something to do with this. The mention of God again points to the question of faith; perhaps the speaker doubts that a truly benevolent God would let a loss like this occur.

This list is only the *beginning* of the speaker's quest for answers. Indeed, they go on to say that it's now their "business" to "find"

out what happened to their "Hay."

The anaphora and dashes throughout this stanza ramp up the poem's momentum and convey the franticness of the speaker's search. The poem's shifting meter in these lines also feels particularly swift. While so far each stanza has alternated between lines of tetrameter (four feet per line) and trimeter (three feet per line), the lines in this stanza are a little shorter.

Lines 13-14 also all start with trochees (feet made up of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable, the opposite of an iamb), adding bursts of propulsive energy:

> Whether | a thief | did it—
> Whether | it was | the wind—
> Whether | Deity's | guiltless—

Line 13 ends in a spondee (two stressed beats in a row, "did it"). Line 15 features a dactyl (stressed-unstressed-unstressed, "Deity's") followed by another arguable spondee ("guiltless"). These variations add yet more force and frantic energy to the poem.

Finally, the last line of this stanza switches to the present tense: the speaker's "business is," not "was." All in all, these slight deviations from the established meter quicken this stanza up, evoking the speaker's dizzying search for answers.

LINES 17-20

> *So I begin to ransack!*
> *How is it Hearts, with Thee?*
> *Art thou within the little Barn*
> *Love provided Thee?*

The poem's final stanza is written entirely in the present tense, making the speaker's search for their "priceless Hay" feel more immediate and urgent.

The speaker declares, "So I begin to ransack!" In other words, they start rummaging through the "Barn" in search of their missing hay. The word "ransack" is interesting here, as it conveys a messy, careless search that causes damage. The speaker was "cautious" when they first sifted through their life; now, they're decidedly *incautious* as they desperately comb through the barn.

The speaker then asks, "How is it Hearts, with Thee?" The speaker seems to be calling out to their "priceless Hay," which represents the lasting parts of their life that they stored in the barn for safekeeping. Again, it's possible to read the poem as a kind of extended metaphor for the process of writing poetry; in this interpretation, the speaker is addressing the memories or feelings that they'd tried to keep safe within their poetry (represented here by the barn). Just as a body without a heart can't live, this metaphor implies that the speaker's poems feel limp and empty if they don't evoke the precious experiences (and perhaps memories of a specific person) they were written to preserve.

The next question—"Art thou within the little Barn / Love provided Thee?"—is also loaded with significance. The speaker built this barn through "Love," but these final lines suggest that this love wasn't necessarily strong enough to keep them safe.

The fact that the speaker ends with these two questions proves just how uncertain they've become—about poetry's ability to safeguard their precious memories, and about a God who would let such memories "fade." They haven't given up on their search for answers (in fact, it seems their search has just begun), but they can't be sure they'll ever find what they're looking for.

SYMBOLS

WINTER

Winter often symbolizes death, hardship, and barrenness. Because the poem uses farming metaphors, it's also worth thinking about what winter means for a farmer: this is a time when nothing grows, and when harvested "Hay" must be kept safe from the elements. A farmer may store their "priceless Hay" in a barn to protect it from frost.

These metaphors suggest that the "winter" of this poem is a symbolic one rather than a literal one. The speaker is perhaps going through a difficult time in their life and so reaches for their "priceless Hay"—the precious parts of their life (their beliefs, memories, faith, etc.) that they tucked away for safekeeping.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "I went one winter morning"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration adds musicality to the poem and emphasizes certain words and phrases. For example, in the very first line, gentle /l/ alliteration draws attention to the phrase "little life." The phrase sounds delicate and quick, emphasizing the speaker's humble existence.

In the next two lines, listen to the thick /w/ alliteration as the speaker separates things that will "fade" from things that will "last":

> I winnowed what would fade
> From what would last till Heads like mine

Winnowing is the process by which farmers separate the wheat grain from the chaff using airflow (which disperses the lighter chaff). The alliteration here subtly evokes the whoosh of the wind that carries the metaphorical "chaff" of the speaker's life away. This windy sound appears throughout the poem, in fact, as with the /w/ consonance in line 6 ("blew away") and the alliteration in line 14 ("Whether it was the wind").

There's also insistent /w/ alliteration in line 7, calling to mind the chilly winter air:

> I went one winter morning

This alliteration emphasizes a meaningful turning point in the poem: in the midst of a symbolic "winter" (i.e., a difficult season of their life), the speaker returns to the metaphorical "Barn" where they've stored their "Hay" only to find it isn't there. Alliteration imbues this line with intensity, alerting the reader that something important is about to happen.

There are other alliterative sounds in the poem as well. Take the bold /b/ alliteration of "business" and "begin" in lines 16-17, which adds some force and energy to the speaker's declaration of intent.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "little," "life"
- **Line 2:** "winnowed," "what," "would"
- **Line 3:** "what," "would"
- **Line 5:** "Barn"
- **Line 6:** "blew"
- **Line 7:** "went," "one," "winter"
- **Line 14:** "Whether," "was," "wind"
- **Line 16:** "business"
- **Line 17:** "begin"
- **Line 18:** "How," "Hearts"

ANAPHORA

There are many examples of anaphora in the poem, which create some rhythmic momentum and also emphasize the speaker's state of mind.

In the first two stanzas, for example, the speaker repeatedly begins lines with the personal pronoun "I." This makes sense, given that the poem focuses on the speaker examining, and trying to save the most important parts of, their own life.

Note, too, that there are fewer "I" sentences in the latter half of the poem, which might subtly reflect the speaker's loss of control; they attempted to preserve "what would last" in their metaphorical "Barn," only for that "priceless Hay" to disappear. The shift away from "I" phrases (with the exception of "I became" and "I begin") conveys the speaker's sudden "cynical" confusion and desperation.

The other examples of alliteration in the poem evoke similar feelings. In lines 9-10, for example, the speaker says their missing "Hay"

> Was not upon the "Scaffold"—
> Was not upon the "Beam"—

This repetition suggests the frantic, exhaustive nature of the speaker's search; they're looking this way and that for what they've lost.

And in lines 13-15, anaphora drives home the speaker's bewilderment as they aren't sure who or what to blame for this disappearance:

> Whether a thief did it—
> Whether it was the wind—
> Whether Deity's guiltless—

The word "Whether" reflects the speaker's doubt; they really don't know what happened! As in the previous example, anaphora suggests that these aren't the *only* choices, but rather three of many possible culprits.

Both these lines and lines 9-10 also feature the device asyndeton. The lack of any coordinating conjunctions speeds up the poem and hammers home the speaker's panic. Together, anaphora, asyndeton, and the consistent uses of dashes at the end of these lines convey the hurried way the speaker is tossing these options out, as if they're just the first possibilities that have come to mind.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I"
- **Line 2:** "I"
- **Line 5:** "I"
- **Line 7:** "I"
- **Line 9:** "Was not upon the"
- **Line 10:** "Was not upon the"
- **Line 13:** "Whether"
- **Line 14:** "Whether"
- **Line 15:** "Whether"

METAPHOR

The poem relies on a central, extended metaphor: the speaker/poet compares taking stock of their life to a farmer winnowing wheat. This is the process by which a farmer separates the wheat grain from the chaff (or the surrounding husk). Winnowing is usually done using air currents (from a fan or, traditionally, just the wind), which carry away the lightweight chaff and leaves the nutritious grain behind.

The speaker metaphorically applies this process to their own life, "scanning" it in order to separate "what would fade" from "what would last":

- These "fading" parts of the speaker's life—the metaphorical chaff—might refer to ephemeral things like wealth, appearance, etc. The speaker lets all these fleeting, insignificant things be blown "away."
- The parts that are left behind—the metaphorical grain of the speaker's life—might refer to things like the speaker's faith in God, their ideals, and their most precious memories. The speaker calls this their "priceless Hay," which they place in a "Barn."

That barn, in turn, might represent poetry itself:

- Poetry, like a barn, provides a structure for the speaker's "hay"—their thoughts, feelings, etc.
- In this interpretation, the poet uses writing to house and safeguard their memories the way a "Farmer" keeps their "Hay" safe in a barn throughout the winter.

Alternatively, that barn might more broadly represent a journal or diary of some sort, or simply a part of the speaker's own mind.

However readers interpret the metaphor, it's clear that when the speaker's "Hay" (i.e., whatever the speaker was trying to preserve, be it thoughts, feelings, or specific memories) goes missing, the speaker becomes distraught. They go from being a "thriving Farmer" (i.e., a Farmer who successfully stores their crops) to a "Cynic"—someone who doesn't know what to believe.

- That this happens in "winter" implies that the speaker went to check on their hay during a difficult time in their life.
- Perhaps they needed the comfort of their faith or memories at this moment, yet they were nowhere to be found.

The speaker goes looking for their "priceless Hay," but can't find it "upon the 'Scaffold'" or "upon the 'Beam'." These words describe the infrastructure of a "Barn," but the poem uses quotation marks around them to remind the reader that they are only being used to support the central metaphor:

- Again interpreting the poem as about poetry itself, these structural terms might reflect the *formal elements* of a poem—things like its meter, stanza length, and rhyme scheme.
- Perhaps the poem, now that they are reading back over it, doesn't do their memories justice or doesn't match the intensity of the feelings or experiences themselves.

At the end of the poem, the speaker addresses their missing "Hearts" directly, calling out to the "Love"/feelings/memories that they'd tried to preserve:

- The "Heart" is the beating center of the body. As such, these lines imply that the speaker's poetry or faith can't *live* without these hearts.
- If a poem fails to evoke the speaker's feelings/memories in all their intensity, it's as if its "Heart" has gone missing.
- In another interpretation of the poem, the speaker is saying that their trust in God feels hollow, lacking the deep faith it needs to survive.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "I put the latter in a Barn—"
- **Lines 8-11:** "And lo—my priceless Hay / Was not upon the "Scaffold"— / Was not upon the "Beam"— / And from a thriving Farmer—"
- **Line 18:** "How is it Hearts, with Thee?"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Art thou within the little Barn / Love provided Thee?"

CAESURA

Caesura creates dramatic pauses within lines and directs the reader's attention toward certain words. Listen to the caesura in line 1, for example:

I cautious, scanned my little life—

This caesura creates a pause that evokes the speaker's "caution," or carefulness, as they sort through their experiences to find "what would last." By slowing the reader down, the reader gets to *feel* the slow and thoughtful way the speaker proceeds with this task.

The most striking caesura in the poem appears in line 8, with the dash after "lo" (a word that expresses surprise):

And lo—my priceless Hay

This caesura creates a dramatic pause, heightening the reader's anticipation: what exactly has the speaker discovered this "winter morning"? The pause also results in greater emphasis falling on the subsequent phrase ("my priceless Hay"), which is an important part of the poem's central metaphor.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "cautious, scanned"
- **Line 6:** "former, blew"
- **Line 8:** "lo—my"
- **Line 12:** "Cynic, I"

- **Line 16:** "is, to"
- **Line 18:** "Hearts, with"

VOCABULARY

Cautious (Line 1) - Careful or tentative.

Scanned (Line 1) - Examined or looked closely at. Note that "scansion" is also a poetic term describing the act of sussing out a poem's meter.

Winnowed (Line 2) - Sorted or sifted through. The term is often used specifically to refer to the process by which farmers separate the wheat grain from the chaff (or husk).

A'dreaming laid (Line 4) - Laid to rest.

Latter (Line 5) - The second of the two aforementioned things (in this case, whatever it is the speaker decided "would last" until they die).

Former (Line 6) - The first of the two aforementioned things (in this case, whatever it is the speaker decided "would fade").

Lo (Line 8) - An exclamation meant to direct attention to something incredible or unbelievable.

Scaffold (Line 9) - When used in reference to farming, this refers to a platform within a barn for piling crops.

Beam (Line 10) - A rafter that supports the roof or second story of a building.

Cynic (Line 12) - A skeptic; someone who is distrustful or full of doubt. In older usage, a "Cynic" could also refer to someone who was rude, grumpy, or impolite.

Whether Deity's guiltless (Line 15) - The speaker is wondering whether God ("Deity") might be to blame (if God is "guilty" or not).

Ransack (Line 17) - To urgency scour or rummage through something.

Thou/Thee (Line 18, Line 19, Line 20) - Old-fashioned words for "you."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"I cautious, scanned my little life" takes the form of a lyrical ballad. This means the poem is made up of quatrains (four-line stanzas) written in common meter and that the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme with each other.

Dickinson uses this form quite often in poetry. It mimics the rhythms of the religious hymns she would have known well, and the steady pattern of meter and rhyme lends her often complex, abstract observations some predictable, memorable music.

METER

The poem is written in common meter, meaning its lines alternate between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. An iamb is a metrical foot consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable; a line of iambic tetrameter is made up of four iambs (four da-DUMs, eight syllables), while a line of iambic trimeter is made up of three iambs (three da-DUMs, six syllables).

Listen to this pattern at work in the poem's first two lines:

I cau- | tious, scanned | my lit- | tle life—
I win- | nowed what | would fade

Overall, this steady pattern adds predictable music to the poem. There are some interesting variations, however, that call readers' attention to important moments.

Listen, for example, to line 7:

I went | one wint- | er morn- | ing

This line is *catalectic*, meaning that it's missing its final beat. Readers expect to hear a final stress that never comes; as a result, the line peters out with an awkward, unfinished feel, indicating that something is slightly off—which is precisely the case: in the following lines the speaker goes on to reveal that their "Hay" has gone missing! The slight blip in the poem's rhythm thus alerts the reader to the fact that something is about to shift in the poem.

After this initial hiccup, the poem never quite settles back into the perfect iambic meter that preceded it. Line 9 and line 11, for example, are also both catalectic (both end with a dangling unstressed beat: "Scaffold"/"Farmer"), and lines 13-15 are even more irregular:

Whether | a thief | did it—
Whether | it was | the wind—
Whether | Deity's | guiltless—

These three lines each begin with a trochee, a foot that is comprised of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable (so the *opposite* of an iamb). This trips up the rhythm and places emphasis on the repeated word, "Whether," which signals the speaker's uncertainty about what happened to their "Hay."

Furthermore, line 13 is missing a full foot; there are just six syllables here instead of the expected eight of a line of tetrameter. It also ends in a spondee (two stressed beats in a row, "did it"), adding frantic energy to the speaker's search.

Line 15 is also catalectic and contains *three* non-iambic feet.

Again, the opening foot is a trochee ("Whether"). "Deity's" is then a dactyl (stressed-unstressed-unstressed, "Deity's"). And readers might scan "guiltless" as another spondee ("guiltless") or another trochee ("guiltless"). Either way, this isn't the iamb readers have come to expect!

Together these variations disrupt the smooth rhythm of the poem, evoking the speaker's distress over their sudden and unanticipated loss. Notice that line 16 then returns to normal ("My bus- | iness is, | to find!"), suggesting that although the speaker is shaken by this experience, they haven't given up hope that things will return to normal and they'll find what they're looking for.

The poem then ends with a final variation:

Love | provi- | ded Thee?

This is something known as *headless* catalexis: the line is missing its *opening* unstressed beat (which should appear before "Love"). Beginning the line with the stressed "Love" adds emphasis to this word, calling attention to the care with which the speaker constructed this metaphorical barn.

RHYME SCHEME

As is typical for lyrical ballads, this poem follows a straightforward rhyme scheme in which the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme with each other. Mapping out the first two stanzas, this looks like:

ABCB DEFE

In the first two stanzas, these rhymes are exact and therefore easy to hear: "fade"/"laid," "away"/"Hay."

Beginning in the third stanza, however, the end rhymes become more subtle. "Beam" and "became" create a slant rhyme, as do "wind" and "find" in the fourth stanza. Not coincidentally, these less obvious rhymes appear when the speaker realizes that their "priceless Hay" is gone and begins to frantically search for it. The shift from a clear, straightforward rhyme scheme to these off-kilter slant rhymes evokes the shift in the speaker's worldview: they've become a "Cynic," as their faith—in writing or in God—is being tested.

The final stanza then uses an identical rhyme as the speaker repeats the word "Thee" at the ends of lines 18 and 20. This repeated word calls repeated attention to the object of the speaker's search: the "Hearts" that they sought to keep safe.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "I cautious, scanned my little life" is carefully examining their life in an attempt to separate the most important, enduring parts from the parts that will fade away in time. They compare this process to the way a farmer winnows wheat, separating the nutritious grain from the useless husk.

The speaker then places the most precious parts of their life into a metaphorical "Barn," much like a farmer stores hay for winter.

The speaker never reveals what, exactly, their "priceless Hay" consists of. This. hay might represent to the speaker's thoughts, feelings, and memories—the pieces of themselves that they believe make them who they are. The hay might also refer to the speaker's faith in God.

What's clear above all is that the speaker wants to keep this hay safe. The barn in which they store it might be a metaphor for poetry itself: in this reading, the speaker is a poet who uses their writing as a container for their memories, emotions, etc. The barn might also represent part of the speaker's mind, a sort of internal chamber where they keep their faith, beliefs, and so forth.

Either way, when the speaker returns to this metaphorical barn, they find that their hay—their memories and/or their faith—is gone. At this point, the speaker experiences a profound shift in the way they think about the world. They go from being a "thriving Farmer"—that is, someone who produces and nurtures something—to a "Cynic," someone filled with doubt and resentment. They've lost faith—perhaps in writing's capacity to store important thoughts and feelings, and perhaps in God. At the same time, they still maintain some degree of hope that this is all some huge misunderstanding—that what they're looking for can still be "f[oun]d."

Note that the speaker is anonymous and genderless; the reader learns nothing about who they are or where they're from. That said, Dickinson was, of course, a writer, and she also grappled with her faith throughout her life. It's reasonable, then, to interpret the speaker here as a representation of the poet herself.

SETTING

The setting of "I cautious, scanned my little life" is entirely metaphorical. Though the speaker describes putting "Hay" in a "Barn" and coming back in the "winter" to find it missing, neither the "Hay" nor the "Barn" nor even the "winter" is real. Instead, the "Hay" is a metaphor for the speaker's thoughts, memories, and feelings, while the "Barn," in one interpretation, is a metaphor for the poems the speaker wrote to preserve said memories. (One might also interpret the "Hay" as the speaker's faith in God.) The "winter" is likely meant to symbolize a difficult time in the speaker's life, or perhaps their sense of emptiness when they discover that their hay is missing.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Though Emily Dickinson published only a handful of poems during her lifetime, it would be a mistake to view her *only* as a literary recluse or to think that she didn't intend for her poetry to be read in the future. She ordered many of her poems into sequences that she then sewed together into fascicles (or booklets); "I cautious, scanned my little life" was included in one of these fascicles and dated to 1860.

Though she wrote in the mid to late 1800s, some critics class Dickinson as a proto-modernist (a 20th-century literary movement) for her psychological subtlety and experimentation with form. She was, certainly, one of the greatest voices of American Romanticism, a school of thought that believed in the importance of the self, nature, and one's individual relationship with God.

Dickinson's thought and work were also influenced by the English Romantics of a generation or two before her, including William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge; by contemporary American transcendentalist writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson; by the novels of the Victorian English writer Charlotte Bronte; and by Shakespeare.

Growing up in a religious community meant Dickinson was also familiar with the Book of Common Prayer. Her poems can be thought of as engaging both with the form and content of these prayers. For example, this poem showcases her characteristic common meter and touches on the questions of faith that Dickinson came back to again and again in her work. (Consider her pithy "Faith is a fine invention.")

"I cautious, scanned my little life" is also part of a long-running tradition of poems about poetry itself. But while literary history is full of poets making bold claims about the merits of their "everlasting" poetry (Shakespeare's "Sonnet 55," for example), this poem suggests there are some things that poetry/writing may *fail* to preserve or express. Some contemporary poems that explore similar themes are "Stillborn" by Sylvia Plath and "The Failure of Language" by Jacqueline Berger.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dickinson's most active writing years coincided with one of the most tumultuous times in American history: the Civil War (1861 to 1865). However, Dickinson rarely addressed the political world around her directly in her poetry, preferring either to write about her immediate surroundings or to take a much wider philosophical perspective.

Dickinson also grew up in a religious community and came of age during the religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening. Dickinson herself was even swept up by this religious movement for a time. Though she ultimately rejected organized religion, her poems remain preoccupied with theological concerns. Many express wonder about the afterlife, often speculating—sometimes exuberantly—on what it's like to meet God and Jesus, if that is in fact what happens when people die (something Dickinson wasn't sure about).

Dickinson also often questions the existence of God in her work—an activity that would have been scandalously at odds with her community. Yet though her work can be irreverent, even blasphemous, as she tests out what exactly she believes, her mind was irrevocably touched by Christianity. This poem's metaphor about a "Farmer [winnowing]" the chaff from the "Hay," for instance, could be read as an allusion to Matthew 3:12, in which God is described "winnowing" believers from non-believers.

Note that at this point, Dickinson's life had already been touched by the deaths of relatives and friends. Her cousin Sophia Holland and friend Benjamin Franklin Newton had both died, and their losses affected her deeply.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Life of Emily Dickinson — A biography of the poet from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem by Julie Harris. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYnwkgZWue0)
- Meter and Rhyme in Dickinson's Poetry — An in-depth look at Dickinson's idiosyncratic use of meter and rhyme. (https://poemshape.wordpress.com/2009/01/18/emily-dickinson-iambic-meter-and-rhyme/)
- A Timeline of Dickinson's Life — A timeline of major events in Emily Dickinson's life, provided by the Emily Dickinson Museum. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/a-timeline/)
- The Poem in Dickinson's Hand — A copy of the poem found in one of Dickinson's handwritten fascicles, dated 1860. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/12173896)
- A Glimpse of How Winnowing Works — A short video which depicts winnowing, the process through which chaff is removed from wheat. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G_gfgxkZryM)

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
- An awful Tempest mashed the air—

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