I measure every Grief I meet

POEM TEXT

I measure every Grief I meet
With narrow, probing, Eyes —
I wonder if It weighs like Mine —
Or has an Easier size.

I wonder if They bore it long —
Or did it just begin —
I could not tell the Date of Mine —
It feels so old a pain —

I wonder if it hurts to live —
And if They have to try —
And whether — could They choose between—
It would not be — to die —

I note that Some — gone patient long —
At length, renew their smile —
An imitation of a Light
That has so little Oil —

I wonder if when Years have piled —
Some Thousands — on the Harm —
That hurt them early — such a lapse
Could give them any Balm —

Or would they go on aching still
Through Centuries of Nerve —
Enlightened to a larger Pain —
In Contrast with the Love —

The Grieved — are many — I am told —
There is the various Cause —
Death — is but one — and comes but once —
And only nails the eyes —

There's Grief of Want — and Grief of Cold —
A sort they call "Despair" —
There's Banishment from native Eyes —
In sight of Native Air —

And though I may not guess the kind —
Correctly — yet to me
A piercing Comfort it affords
In passing Calvary —

To note the fashions — of the Cross —
And how they're mostly worn —
Still fascinated to presume
That Some — are like My Own —

SUMMARY

I evaluate other people's sorrow with focused, curious eyes. I wonder whether that sorrow is as heavy as my own or whether it's easier to bear.

I wonder whether the person has carried their sorrow for a long time, or whether it just started. I couldn't tell you when mine began; the pain feels so old.

I wonder whether it's painful for them to live, whether they struggle to keep going, and whether—if they had the choice—they wouldn't rather die.

I notice that some people, after years of patient suffering, eventually start smiling again, with a smile as dim as an oil lamp that's low on oil.

I wonder whether, after thousands of years have passed since the trauma that originally grieved them, the lapse of time might bring them any comfort.

Or would they still be in pain despite centuries of courage, awakened to an even greater suffering than great love?

Many people feel sorrow, I'm told, and for many different reasons. Death is one reason, and it only comes once, and only shuts the eyes.

There's also the sorrow of wanting, and the sorrow of being cold, and a kind known as "despair." There's the sorrow of being exiled from your people while still living close to home.

While I might not correctly guess which kind of sorrow someone is feeling, I still feel a poignant comfort in passing by their versions of Christ's torment.

I find comfort in noticing what kinds of crosses people are bearing these days, and how they tend to bear them. And I'm still captivated by the thought that some of their sorrows resemble my own.

THEMES

THE NATURE OF GRIEF

The speaker of "I measure every Grief I meet" can't help but compare everyone else's suffering to her own. She wonders if other people's grief is somehow heavier or lighter, whether it eases with time, and what its origins are. While the speaker ultimately concedes that she can't truly *know* anything about anyone else's grief, the simple knowledge that others may suffer as she does helps her feel a little less alone. In this way, the poem suggests that grief is at once deeply personal and an experience that binds people together.

The poem begins with the speaker's frank admission that she finds herself examining everyone else's grief, trying to understand whether other people feel "weigh[ed]" down as she does or whether their pain is somehow "Easier" to bear. The speaker also wonders how other people deal with their grief. Her own "feels so old" that she can't remember when it started, but she notices that, in time, some grieving people "renew their smile." This would seem to suggest that not everyone's suffering "weighs" the same, even if the speaker implies that these smiling people are only faking their former happiness.

Deep down, the speaker recognizes that she can't really understand what anyone else is going through. There are many sources of grief, she observes, from the experience of constant "Cold" to a harder-to-define "Despair." Though she can't help but compare others' grief to her own, she acknowledges that grief comes in too many forms to allow accurate "measur[ing]." No matter how hard she tries, she can never "guess the kind" of pain someone else is suffering; she can only imagine it based on her own experiences.

Still, by imagining other people's suffering, the speaker gains "piercing Comfort." Even if she can't grasp the exact nature of others' pain, just knowing that others experience pain at all makes her feel poignantly connected to them. She goes so far as to imagine "passing Calvary" (Calvary being the site of Christ's crucifixion, or a representation of that event). Other people's suffering reminds her of Jesus's suffering for humankind, which helps her find some kind of meaning in her own suffering. In other words, pain connects her to others and maybe even to something divine. As unknowable as others' grief may be, she finds consolation in "presum[ing]" (imagining) that some people's grief is "like [her] own."

The idea that she isn't suffering alone reminds her that grief is simply a part of life—something that can "Enlighten" people "to a larger Pain" as well as a larger "Love." Through the shared experience of grief, people can bond and empathize with each other, and maybe even understand the love that, according to Christian tradition, led Christ to die for them.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-40

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

I measure every Grief I meet
With narrow, probing, Eyes —
I wonder if It weighs like Mine —
Or has an Easier size.

The poem begins with a metaphor. The speaker describes "measur[ing]" everyone else's sorrow against her own, implying that she's trying to figure out whose grief is greater. She wants to know whether others are burdened as heavily as she is, or whether their sorrow is of "an Easier size" (i.e., not as difficult to live with). The fact that she does this "with narrow, probing Eyes" suggests that it isn't something she's forthright about; rather, this is a personal, internal obsession for her.

Right away, the poem creates musicality and rhythm through sonic devices: there's consonance (the /z/ sounds in "weighs," "Easier," and "size," for example), assonance (the short /eh/ sounds in "measure" and "every," the long /ee/ sounds in "Grief" and "meet"), and alliteration (the /m/ sounds at the beginnings of "measure" and "meet," as well as the /w/ sounds in "wonder" and "weighs").

The variety of sounds happening within and across lines gives the poem a rich, subtle texture that reflects the alertness and subtlety of the speaker's mind. This is a speaker who's constantly "measur[ing]," "probing," and "wonder[ing]." She isn't just examining other people's grief; she's attentively investigating the nature of grief itself.

The poem also uses common meter: its lines alternate between eight and six syllables apiece in iambic (da-DUM, da-DUM) rhythm, and follow an ABCB rhyme scheme. Here's an example of that meter in action in lines 1-2:

I mea- | sure ev- | ery Grief | I meet
With nar- | row, pro- | bing, Eyes —

Note that line 1 is iambic *tetramter* (four iambs, for a total of eight beats) whereas line 2 is iambic *trimeter* (three iambs, for a total of six beats). This meter gives the poem a feeling of formality, in keeping with both its grief theme and its speaker's reserved, observing tone. This first stanza also contains a clear, full rhyme between "Eyes" in line 2 and "size" in line four.

Finally, Dickinson's signature em dashes, seen here in lines 2 and 3, give the poem a hesitant, fragmentary feeling. Her eccentric capitalization (another signature effect) introduces further unpredictability, while sometimes lending emphasis to

certain words. For example, even Dickinson wouldn't normally capitalize a short pronoun like "it," but she does here (in line 3), suggesting that grief is so weighty that it's not an "it" but an "It."

LINES 5-8

I wonder if They bore it long —
Or did it just begin —
I could not tell the Date of Mine —
It feels so old a pain —

The second stanza begins with the speaker repeating "I wonder if," a phrase that first appeared at the start of line 3. This anaphora gives the poem momentum; the speaker seems propelled by curiosity about other people's grief.

The repetition of this phrase also highlights the speaker's uncertainty. Although she's keenly *interested* in grief, she doesn't claim to fully *understand* how it works. Instead, she follows her sense of "wonder" (or curiosity), questioning whether others have been grieving a long time or whether their grief has "just beg[u]n." She admits that her own grief is "so old a pain" that she can't even recall when it started—by now, it almost seems to be a part of her.

While the first stanza featured a full rhyme ("Eyes" and "size"), here's there's a slant rhyme: "begin" and "pain." Dickinson often uses such rhymes to undermine the hymn-like formality of her poems, making them rougher around the edges and giving them a quality of tension and doubt. Here, that rhyme suggests the muted nature of the speaker's grief. Whereas a full rhyme, like new grief, would draw attention to itself, this subtler rhyme mimics the way "old [...] pain" fades into the background of one's life.

The alliteration in the phrases "**b**ore it long" and "**b**egin" also emphasizes the contrast between an old pain and a new one—between someone who's been grieving a long time and someone in the throes of fresh sorrow.

LINES 9-12

I wonder if it hurts to live —
And if They have to try —
And whether — could They choose between—
It would not be — to die —

The third stanza continues the poem's use of anaphora, as the speaker once again "wonder[s]" something: this time, whether other grieving people find it hard to go on living.

Here, anaphora highlights the progression of the speaker's thoughts, which have escalated from measuring other people's grief to speculating whether those people might prefer to die. While the speaker doesn't come out and say that *she* would prefer dying to grieving, her questions do seem to suggest a certain weariness. Then again, perhaps knowing that other people "have to try"—struggle to go on living, just as she does—would provide some comfort.

The full end rhyme on "try" and "die" emphasizes the contrast between life, which requires constant effort, and death, which seems restful by comparison. The speaker knows that those who long for death are really longing for an end to their suffering. Sharp /t/ consonance ("hurts," "to," "try," "between") evokes the sharp pain of grief.

Lines 11 and 12 also contain caesuras (grammatical pauses within lines) marked by em dashes:

> And whether — could They choose between —
> It would not be — to die —

Caesura gives the passage a hesitant quality, as if the speaker is struggling to articulate her thoughts. This quality makes the passage sound more vulnerable, and perhaps revealing—though the speaker isn't explicitly sharing her own emotions.

LINES 13-16

I note that Some — gone patient long —
At length, renew their smile —
An imitation of a Light
That has so little Oil —

In this stanza, the speaker observes that at least some grieving people eventually "renew their smile"—that is, begin to look happy again. But she metaphorically compares their smiles to an oil lamp "That has so little Oil." In other words, their smiles are dimmer than they were before the grief. The speaker doesn't seem to believe that anyone who's experienced grief can ever be purely happy again.

Line 13 contains caesura (a grammatical pause within the line) as well as unusual syntax (word order):

> I note that Some — gone patient long —

Caesura places emphasis on the words before and after it—in this case, "Some" (also emphasized through capitalization) and "gone." In this way, it helps stress that the speaker's observation is true only for "Some" grieving people; others *never* go back to smiling.

"Gone" is emphasized not only by the caesura but also by its internal rhyme (which is also an imperfect rhyme) with "long." These effects help highlight the passage of time; the stressed, elongated vowels literally stretch out the sound of the line. The odd syntax (a more typical word order might be: "long gone patient") allows the line to end on the word "long," which also suggests *longing*.

An abundance of consonance adds to the musicality of the stanza. Note the repetitive /l/, /m/, and /ng/ sounds, for example:

I note that Some — gone patient long —
At length, renew their smile —
An imitation of a Light
That has so little Oil —

This consonance makes the language lilting and fluid—perhaps even a bit more pensive and thoughtful.

LINES 17-20

I wonder if when Years have piled —
Some Thousands — on the Harm —
That hurt them early — such a lapse
Could give them any Balm —

The fifth stanza begins with anaphora again ("I wonder if"), as the speaker returns from observation to curiosity. This time, she wonders whether any amount of time could ever soothe the pain of grieving. It's clear that she doesn't think a human lifetime is long enough to ease "the Harm," but would the passage of "Thousands" of years be a "Balm," or comfort?

Alliteration ("Harm"/"hurt," "wonder"/"when"), assonance ("hurt"/"early"), and consonance contribute to the rhythm of these lines:

I wonder if when Years have piled —
Some Thousands — on the Harm —
That hurt them early — such a lapse
Could give them any Balm —

The stanza also features an imperfect rhyme between "Harm" and "Balm." The contrast between the harder /r/ sound in "Harm" and the liquid /l/ sound in "Balm" helps evoke the contrast between pain and the easing of pain.

Both here and throughout the poem, the interplay between caesura, enjambment, end-stopping, and punctuation has complex rhythmic effects. For instance, line 17 doesn't contain any caesuras, but it's end-stopped with a dash. (Dashes tend to create uncertainty and suspense rather than a restful pause, as a comma or period might.) However, the normal rules of punctuation *would* insert a caesura between "if" and "when," and would *not* insert end-stopping punctuation after "piled." Similarly, the caesura in line 18 doesn't coincide with a standard grammatical pause—there wouldn't usually be punctuation of any kind here—so it reads as a strange interruption.

The overall effect of these unusual rhythms is a kind of lurching uncertainty, as if the speaker is navigating a wilderness of thoughts. Grief, to her, isn't something cut and dried; it's endlessly confusing and compelling.

LINES 21-24

Or would they go on aching still
Through Centuries of Nerve —
Enlightened to a larger Pain —
In Contrast with the Love —

Stanza 6 expands on the question posed in stanza 5. The speaker considers the possibility that even thousands of years would not be enough to stop grieving people from "aching." She imagines their pain continuing "Through Centuries of Nerve"; in other words, through centuries of willful strength and determination.

What would be the reward for such courage? The speaker speculates that such an experience might lead to "Englighten[ment]." Perhaps living so long with grief would make one more aware of a "larger Pain"—that is, a shared suffering that connects all of humanity. This pain draws a sharp "Contrast" with a greater "Love." What exactly this love is, and where it comes from, is unclear. It seems, though, that love and pain are two sides of the same coin—a large force that people share in collectively yet experience individually.

Dickinson's eccentric capitalization continues in this stanza. While it's in keeping with conventions of English poetry to capitalize the words on the left margin of the poem ("Or," "Through," "Enlightened," "In"), the other instances of capitalization here are unusual. By capitalizing "Centuries," "Nerve," "Pain," "Contrast," and "Love," the speaker draws attention to the abstract concepts she's grappling with: time, courage, suffering, difference, and love. (Notice that when she capitalizes seemingly concrete words elsewhere in the poem—such as "Eyes" in line 2 or "Oil" in line 16—the capitalization seems to imbue the word with a more abstract, philosophical significance.)

Even as the speaker is working through grief in a personal, visceral way, she's also wrestling with big *ideas*. She isn't just trying to understand her own feelings; she's trying to understand something about human nature.

LINES 25-28

The Grieved — are many — I am told —
There is the various Cause —
Death — is but one — and comes but once —
And only nails the eyes —

In stanza 7, the speaker acknowledges that not all grief is the same, and she's far from being the only person afflicted. She begins by describing the first "Cause" of grief that comes to mind: death.

As the speaker grapples with this theme, the stanza relies heavily on caesura. Take line 25, for example:

The Grieved — are many — I am told —

This fragmented line suggests difficulty. The speaker is trying to be precise, and also seems to be navigating painful emotions in a way that causes her to pause frequently. Maybe death comes to mind first because she herself has lost someone. Or maybe

it's because death is the most universal form of suffering: not only will everyone lose someone at some point, but everyone must eventually face their own mortality. The speaker acknowledges this universality through understatement; she knows that billions of people grieve, but says only that she's "told" that "The Grieved — are many."

As the speaker describes death, the poem again uses caesura twice in one line:

> Death — is but one — and comes but once —

Caesura again makes the line sound hesitant and emotionally charged. It also underscores the speaker's repetitions. First, there's polyptoton in line 28: the repetition of the root word "one" in "once" and "only." This repetition, which creates a kind of echo in the language, subtly undermines the idea that death is a one-time event. Perhaps the implication is that a person can only die once, but the effects of their death are felt continuously by those who survive them.

This repetition is further emphasized by assonance: the four /uh/ vowels in line 27 ("but," "one," "comes," "once") sound almost like a stammer, evoking the difficulty of describing death's impact.

However, for the speaker, death isn't the worst cause of grief imaginable; unlike some forms of suffering, it "only nails the eyes." Here the speaker personifies death, perhaps comparing it to someone who nails a coffin lid shut—or to the Romans who drove nails in Christ during the Crucifixion (alluded to in lines 35-40). This metaphor suggests that death can only take the body; the soul, it seems, flies free.

LINES 29-32

There's Grief of Want — and Grief of Cold —
A sort they call "Despair" —
There's Banishment from native Eyes —
In sight of Native Air —

In stanza 8, the speaker elaborates on the different causes of grief. In addition to death, there's "Grief of Want — and Grief of Cold —" (line 29). The parallel phrasing here adds rhythm to the verse, while perhaps suggesting that "Want" and "Cold" are similar experiences.

In addition to these griefs, there's "A sort they call 'Despair.'" The sudden departure from the parallel structure of the previous line suggests that there's something unique about this form of grief. It's defined by a complete lack of hope, so it's harder to understand, and bear, than others.

In lines 31-32, the speaker lists another kind of grief:

> Banishment from native Eyes —
> In sight of Native air —

The repetition of "native" is an example of diacope. Notably, the first "native" is lowercase while the second is capitalized, which might suggest that "Native Air" (the place she's from) means a bit more to the speaker than "native Eyes" (the people in that place). Either way, this phrase seems to describe a kind of paradox: feeling banished while still in, or near, one's home. As someone who rarely left home or entertained visitors during her adult life, Dickinson may have known something about this kind of grief, though no one knows exactly why she became reclusive.

LINES 33-36

And though I may not guess the kind —
Correctly — yet to me
A piercing Comfort it affords
In passing Calvary —

After listing various causes of grief, the speaker admits that, for all her assessment of other people's emotional burdens, she still "may not guess the kind — / Correctly." Ultimately, grief is a personal experience; it's hard for anyone else to guess what the grieving are going through.

Still, the speaker says that she feels "A piercing Comfort" whenever she finds herself "passing Calvary." This is an allusion to the biblical story of Jesus's execution at Calvary, where he was nailed to a cross and left to die.

Since the speaker isn't literally passing by this event while going about her day, she's using Christ's suffering to symbolize the suffering of the people she *does* encounter. It's as if every "Grief" she "meet[s]" is a reflection, or version, of the Crucifixion. The word "piercing" evokes the nails that "pierc[ed]" Christ, linking his suffering—and the suffering of people around her—with the "comfort" she takes in it.

According to the Bible, God was ready to destroy humanity for their sins, but Jesus offered his own life for their salvation. In thinking of Christ's suffering, as well as the suffering of others, the grieving speaker remembers that her "pain" isn't unique—and perhaps also remembers that suffering can arise from love. As in lines 23-24, the speaker positions pain and love in relation to each other, as if they're sides of the same coin.

Strong /k/ alliteration ("kind," "Correctly," "Comfort," "Calvary") makes this whole stanza stand out, giving the poem an increased intensity as it nears its conclusion.

LINES 37-40

To note the fashions — of the Cross —
And how they're mostly worn —
Still fascinated to presume
That Some — are like My Own —

The poem's final stanza continues to allude to Jesus's crucifixion:

To note the fashions — of the Cross —
And how they're mostly worn —

"The Cross" symbolizes Christ's death and resurrection; the speaker is metaphorically comparing Christ's suffering to that of people around her. Though the metaphor is ambiguous (both "fashions" and "worn" have more than one applicable definition here), it seems to point again to the many varieties of pain and the various ways in which people endure pain. The language echoes the saying "We all have our crosses to bear"—in other words, we're all burdened by some kind of misfortune. The speaker can't relate to everyone's grief, but she's "Still fascinated" by the idea that someone out there may grieve in the same way she does.

These lines feature sibilance ("Cross," "mostly,""Still," "fascinated," "Some") and more general consonance ("note," "fashions," "mostly," "worn," "fascinated," "presume," "Some," "My," "Own"), both of which contribute to the musicality and intensity of these final lines. Alliteration and assonance also link "fashions" (the object of fascination) with the word "fascinated" itself.

The passage also features subtle slant rhymes, both internal ("Presume"/"Some") and at the ends of lines ("worn"/"Own"). The close-but-not-quite-perfect nature of slant rhyme echoes the speaker's desire to find a grief that matches her own; it hasn't happened yet, but she's still searching.

Similarly, the poem ends with an em dash rather than a period, suggesting that the speaker hasn't reached any firm conclusions about the nature of grief. Her "measur[ing]," "probing," and "wonder[ing]" will continue.

SYMBOLS

THE CROSS

In this poem, the cross symbolizes the burden of suffering, misfortune, and grief that ordinary people carry around with them, as in the expression "my cross to bear."

Generally speaking, the cross alludes to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and by extension, the Christian religion. In the biblical story of the crucifixion, Jesus was made to carry his own cross to Calvary (see line 36), the site of his execution.

With mild irreverence, then, the speaker refers to the "fashions"—style trends—"of the Cross," noting "how they're mostly worn" by people around her. In other words, she's observing what kinds of pain and grief are most common among people in her community.

Because her own grief makes her feel connected to fellow sufferers, she takes "piercing Comfort" in "passing" such everyday versions of "Calvary." These metaphorical phrases link Jesus's suffering with everyday human troubles—as well as with the speaker's empathetic response, since "piercing" evokes the nails that pierced Christ on the cross.

The cross/Calvary symbolism may also suggest the love-based, redemptive nature of Christ's suffering. According to Christian tradition, God was so disappointed in the sinfulness of human beings that he was ready to give up on them entirely. Jesus, the son of God, believed humanity was worth saving, so he offered his own life in payment of their sins. Part of the speaker's "piercing Comfort," then, may relate to the idea that at least some suffering is born out of love, and can have redeeming effects.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 35:** "piercing Comfort"
- **Line 36:** "Calvary"
- **Line 37:** "the Cross"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

The poem contains an allusion to the biblical figure of Jesus Christ. In lines 34-37, the speaker says:

[...] yet to me
A piercing Comfort it affords
In passing Calvary —
To note the fashions — of the Cross —

According to the Christian religion, Calvary is the site of Christ's *crucifixion*—a cruel form of execution in which a person is nailed to a wooden cross and left to die. In thinking about Christ's suffering, especially as reflected in ordinary people around her, the speaker finds an intense form of comfort.

This may be because Christ's suffering was redemptive and born of love; he sacrificed himself in order to save humanity. (In the Bible, God was fed up with the sinfulness of human beings and ready to wipe them off the face of the earth. Jesus, however, intervened on their behalf, offering to die in their place.) The speaker clearly identifies with "the fashions — of the Cross," and her experience of "piercing Comfort" recalls the nails that pierced Christ. Perhaps this language suggests that her own suffering is love-based and/or redemptive—though she isn't explicit about how.

The allusion also depicts ordinary human griefs and trials as versions of Christ's suffering on the cross. In this way, it echoes the saying, "We all have our crosses to bear."

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 34-37:** "yet to me / A piercing Comfort it affords /

> In passing Calvary — / To note the fashions — of the Cross —"

CONSONANCE

The poem contains a great deal of consonance, which lends musicality and emphasis to its language. Take the buzzing /z/ sounds that fill lines 3-4:

> I wonder if It weighs like Mine —
> Or has an Easier size.

Right away, the poem feels memorable and striking. The alliteration of "wonder" and "weighs" (also a form of consonance) adds to the effect.

The fourth still is especially musical, filled with flowing /l/, /m/, and /n/ sounds that add a feeling of fluidity to the verse:

> I note that Some — gone patient long —
> At length, renew their smile —
> An imitation of a Light
> That has so little Oil —

All these lilting consonants might make the lines feel a bit more sorrowful and serious to readers.

For another striking example of consonance in action, look to lines 33-36. Here, hissing sibilance mixes with /k/, /f/, /p/, /ng/, and /r/ sounds:

> And though I may not guess the kind —
> Correctly — yet to me
> A piercing Comfort it affords
> In passing Calvary —

The intense sound patterning in this stanza corresponds to, and helps evoke, the "piercing" intensity of the speaker's "Comfort."

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "measure," "meet"
- **Line 3:** "wonder," "weighs"
- **Line 4:** "has," "Easier size"
- **Line 5:** "bore"
- **Line 6:** "begin"
- **Line 7:** "not tell," "Date"
- **Line 8:** "feels," "old"
- **Line 9:** "it hurts to"
- **Line 10:** "to try"
- **Line 11:** "between"
- **Line 12:** "not be — to"
- **Line 13:** "note," "gone patient," "long"
- **Line 14:** "length," "renew," "smile"
- **Line 15:** "An imitation," "Light"
- **Line 16:** "little Oil"
- **Line 17:** "wonder," "when"
- **Line 18:** "Harm"
- **Line 19:** "hurt," "them," "early ," "lapse"
- **Line 20:** "them," "Balm"
- **Line 21:** "still"
- **Line 22:** "Centuries"
- **Line 23:** "Enlightened," "larger," "Pain "
- **Line 24:** "In Contrast," "Love"
- **Line 28:** "only nails"
- **Line 29:** "Cold"
- **Line 30:** "sort," "call," "Despair"
- **Line 33:** "guess," "kind"
- **Line 34:** "Correctly"
- **Line 35:** "piercing Comfort," "affords"
- **Line 36:** "passing Calvary"
- **Line 37:** "fashions," "Cross"
- **Line 38:** "mostly"
- **Line 39:** "Still fascinated"
- **Line 40:** "Some"

ALLITERATION

Like consonance, alliteration contributes to the poem's rhythm and musicality and lends emphasis to certain phrases.

Take the first three lines, which contain two kinds of alliteration: /m/ sounds in "measure" and "meet," and /w/ sounds in "wonder" and "weighs." If Dickinson had phrased the first line *without* alliteration ("I measure every Grief I see," for example), it wouldn't sound nearly as crisp. Repeated /m/ sounds make the line more emphatic, musical, and memorable. Similarly, the stressed, alliterative syllables in wonder and weighs make line 3 (appropriately) feel a little weighty.

The most noticeable alliteration in the poem comes in lines 33-36:

> And though I may not guess the kind —
> Correctly — yet to me
> A piercing Comfort it affords
> In passing Calvary —

This /k/ alliteration is not only sonically striking but also visually noticeable, in part because of the capitalization of words beginning with "C." Dickinson really wanted that letter and that sound to stand out. At least partly because of the alliteration, the notion of the speaker taking comfort in other people's Christlike suffering feels like the climax of the poem.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "measure," "meet"

- **Line 3:** “wonder,” “weighs”
- **Line 5:** “bore”
- **Line 6:** “begin”
- **Line 13:** “long”
- **Line 14:** “length”
- **Line 18:** “Harm”
- **Line 19:** “hurt”
- **Line 33:** “kind”
- **Line 34:** “Correctly”
- **Line 35:** “piercing,” “Comfort”
- **Line 36:** “passing,” “Calvary”
- **Line 37:** “fashions”
- **Line 39:** “fascinated”

ASSONANCE

In addition to consonance and alliteration, the poem uses assonance to enhance its musicality and rhythm. The poem's opening line contains repetitive short /eh/ sounds ("measure," "every") as well as long /ee/ sounds ("Grief," "meet"). Along with /m/ alliteration ("measure," "meet"), this strong assonance ensures a memorable first line, and immediately gives the poem a momentum that propels the reader forward.

Another notable moment of assonance comes in line 27:

> Death — is but one — and comes but once —

The /uh/ assonance in this line is so insistent that it's hard to miss. It lends a staccato rhythm to a line also marked by repetition and caesura (pauses within the line, here indicated by em dashes). The /uh/ sounds evoke a kind of stuttering hesitancy, perhaps suggesting that this particular grief hits closer to home for the speaker.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “measure,” “every,” “Grief,” “meet”
- **Line 3:** “like Mine”
- **Line 8:** “so old”
- **Line 19:** “hurt,” “early”
- **Line 27:** “but,” “one,” “comes,” “but,” “once”
- **Line 33:** “guess”
- **Line 34:** “Correctly,” “yet”
- **Line 36:** “passing,” “Calvary”
- **Line 37:** “fashions”
- **Line 39:** “fascinated”

METAPHOR

The poem begins with a metaphor. The speaker says that she "measure[s] every Grief" she comes across, as if grief were something that could be summed up in terms of inches or feet.

She goes on to wonder whether other people's grief "weighs" the same as hers, or whether their grief is of "an Easier size." The metaphor implies that sorrow is a burden that must be carried through life and that greater sorrows make for heavier burdens. The speaker can't really know the nature of the sorrows other people live with, but that doesn't stop her from wondering and comparing.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker notes that some people, after enough time has passed since the cause of their grief, seem to resume their former happiness. Yet she doesn't really believe they feel that way on the inside. She compares their smiles to "An imitation of a Light / That has so little Oil." In other words, like an oil lamp that doesn't have enough oil in it, their smiles appear much dimmer than they did before they suffered.

The speaker describes various sources of grief in stanzas 7 and 8. In line 27 she says, "Death — is but one — and comes but once —." In other words, death is only one of many sources of sorrow. The speaker adds that it "only nails the eyes," a metaphor that suggests there's more to human beings than their bodies. Death may shut the eyes, but the spirit (it's implied) continues to see. This metaphor also personifies death as a figure who nails corpses' eyes shut, as one might nail a coffin lid—or, perhaps, as Christ's persecutors nailed him to the cross.

The last metaphor, in lines 37-38, invokes Christ explicitly:

> To note the fashions — of the Cross —
> And how they're mostly worn —

This metaphor can be interpreted in a few different ways. The word "fashions," for example, might refer to style trends, but it might also refer to ways or manners of doing something. Similarly, "worn" primarily means "carried or displayed on the body," as with clothing and accessories, but it can also mean "shabby" or "worn out." (Dickinson might be punning here, suggesting that the latest "fashions" of grief aren't so new after all; they're worn out with age, because humans have always suffered.)

Generally, the metaphor refers to the different ways in which people suffer, and how they carry (behave during) their suffering. The speaker keeps a close eye out to see if those around her are suffering more, less, or differently than before. It's also possible that she's making some statement about the way people do or don't emulate the kind of loving, sacrificial suffering represented by Jesus. Yet the speaker isn't really judging other people's pain so much as she's looking for evidence that their pain resembles her own.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “I measure every Grief I meet”
- **Lines 3-4:** “I wonder if It weighs like Mine — / Or has an Easier size.”

- **Lines 15-16:** "An imitation of a Light / That has so little Oil —"
- **Lines 27-28:** "Death — is but one — and comes but once — / And only nails the eyes —"
- **Lines 37-38:** "To note the fashions — of the Cross — / And how they're mostly worn —"

ANAPHORA

The poem uses anaphora often, particularly of the phrase "I wonder if." This repetition draws attention to the speaker's curiosity and imagination. It's through "wonder[ing]" about other people's suffering that the speaker is able to feel more connected to them, knowing that neither she nor they are alone in their grief.

The fact that the speaker also repeats "I" at the start of many lines also reflects the idea that she can't truly know another person's grief; she can only know what she thinks/wonders/feels/etc. That "I" anaphora reflects that her perspective is centered throughout the poem.

Finally, the speaker uses anaphora of the word "There's" in the latter half of the poem, as in:

> **There's** Grief of Want — and Grief of Cold —
> A sort they call "Despair" —
> **There's** Banishment from native Eyes —
> In sight of Native Air —

This anaphora simply adds to the sense of there existing many different kinds of grief. The parallelism of the phrases "Grief of Want" and "Grief of Cold" adds to this effect, reinforcing the idea that there are as many kinds of grief as there are people to feel it.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I"
- **Line 3:** "I wonder if"
- **Line 5:** "I wonder if"
- **Line 7:** "I"
- **Line 9:** "I wonder if"
- **Line 13:** "I"
- **Line 17:** "I wonder if"
- **Line 29:** "There's"
- **Line 31:** "There's"

CAESURA

The poem contains a lot of caesuras, most of them marked by em dashes within lines. Dickinson's use of the em dash is one of her most recognizable and defining traits. It gives her poems a slightly fragmented feel, as she opts for bits of thought interrupted by pauses instead of polished, fluid syntax. It also helps her pace her poems, adding a sense of hurrying up and slowing down that mimics the way the mind actually works. Though her poems are highly composed, caesura can make it seem as though she's sharing her thoughts in real-time.

Take lines 25-28, for example:

> The **Grieved — are many — I** am told —
> There is the various Cause —
> **Death — is** but **one — and** comes but once —
> And only nails the eyes —

Even in this one passage, caesura serves a variety of purposes. The caesura after "The Grieved" creates a pause that feels like hesitancy, as if the speaker isn't sure how to proceed after naming her subject. The next caesura, after "many," adds emphasis to the middle of the line (whereas a comma would have created a lesser pause, placing less emphasis on how *many* people experience grief).

The em dashes surrounding "I am told" create some ambiguity as to whether this phrase refers to the clause before or after it. The caesuras after "Death" and "one" (line 27) again evoke the hesitancy that comes with great feeling, as if the speaker is getting emotional while thinking about death. The jerkiness of the caesuras is reinforced by the staccato /uh/ assonance throughout the line ("but," "one," "comes," "once").

Together, caesura and assonance create the impression that the speaker is struggling to articulate this kind of grief, perhaps because it holds deep significance for her.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "narrow, probing, Eyes"
- **Line 11:** "whether — could "
- **Line 13:** "Some — gone"
- **Line 14:** "length, renew"
- **Line 18:** "Thousands — on"
- **Line 19:** "early — such"
- **Line 25:** "Grieved — are," "many — I"
- **Line 27:** "Death — is," "one — and"
- **Line 29:** "Want — and"
- **Line 34:** "Correctly — yet"
- **Line 37:** "fashions — of"
- **Line 40:** "Some — are"

REPETITION

Anaphora isn't the only kind of repetition in the poem. The speaker also uses diacope, polyptoton, and general parallelism to add emphasis to her ideas and phrases.

Polyptoton appears in lines 27-28:

> Death — is but **one** — and comes but **once** —
> And **only** nails the eyes —

"One," "once," and "only" all come from the root word "one." The speaker is saying that death is a singular event, yet the repetition of the root word "one" seems to tell a different story, suggesting that while individuals die once, their deaths may echo throughout loved ones' lives for years to come. The repetition also produces a strong rhythm, as the repetition of /uh/ sounds adds to other /uh/ assonance already present in the line.

The following stanza contains two instances of diacope: "Grief [...] Grief" and "native [...] Native." In line 29, the repetition of "Grief" overlaps with parallelism ("Grief of Want" and "Grief of Cold" are parallel grammatical structures), underscoring that while the sources of people's pain might differ, the result is the same. Grief is grief, regardless of the cause. In lines 31-32, "native" is repeated, this time without parallelism. Here, diacope stresses the paradox of feeling banished while still living in or near one's homeland.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 27:** "but," "one," "but," "once"
- **Line 28:** "only"
- **Line 29:** "Grief," "Grief"
- **Line 31:** "native"
- **Line 32:** "Native"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem begins with an enjambed line:

> I measure every Grief I meet
> With narrow, probing, Eyes —

This initial enjambment creates a sense of momentum, as the reader moves from the first line to the second without pausing. Yet this momentum is immediately checked by a long series of end-stopped lines. The apparent confidence with which the speaker started soon gives way to a faltering hesitancy, as if the speaker is feeling her way along, unsure of how to proceed. Notably, while the first stanza ends in a period, the rest of the poem avoids this kind of finality. Every other end-stopped line in the poem concludes with an em dash, suggesting breakage or interruption rather than the completion of a thought.

No further enjambment appears until line 15, at which point enjambed lines start occurring intermittently, then disappear again for a while. The prevalence of lines end-stopped with the inconclusive em dash suggests that the speaker doesn't exactly know what she's searching for. She's meditating on grief, trying to discover something about it; instead of speaking with certainty, she's following her curiosity, stopping and starting rather than reeling off fluid, complete sentences.

Only once in the poem (lines 34-36) do two enjambed lines occur in a row:

> Correctly — yet to me
> A piercing Comfort it affords
> In passing Calvary —

Here, finally, the speaker is more confident. She's not sure if other people suffer as she does, but she's sure that the knowledge of their suffering (and Christ's) somehow assuages her own.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "meet / With"
- **Lines 15-16:** "Light / That"
- **Lines 19-20:** "lapse / Could"
- **Lines 21-22:** "still / Through"
- **Lines 34-35:** "me / A"
- **Lines 35-36:** "affords / In"
- **Lines 39-40:** "presume / That"

VOCABULARY

Probing (Line 2) - Searching or examining.

Easier size (Line 4) - Smaller, more manageable weight.

Bore (Line 5) - Carried the weight of; endured.

Imitation (Line 15) - A copy or simulation; an attempt to resemble something. Here, the word suggests that a person's smile after grief resembles (imitates) a weak, fading light.

Oil (Line 16) - Refers to the oil used in oil lamps.

Lapse (Line 19) - An interval or gap.

Balm (Line 20) - An ointment or salve used to heal or soothe.

Enlightened (Line 23) - Illuminated with knowledge; made aware.

Banishment (Line 31) - Punishment consisting of exile from a town, country, or other place.

Native (Line 31, Line 32) - Relating to, belonging to, or characteristic of the place where one was born.

Calvary (Line 36) - The location where, according to Christian scripture, Jesus was crucified.

Fashions (Line 37) - Popular trends or ways of doing something.

Cross (Line 37) - An upright post with a horizontal bar, used in antiquity for crucifixion. More specifically, this is a reference to Christ's crucifixion, which the poet relates to the struggles and burdens of everyday people (as in the expression "cross to bear").

Worn (Line 38) - *Worn* has several definitions that are applicable in this context:

- carried or displayed on the body (as with clothing or

accessories);
- damaged and shabby as a result of much use;
- tired or fatigued.

Presume (Line 39) - Suppose, assume, or imagine.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem is made up of 10 quatrains (four-line stanzas). These are more specifically ballad stanzas, which means they follow an ABCB rhyme scheme and that their lines alternate between eight and six syllables. Dickison uses this form quite often in her poetry.

Compared to most of Dickinson's poems, however, this is quite long! The poem's length may have something to do with its subject: it specifically deals with an "old [...] pain," which, according to the speaker, even thousands of years might not be enough to relieve. Appropriately enough, then, the speaker takes some time to work through her thoughts and feelings.

Further like most of Dickinson's poetry, "I measure every Grief I meet" uses short lines and lots of em dashes. The em dashes disrupt the otherwise orderly quatrains, giving the poem a sort of fragmented feeling that's appropriate to its subject. The stopping and starting also might mimic the curiosity, hesitation, and associative patterns of a mind in motion.

METER

Like the vast majority of Dickinson's poetry, "I measure every Grief I meet" is written in ballad meter. This means that its stanzas alternate lines of tetrameter (four metrical feet per line) and trimeter (three metrical feet per line).

Because the meter is also iambic (an iamb is a foot made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable), this can more specifically be called common meter. Lines 1-2 illustrate the pattern:

I mea- | sure ev- | ery Grief | I meet
With nar- | row, pro- | bing, Eyes—

Ballad meter was originally used for lyrical ballads (poems that told a story and were traditionally accompanied by music). Common meter, in particular, became a common feature of English-language hymns (such as "Amazing Grace"), so Dickinson would have been very familiar with this rhythm from church. Here, the rhythm gives the poem an almost reverential quality. In fact, the speaker feels an affinity with Christ's suffering on behalf of humankind, and also compares others' experience of grief to Christ's agony on the cross.

RHYME SCHEME

Since the poem is written in ballad form, it uses the ballad's typical rhyme scheme. Each stanza has the following pattern:

ABCB

This means that the second line of each stanza rhymes with the last, while the lines in between do not rhyme. However, as is usually the case with Dickinson's poetry, the end rhymes are often slant rhymes ("begin"/"pain," "smile"/"Oil," "Harm"/"Balm," etc.) rather than full rhymes. (A few full rhymes do crop up here and there: "try"/"die," "Despair"/"Air," "me"/"Calvary.")

The many imperfect rhymes give the poem a natural-sounding, understated musicality. The speaker's relationship to grief is very personal and complex, and her subtle use of rhyme reflects her intimate, evolving understanding of it. Consistent full rhymes lend a feeling of authority and assurance, which wouldn't square as well with the speaker's endless search for grief that's "like [her] own." The delicately woven slant rhymes suggest that she hasn't come to any finite conclusions about the nature of suffering.

SPEAKER

The speaker is both burdened with and fascinated by grief. She finds herself quietly examining everyone she meets, wondering whether their grief is more bearable than her own. The questions she asks in regard to other people—whether "it hurts to live" and whether they "have to try"—suggest her own struggles with moving beyond the pain of grief.

Yet the speaker's relationship to grief isn't as simple as just wanting to leave it behind. Some part of her believes that, through suffering, people can become "Enlightened to a larger Pain"—a pain that connects all of humanity. She also seems to see her grief as a way of connecting to the divine: contemplating the suffering of Christ, as reflected in others around her, brings her a kind of "Comfort." She's more than aware that her own grief isn't the only kind; there are as many kinds of grief as there are people, and she can never really know what other people are going through. Still, imagining their pain helps her remember that she isn't alone.

Note that while this guide refers to the speaker as "she/her" in light of the fact that the speaker is sometimes read as Dickinson herself, the poem doesn't specify the speaker's gender. In this way, it keeps its meditations accessible to anyone who has ever felt the isolation of grief.

SETTING

The poem doesn't describe any physical setting; it takes place inside the speaker's thoughts. Though the speaker describes "measur[ing]" everyone else's "Grief," she doesn't really paint a picture of what that looks like; instead, she focuses on the questions that arise when she's thinking about others' pain.

Broadly, however, her language evokes a community in which she sometimes "meet[s]" and "pass[es]" others in public.

In the second-to-last stanza, the speaker describes "passing Calvary," which is the closest the poem comes to naming a physical setting. Even here, though, the speaker isn't literally referring to the site where Jesus was crucified; she's metaphorically describing the experience of passing by someone in pain or distress. In general, the speaker is much less concerned with the material world than the world of the mind and heart.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson lived and died in Amherst, Massachusetts (1830-1886). Like the Transcendentalist writers of her time, she was influenced by Romanticism, and her work shows a keen interest in nature, spirituality, and a personal (rather than religious) relationship with God.

However, while Transcendentalist writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau promoted their philosophy publicly, giving lectures and helping to build a social movement around their ideas, Dickinson grappled with her relationship to nature and spirituality in private. More than a century later, she is considered one of the most important and influential poets in the English language.

In addition to the Romantics (particularly William Wordsworth), Dickinson was deeply influenced by Charlotte Brontë, Shakespeare, and Christian literature, including the Bible and church hymns. Having attended a religious school in her youth and experienced the revivalism of New England in the 1850s, she spent the rest of her life engrossed by questions of belief and spirituality (though she stopped attending church as a young woman). This fascination, or even obsession, can be seen in the way her poems frequently use common meter—the meter of church hymns.

Like almost all of Emily Dickinson's work, "I measure every Grief I meet" wasn't published until after her death in 1886. No one knows precisely when it was written, but the first surviving manuscript in which it appears is dated 1862. In fact, though she began writing at a young age, the vast majority of her poems were written between 1855 and 1865—the years leading up to, and spanning, the Civil War.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson was preoccupied with death, and by extension grief, from a young age. She experienced the death of loved ones throughout her life, but the death of Sophia Holland in 1844 was particularly formative. Holland was both a second cousin and a beloved friend, and as Dickinson was only 14 at the time of her death, the loss was traumatizing.

The world Dickinson grew up in was patriarchal and puritanical; strict Christian (specifically, Calvinist) morality ruled people's lives, dictating what was and wasn't proper behavior. Though 19th-century New England society generally discouraged women from becoming authors, Dickinson herself had her father's permission to write, as well as family means that afforded her time and space to do so. Still, her innovativeness and intellect were underappreciated in her lifetime; she was better known as a gardener than a poet.

Dickinson's poems often feel removed from their context; their highly personal nature doesn't immediately reflect the historical moment in which they were composed. Unlike Walt Whitman or Ralph Waldo Emerson, Dickinson didn't address the contemporary debate regarding the morality of slavery and the push for abolition, nor do her poems refer directly to the Civil War. Yet these major events undoubtedly impacted her writing, especially given how much more productive she was during the Civil War years. The fact that she had friends who joined the fight likely contributed to her preoccupation with death and grieving.

It has been speculated that Dickinson also suffered from a chronic illness—likely some form of epilepsy, which was highly stigmatized at the time. Such an illness might partly account for her increasingly reclusive lifestyle, while shedding further light on her many poems about pain and spirituality. Regardless, "I measure every Grief I meet" engages with some of her most characteristic themes: grief, death, and physical or mental suffering ("the fashions — of the Cross"). Though her attitude toward organized religion was skeptical, her private spiritual convictions, expressed through poetry, proved a source of comfort in difficult times.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — The poem performed with musical accompaniment by Michael Hermiston. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTVFAPER8CY)
- Biography and Poems — A biography of Dickinson and more Dickinson poems from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)
- Poems about Grief — A Poetry Foundation archive of poems about grief and suffering. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/137079/poems-of-sorrow-and-grieving)
- Dickinson's Meter — A closer look at Dickinson's unconventional use of meter and its relationship to the hymn tradition. (https://poets.org/text/isaac-watts-emily-dickinson-inherited-meter)

- Harvard Collection — Harvard Library's Emily Dickinson collection, which contains Dickinson's original, hardbound manuscripts as well as letters, her herbarium, and the family Bible. (https://library.harvard.edu/collections/emily-dickinson-collection)

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—
- As imperceptibly as grief
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I dwell in Possibility –
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I like to see it lap the Miles
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- I started Early — Took my Dog —
- I taste a liquor never brewed
- It was not Death, for I stood up
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- Success is counted sweetest
- Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
- The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
- There is no Frigate like a Book
- There's a certain Slant of light
- The Sky is low — the Clouds are mean
- The Soul selects her own Society
- They shut me up in Prose –
- This is my letter to the world
- We grow accustomed to the Dark
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Mottram, Darla. "*I measure every Grief I meet.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 29 Jun 2021. Web. 19 Jul 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mottram, Darla. "*I measure every Grief I meet.*" LitCharts LLC, June 29, 2021. Retrieved July 19, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/emily-dickinson/i-measure-every-grief-i-meet.