The Brain—is wider than the Sky—

POEM TEXT

The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
For—put them side by side—
The one the other will contain
With ease—and you—beside—

The Brain is deeper than the sea—
For—hold them—Blue to Blue—
The one the other will absorb—
As sponges—Buckets—do—

The Brain is just the weight of God—
For—Heft them—Pound for Pound—
And they will differ—if they do—
As Syllable from Sound—

SUMMARY

The human mind is wider than the sky. After all, if you were to place the two next to each other, the mind could easily wrap itself around the entire sky—in fact, the mind could do this while *also* wrapping itself around *you* at the same time.

The human mind is deeper than the ocean. If you were to hold them up next to each other—the blue of the mind next to the blue of the ocean—the mind would be able to soak up the entire ocean, just like sponges can soak up whole buckets of water.

The human mind weighs exactly the same as God. If you were to lift them both up, and compare the weight of each, any minor difference between the two will only be like the difference between a single part of speech and sound itself.

THEMES

THE POWER OF THE HUMAN MIND

In "The Brain—is wider than the Sky—" the speaker compares the "Brain" (really, the human mind) to the sky, the sea, and even to God. While a human brain might be *physically* smaller than any of these things, the speaker says, the *mind* can envision almost anything. In fact, the poem argues that the mind has an almost infinite capacity to imagine, perceive, and absorb.

The speaker begins by asserting that the mind is "wider" than the sky. This width is metaphorical, and refers to the mind's imaginative power. While the sky may appear infinitely huge, the speaker says, the mind is even *bigger*. The mind is so "wide," in fact, that it can easily "contain," or encompass, the sky—and even have room left over to contain the person who's *looking* at the sky! Simply put, the mind is so vast that it can wrap itself around something that itself seems *infinite* (i.e., the sky); the mind's ability to imagine is essentially endless.

Not only is the brain *wider* than the sky, the speaker insists, but it's also *deeper* than the sea. Depth here is again a metaphorical measurement and suggests the mind's ability to accumulate wisdom and knowledge. If width refers to how *far* the mind can expand—how many things it can imagine—then depth might suggest how deeply it can *understand* all those things. Comparing the brain to a sponge that absorbs a whole bucket of water, the speaker argues that the mind's capacity to perceive and learn has no limits.

The speaker finally argues that the brain is God-like in its infinite power to imagine and absorb things (including things that *themselves* seem infinite, or endless, like the sky and the sea!). The speaker asserts that the "Brain" is the same "weight" as God, and notes that if they "differ" at all, it's like the difference between a "Syllable" and "sound." While this is a complicated simile, the gist is that, in this speaker's view, the mind's mighty power to imagine and observe is as limitless as the heavens themselves.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

HUMANITY'S RELATIONSHIP TO GOD

The poem's speaker explores both the human mind's limitless potential and how that limitless potential reflects humanity's relationship to God. The poem suggests that the mind's seeming capacity to imagine and even "contain" the infinite is in fact what connects humanity to God.

The speaker first argues that the human mind is wider and deeper than the widest and deepest things on earth, namely, the sky and the sea. The sky, to human observers, is essentially endless and eternal, which means that if the mind can "contain" the sky, then the mind isn't just infinite; it can *contain infinity itself*.

The mind seems limitless in its potential to perceive and imagine, and in this limitlessness, the speaker says, the mind is a lot like God: both God and the human mind are essentially infinite, without boundaries or ends. In fact, the speaker says that the mind can match God "Pound for Pound"—that human

consciousness weighs the same as God!

If the human mind and God are different at all, the speaker goes on, they are different in the sense that a "Syllable" is different from a "sound." This might suggest that the human mind is like one *piece* of God, in the way that a syllable is essentially a *piece* (or pieces) of sound.

Alternatively, this might suggest the opposite: that the human mind actually gives *shape* to God, making God comprehensible to human understanding. Think of it this way: if "sound" is something formless and raw, then a syllable is something that gives shape to that sound—that turns it into human speech. In this reading, the human mind is essentially "containing" a little piece of God, just as it earlier "contained" the sky.

However one reads this mysterious final line, it's clear that the boundless potential of the human mind helps the speaker feel more connected with God.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
For—put them side by side—

The speaker says that the "Brain" is "wider" than the "Sky" itself, and then asks the reader to imagine holding the two next to each other in order to compare them.

Literally, of course, the human brain is much smaller than the sky (and it's impossible to arrange either "side by side"!). But the speaker is really talking about the human *mind*, and saying that its capacity to perceive and imagine feels as vast and expansive as the sky above.

The capitalization of "Brain" and "Sky" is in keeping with Dickinson's unique poetic style, but also might help clue readers into the fact that the speaker is considering both of these entities symbolically, as representative not just of the *literal* brain and *literal* sky, but of curiosity, wonder, imagination. The direct repetition, or diacope, of "side by side" reinforces the similarity between the mind and the open sky, placing them next to each other as equals. The assonance of these lines reinforces the connection as well: note the long, slow /i/ sounds in "wider," "Sky," and "side by side," which seem to expand the lines themselves.

The caesuras here, in the form of dashes, draw out these lines even further—in other words, they make the lines "wider"! Dashes, like idiosyncratic punctuation, are another characteristic of Dickinson's poetry. Here, they not only "widen" the lines themselves, but also suggest a burst of energy at the end of lines. Instead of ending with an expected, final-feeling period, the speaker uses dashes at the end of nearly every line in the poem to capture the potential of the human mind; they move the reader forward through the poem, creating a sense of spaciousness and momentum.

Finally, these lines establish the poem's ballad meter, which alternates between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. An iamb is a poetic unit with two syllables, the first of which is unstressed and the second of which is stressed: da-DUM. Tetrameter means there are four of these iambs in a line, making eight syllables total, while trimeter means there are three iambs per line, for six syllables total:

The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
For—put them side by side—

Dickinson used this meter quite often in her poetry. It has a bouncy, predictable rhythm that evokes religious hymns.

LINES 3-4

The one the other will contain
With ease—and you—beside—

The speaker says that if one were to place the human mind and the sky up next to each other (or perhaps on top of each other), the human mind could easily "contain" the sky. This again speaks to how vast and endless the human mind is; it can perceive, and even hold, the entire sky.

What's more, the speaker says, the human mind can also contain "you" at the same time. This "you" can be read in several ways:

- In one reading, the speaker could be saying that a human mind could perceive both the sky and "you"—the reader, or any other person—simultaneously.
- The speaker could be saying that if you were to look up at the sky, your mind could take in the sky, while still holding "you"—your personality, and all of your thoughts.
- Either way, the speaker's point is clear: the human mind *must* be "wider than the Sky," since it is able to contain not only the sky, but many other things along *with* the sky, all at the same time.

These lines conclude the poem's first quatrain, or four-line stanza, and also establish the poem's ABCB rhyme scheme (lines 1 and 3 don't rhyme, but lines 3 and 4 do: "side" rhymes with "beside"). This rhyme scheme, combined with the poem's meter

Interestingly, these two words don't only rhyme; "beside" *contains* the word "side," much as the speaker says that the human mind can *contain* the "sky." This rhyme scheme and

subtle repetition, then, subtly reinforces the speaker's argument, even as the dashed line at the stanza's ending pushes the reader forward to stanza two.

LINES 5-6

The Brain is deeper than the sea—
For—hold them—Blue to Blue—

Not only is the human mind wider than the sky, the speaker says here, but it's also "deeper" than the "sea." If being "wider" than the sky suggests the mind's nearly infinite ability to *imagine*, then being "deeper" than the sea perhaps suggests the mind's nearly infinite ability to *understand* and *take in* information.

Here the poem uses parallelism, as the speaker moves from the comparison in the first stanza (between the mind and the sky) to the comparison in the second (between the mind and the sea):

- In each case, the stanza begins with the speaker comparing "The Brain," a stand-in for the amorphous human mind, to some element of the physical world.
- Then, in each stanza's second line, the speaker asks the reader to "put" or "hold" these two things next to each other in order to compare them.
- And just as the diacope of the phrase "side by side" in line 2 emphasized the similarity between the mind and the sky, here "Blue to Blue" conveys the idea that the human mind and the sea are inherently similar. The alliterative /b/ sounds in "Brain" and "Blue" reinforce this connection. (Of course, the brain isn't *literally* blue, but the speaker conjures an image of the human mind and imagination like a vast, open sea. Calling the mind "Blue" is also a strikingly creative turn of phrase that, in turn, emphasizes the creative power of the human mind.)

To really see how this parallelism in action, take a look at the breakdown of both lines' structure below:

The Brain is [wider/deeper] than the [Sky/Sea]
For [put/hold] them [side/Blue] by [side/Blue]

Not only is the grammatical structure the same here, but the speaker even uses similar sound patterns.

- For example, the assonance of the long /ee/ sound connects "deeper" and "sea," just as long /i/ sounds in the first stanza connect "wider" and "sky." Again, these long vowel sounds lengthen the lines, illustrating the human mind's breadth and depth.
- The final words in these comparisons also start with the same letter: "Sky"/"sea."

The point of all is this is to emphasize just how vast the human mind is; having gone way up to the heavens, the speaker now ventures way down to the depths of the ocean.

LINES 7-8

The one the other will absorb—
As sponges—Buckets—do—

The speaker explains why the "Brain," or the human mind, is "deeper than the sea": if you put the two next two each other, the mind would be able to perceive, or "absorb" and take in, the sea itself. The mind, then, is capable of soaking up the entire ocean, just as "sponges" can soak up whole "Buckets" of water. And if the mind can *take in* and hold the sea, it must be "deeper" than the sea.

In these lines, the speaker continues the parallelism that drove the opening of the stanza. The poem directly repeats the phrase "The one the other" in order to emphasize the fact that "The one" (that is, the human mind) can take in, perceive, and imagine whatever the "other" is, even if it is something as vast as the sky or the ocean! As in the first stanza, then, these lines also play with the difference between the human brain's *physical* size and the mind's seemingly infinite capacity to imagine.

Using a simile, the speaker specifically compares the human mind to a "sponge." Sponges can expand and absorb a large amount of water, the speaker notes, declaring that sponges can take whole "Buckets" of water into themselves. Likewise, the speaker implies that the human mind could "absorb" an entire ocean easily. Again, the idea of absorption and depth here might speak to the mind's ability to understand things, to learn, and to take in new information.

Throughout this stanza, alliterative /b/ sounds link "Brain," "Blue," and "Buckets." All of these words are also capitalized, calling even more attention to them. This alliteration reinforces the speaker's meaning, connecting the human mind to the vast "Blue" of ocean water, and then to a "Bucket" of water—both of which, the poem says, the mind can easily absorb.

LINE 9

The Brain is just the weight of God—

In the poem's third and final comparison, the speaker compares the human mind to God. More specifically, the speaker says that the "Brain" is the same "weight" as God.

Here, for the first time, the poem shifts ever so slightly out of its parallel structure. Although the opening line of this stanza begins with the anaphora of the phrase "The Brain" (just like stanzas 1 and 2), the speaker doesn't claim that the "Brain" or human mind weighs *more* than God. (In stanzas 1 and 2, the speaker argued that the human mind was *wider* and *deeper* than the sky and the sea.) Instead, the speaker says that the human mind and God weigh "just" the same. In other words, the poem

doesn't suggest that the human mind is *greater* than God but rather implies that the two are *equivalent* in some way.

This shift is important for several reasons:

- First, it builds on the poem's previous depictions of the mind as almost limitless in its capacity to perceive and imagine. In many cultures, God is associated with infinite creative power and omniscience, so the poem's previous depictions of the mind as limitless *already* suggested that the human mind is *similar* to God in some way.
- What's more, since the mind can imagine the vast sky and sea, the poem suggests that the mind can also imagine God—and thus must share some of God's infinite capacities. Here, though, the poem goes one step further. By saying that the mind is the same "weight" as God, the speaker subtly implies that the human mind and God are made, in a sense, out of the same substance; at a certain level, they are one and the same.

This description also suggests that the speaker is not talking about "weight" in simple or literal terms. A human *brain* might have physical weight, but the *mind* does not—and neither, at least according to conventional thinking, does God. Yet the speaker suggests that in a certain sense they do "weigh" the same, implying that there is something inherently similar between them, even if it can't be easily or directly described or named.

LINES 10-11

For—Heft them—Pound for Pound—
And they will differ—if they do—

The speaker asks the reader to imagine lifting, or "Heft[ing]," the human mind and God, in order to measure and compare their weight. Reinforcing the opening line of the stanza, the speaker suggests that they will weigh the same—"Pound for Pound."

In these lines, the speaker continues the parallelism that structured the first two quatrains: after comparing the "Brain" (the human mind) to something else (in this case, God), the speaker asks the reader to envision putting the two next to each other. The repetition of the word "For," which has appeared in the second line of each stanza, reinforces this parallelism and continues to convey a sense of logic and reason in the speaker's argument. Meanwhile, just as the speaker previously repeated "side by side," and "Blue to Blue," the speaker now repeats the word "Pound," emphasizing the inherent similarity of the human mind and God.

Here, though, the poem again shifts ever so slightly away from its parallel structure. Instead of saying that the human mind could "contain" or "absorb" God, as the speaker said that the mind could contain the sky and sea, the poem introduces a suggestion of doubt, implying that the mind and God *might* "differ" in their weight in some way. Yet the speaker also implies that if there *is* a difference between the mind and God, it will be a slight one. The alliterative /d/ sounds in "differ" and "do" reinforce the idea that the human mind *might* differ from god—but if there is a difference, it won't be that substantial.

LINE 12

As Syllable from Sound—

The speaker concludes that if there *is* a difference in the weight of the human mind and that of God, it will only be like the difference between a "Syllable" and a "Sound." Through this simile, the speaker suggests that the human mind is like a syllable (a single unit of sound used in human speech), where God is like "sound" in its entirety. The human mind, then, is one *piece* of God; it partakes in some of God's infinite capacity, but perhaps to a lesser degree.

- This line can also be read in a different way, however. If sound is a kind of raw, unformed substance, then a syllable is something that *shapes* this unformed thing into language and meaning. In this reading, the poem could be suggesting that the human mind gives *shape* to God and is able to *articulate* an idea of what God is.

Either way, the simile is important in conveying the idea that the mind *links* humanity to God. Perhaps the mind is one *part* of God, or perhaps it allows humanity to give voice to an idea of God. What the poem throughout has made clear is that the human mind—like God—is almost boundless in its capacity to perceive and imagine. The poem's ending conveys a sense of reverence for this limitless potential.

Several sonic effects are important to the line and reinforce its meaning. First, the sibilant alliteration of "Syllable" and "Sound" emphasizes the connection between a single syllable and sound in its entirety. By extension, this alliteration emphasizes the connection between the human mind and God. And since /s/ sounds have no clear beginning and ending, this sibilance helps to convey the idea of the mind as continual and limitless.

These lines also conclude the rhyme scheme of the final quatrain; as in the rest of the poem, this quatrain follows an ABCB rhyme pattern, with "Pound" rhyming exactly with "Sound." These rhyme endings, each of which ends with a /d/ sound, also echo the /d/ sound in "God," thus subtly linking the idea of "Sound" as a whole—and the "Pound" of the mind—with the idea of God. Finally, the line ends with a dash, suggesting that both God, and the mind's infinite capacity to *imagine* God, are endless—and continue well beyond the bounds of this poem.

SYMBOLS

THE SEA

The sea, and water in general, symbolize profundity (or depth). Because the ocean is so deep and enormous, it has also traditionally been associated with a sense of mystery and the unknown. If the mind is "deeper" than the sea, then, the mind is even *more* profound, filled with even *more* mystery. When the speaker says that the mind can "absorb" the sea as easily as a sponge can soak up whole buckets of water, this also implies that the human mind is also capable of absorbing profound thoughts and ideas.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "the sea"

POETIC DEVICES

PARALLELISM

The poem uses parallelism (and the more specific device anaphora) in each of its three stanzas, repeating the same grammatical structure again and again and beginning many of its lines with the same words and phrases. This creates a sense of building logic in the poem even as the speaker compares the human mind to increasingly remarkable things.

The speaker begins each stanza with the exact same phrase: "The Brain is." This anaphora is then followed by the speaker's comparing the "Brain" (that is, the human mind) to the sky, the sea, and then to God. She then asks the reader to imagine holding the "Brain" up next to each of these things. Finally, she concludes each stanza by proving her claim, explaining why the "Brain" is "wider than the Sky," "deeper than the sea," and "just the weight of God."

Note how similar the first three lines of stanzas 1 and 2 are in particular:

> The Brain is [wider/deeper] than the [Sky/sea]
> For [put/hold] them [side/Blue] [by/to] [side/Blue]
> The one the other will [contain/absorb]

Only a few words change here, and the gist is generally the same. This repetition, in turn, emphasizes the mind's limitless capacity to perceive the surrounding world.

Interestingly, the poem's parallelism also calls attention to the moments when the speaker shifts *out* of this structure. Specifically, in stanza 3, the speaker doesn't claim that the "Brain" is *greater* ("wider" or "deeper") than God. Instead, the speaker says that the mind is "*just the weight*" of God, meaning that the human mind is *similar* to God, but not *more* infinite.

The speaker also doesn't say that the human mind can "contain" or "absorb" God, abilities emphasized in the poem's beginning. Instead, the speaker introduces an element of doubt, suggesting that the mind *might* actually differ from God in some way.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 5-7
- Line 8
- Lines 9-10
- Line 12

ENJAMBMENT

Thanks to Dickinson's characteristically unique use of punctuation, it's difficult to tell which lines are enjambed. While much of the poem *looks* end-stopped, it's not always clear if there's meant to be a meaningful pause or not thanks to all those dashes. What's more, those dashes feel far less restrictive and final than something like a period or a comma; they grant the poem a sense of momentum, pushing readers forward down the page.

The true enjambments in the poem, we'd argue, come in the third line of each stanza. This is clearest in lines 3-4:

> The one the other will contain
> With ease—and you—beside—

Line 3 rushes past the line break, essentially moving to "contain / With ease" the line that follows. In this way, the enjambment evokes the mind's metaphorical width.

The next two stanzas have enjambments in the same spot, each time dividing a simile in half. Some readers might even argue that the first lines in each stanza are also enjambed, with that connecting word "For" signaling that there should be a smooth, pauseless transition between lines. Whatever labels one uses, these enjambments and dashes evoke the limitless capacity of the mind itself, which can't be contained by mere line breaks.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "contain / With"
- **Lines 7-8:** "absorb— / As"
- **Lines 11-12:** "do— / As"

DIACOPE

The poem uses diacope in the second line of every stanza: "side by side," "Blue to Blue," and "Pound for Pound." In each instance, this repetition helps readers imagine how the human mind compares when placed next to something else—the sky, the sea,

and, finally, God.

For example, in the first stanza, the speaker asks the reader to imagine "put[ting]" the human mind and the sky "side by side." If one were to place these things right next to each other, the speaker says, then one would see just how easily the mind could "contain," or encompass, the entire sky.

Similarly, in stanza 2, the speaker invites the reader to "hold" the human mind and the sea next to each other, "Blue to Blue." In this instance, the repetition of the word "Blue" asks the reader to envision the mind itself as "Blue" just like ocean water. Of course, the brain isn't literally blue, but this repetition emphasizes the sense that the mind is *like* the ocean—deep and almost unfathomable in its scope and potential.

Finally, the speaker asks the reader to imagine "Heft[ing]" or lifting the human mind and God, and then comparing their weight "Pound for Pound." Again, that diacope encourages readers to consider holding the human mind in one hand and God in the other. It's an impossible task, of course, but the repetition of the word "Pound" is meant to suggest that the human mind and God are, in some sense, made out of the same *substance*, since they can be measured alongside each other.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "side," "side"
- **Line 6:** "Blue," "Blue"
- **Line 10:** "Pound," "Pound"

METAPHOR

The comparisons in the poem are all metaphorical—one can't literally move the sky, hold the sea, or lift God. And while the "Brain" is physically relatively small, the speaker is really using "Brain" here to talk about the human mind—something that doesn't have any physical form at all, and thus can't logically be "wider," "deeper," or heavier than anything.

The point of all these metaphors is to illustrate the limitless *potential* of the mind. Treating the mind as something physical and subject to measurement helps readers grasp just how immeasurable the mind's power really is.

The sky is just about the "widest" thing people can perceive, and the speaker is saying that the brain is metaphorically even wider than that. Width, here, is really just a metaphor for the capacity to perceive and imagine things.

The sea, in turn, is far too deep for anyone to hold it—and yet the speaker insists that the mind is even deeper. This depth metaphorically represents the mind's capacity to take things in, to absorb knowledge and new understanding. Also note how the speaker describes both the human mind and the ocean as "Blue." This mind is not *literally* blue, but the speaker is asking the reader to envision the mind as a kind of ocean itself, limitless and reflecting the blue of the sky.

Finally, the idea of the mind metaphorically weighing as much as God reflects the value and importance of both.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The Brain"
- **Line 5:** "The Brain"
- **Line 6:** "Blue to Blue"
- **Line 9:** "The Brain"
- **Line 10:** "Pound for Pound"

SIMILE

The poem uses two similes to further illustrate the mind's boundless capacity. First, the speaker compares the mind to a sponge that can soak up whole "Buckets" of water. This simile reinforces the idea that the *mind* greatly exceeds the *brain's* small physical size. After all, a sponge is *physically* small, but can absorb a great deal of water. Similarly, the speaker suggests that the human mind is capable of "absorb[ing]"—or taking in, imagining, and remembering—an entire ocean (and more, in fact).

Then, the speaker says that if a difference exists between the human mind and God, it's like the difference between a "Syllable" and "Sound." This is a complicated simile that's open to interpretation, but here's a possible reading:

- A sound is something formless and raw, whereas a syllable is a piece of sound that has been shaped into language. A syllable is thus *made out* of sound, which might suggest the human mind is like a small piece of God.
- In this reading, the human mind connects people to God, just as syllables let people shape and make meaning out of formless sound. This might refer to the idea that the mind is what allows people to conceive of and/or to perceive God in the first place.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "The one the other will absorb— / As sponges—Buckets—do—"
- **Lines 11-12:** "And they will differ—if they do— / As Syllable from Sound—"

ALLITERATION

The poem uses alliteration to emphasize the similarity between the human mind and the sky, the sea, and God. For example, in the first quatrain, sibilance connects the words "Sky" and "side." On the one hand, this simply sounds nice; it makes the poem feel more musical and memorable from the top. But also note that how that /s/ sound can stretch on and on (as long as someone has air to speak, that is!). These sounds thus very subtly reinforce the sheer breadth of the mind.

In the next stanza, alliterative /b/ sounds connect "Brain," "Blue" and "Buckets." These bold sounds add energy and force to the speaker's argument. And, again, alliteration reinforces the sense of connection here, linking the human mind to the deep "Blue" sea and a big "Bucket[]" of water.

The alliteration of "Syllable" and "Sound" in the final stanza is perhaps the most striking, and it again emphasizes the deep connection between these words. The similar sounds of these words reflect the similarity of the mind and God. The poem suggests that the human mind and God are, at some level, made of the same substance, an idea that the echoing alliteration reinforces.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Sky"
- **Line 2:** "side," "side"
- **Line 5:** "Brain"
- **Line 6:** "Blue," "Blue"
- **Line 8:** "Buckets"
- **Line 11:** "differ," "do"
- **Line 12:** "Syllable," "Sound"

ASSONANCE

Assonance appears throughout the poem and works a lot like alliteration to create music and draw connections between words. For instance, note how many long /i/ sounds pop up throughout the first two lines:

> The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
> For—put them side by side—

This assonance adds rhythm and emphasis to the speaker's point, opening the poem on a bold and memorable note. That /i/ vowel itself is long and wide, subtly evoking the image at hand. A similar thing happens at the start of the second stanza, where long /ee/ sounds link "deeper" and "sea." These sounds seem to lengthen the line itself and, in doing so, and convey the human mind's depth and breadth. The start of the third stanza does the same thing yet again: long /ay/ sounds echo in "Brain" and "weight," making the line itself feel a bit weightier.

There are some other brief blips of assonance in the poem as well, such as the sort /uh/ sounds of "sponges" and "Buckets" in line 8, and the short /ih/ (and /f/) sounds of "differ—if." These moments add subtle music and sonic interest to the poem.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "wider," "Sky"
- **Line 2:** "side by side"
- **Line 5:** "deeper," "sea"
- **Line 8:** "sponges," "Buckets"
- **Line 9:** "Brain," "weight"
- **Line 11:** "differ," "if"

VOCABULARY

Ease (Line 4) - If someone can do something with "ease" this means they can do it easily, without much effort.

Absorb (Line 7) - To soak up or take in.

Heft (Line 10) - To "heft" something means to hoist or raise it.

Pound (Line 10) - A unit of weight equivalent to 16 ounces.

Syllable (Line 12) - A unit of speech that contains one vowel sound and can also include surrounding consonants. A single syllable can make up a whole word or part of a word.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem consisted of three quatrains, or four-line stanzas. These are more specifically ballad stanzas, meaning they alternate between iambic tetrameter and trimeter and follow an ABCB rhyme scheme. Dickinson uses ballad stanzas all the time in her poetry, the form of which resembles that of Christian hymns. Each quatrain also follows a parallel structure, as the speaker compares "The Brain" to the sky, the sea, and, finally, to God.

Altogether, the poem's steady, predictable form creates a calm, measured, tone, with the speaker seems to be moving from one logical argument to the next. The poem thus feels confident and clear-headed, even as the speaker makes the bold claim that the human mind is comparable to God.

Despite this regular, measured form, the poem *also* includes elements that work against the form's container. Specifically, the poem uses dashes throughout, both in the middle of lines and at the ends of lines and stanzas. Where conventional punctuation (like commas and periods) would require the reader to pause or even come to a full stop at the end of each quatrain, these dashes propel the reader forward through the poem, creating a sense of anticipation and momentum.

These dashes, then, help to convey the poem's meaning: just as the poem suggests that the human mind can exceed its apparently small container (of the physical brain) to imagine the infinite, the poem *enacts* this sense of boundless potential; it's as though the poem's own ideas cannot be restrained by the poem's formal container.

METER

"The Brain—is wider than the Sky—" is written in ballad meter, a term sometimes used interchangeably with common meter

(though, depending on the strictness of the definition, there are some differences). As the name suggests, this is the type of meter used in traditional ballads.

All this is to say that the poem alternates between lines of iambic tetrameter (four iambs per line, for a total of eight syllables) and lines of iambic trimeter (three iambs per line, six syllables). An iamb begins with an unstressed syllable and ends on a stressed syllable. For example, consider the poem's two opening lines:

> The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
> For—put them side by side—

This steady meter is typical of Dickinson's poetry, and it adds a sense of music and rhythm throughout.

Also note that ballads were traditional songs used to tell stories and were often passed down from generation to generation. The poem's use of this meter, then, subtly suggests that it is one such song, telling a fundamental truth about human experience.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows a regular ABCB rhyme scheme. Marking for the new rhyme sounds in each stanza, that pattern looks like this:

ABCB DEFE GHEH

The rhyme scheme is predictable and regular, and this, in turn, adds to the speaker's confident, logical tone.

The poem does include two slight variations within the rhyme scheme, however, both of which are important to the poem's meaning. First, in stanza 1, the line ending "beside" actually *contains* its own rhyme word, "side." This subtle repetition reinforces the idea that the human mind is not only *similar* to the sky; it can *actually* contain it, just as one rhyme word contains another.

Additionally, in the penultimate line of the poem, the word "do" echoes the rhyme sounds that already appeared in the second stanza—where "do" rhymes with "Blue." Where the rest of the poem has introduced *new* rhyme sounds in each stanza (shifting, for example, from ABCB to DEFE), here the poem circles *back* to a previous line ending. And this happens at the moment in the poem when the speaker acknowledges that the human mind *might* differ from God—but that this difference will be a slight one.

In a subtle way, this might convey an ever-so-slight faltering in the forward progression of the speaker's argument. When the speaker's argument comes up against God, the poem implies, the terms of the poem have to slightly shift, as the speaker acknowledges that the human mind might not be exactly *equivalent* to God.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Brain—is wider than the Sky—" remains completely anonymous. Many readers take the speaker to be a representation of the poet, Emily Dickinson, but there's no real indication in the poem about the speaker's identity. And this makes sense: the speaker isn't talking about one specific person's mind, but rather the human mind in general.

SETTING

The poem doesn't have a specific setting. As with the lack of a specific speaker, this makes sense: the poem is talking about the seemingly limitless nature of the human mind, so it's no wonder that the speaker doesn't limit the poem to a particular time or place!

That said, on a very broad level, it's clear that the poem takes place on earth—in the human, rather than the divine, realm. The speaker describes the human mind by comparing it to aspects of the earth, including the sky (as seen from the earth) and the sea. The speaker also uses ordinary, earthly details like "sponges," "Buckets," and the weight of "Pound[s]" to elaborate on these comparisons.

All of these details make clear that the speaker lives on earth and is describing the human mind from this vantage point. In a way, this ordinary, earthly setting makes where the poem *goes* all the more remarkable, as the speaker moves imaginatively from the vast sky, to the ocean, and then to God. These imaginative leaps show the power of the mind to transport the speaker almost anywhere.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson chose to publish only a handful of poems during her lifetime, but she did order and bind many of her poems together into booklets—and the way Dickinson ordered her poems was never accidental. The poem before this one ("'Tis little I—could care for Pearls—") explores how wealthy the speaker feels since she is able to "own the Ample sea" and wears the "Diadem" or crown of her own mind. That poem thus provides a clear transition to *this* one, which suggests that through one's mind, one is able to *hold* the sea, and suggests that the human "Brain" is limitless.

Dickinson wrote often about the power, potential, and painful realities of the human mind. Some of her poems, such as "I dwell in Possibility" and "They shut me up in Prose," are a lot like this one in that they celebrate the boundless capabilities of the poetic imagination. Others, like "I felt a Funeral in my Brain" and "After great pain, a formal feeling comes," speak to the pain

of trauma, grief, and mental illness. What these works all share is a fascination with human consciousness.

Dickinson also read widely and her work draws on everything from the Bible, Shakespeare, Milton, to her contemporaries Ralph Waldo Emerson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Today, Dickinson is recognized as a foundational American poet, who, along with Walt Whitman, lay the groundwork for a distinctly American poetics for centuries to come.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dickinson wrote "The Brain—is wider than the Sky—" in the early 1860s, while living where she lived virtually all her life, in the small New England town of Amherst, Massachusetts. This historical context is important to the poem, and in a way makes the speaker's argument all the more remarkable.

Specifically, Dickinson wrote the poem in a historical time and place that was both socially and religiously conservative. Within this context, the speaker's claims that the human mind is the same "weight" as God would have been considered not only radical, but dangerous and sacrilegious. Yet the speaker of the poem presents this idea in a logical, measured way, asking the reader to consider what she is saying for themselves.

It is also important to note that while the poem explores the capacity of the human *mind*, the speaker uses the anatomical and medical term "The Brain," referring to the physical part of the human body. In this sense, the poem also draws on medical and anatomical awareness of Dickinson's day. Significantly, while a student at Mount Holyoke school, which she attended from September 1847 until October 1848, one of Dickinson's textbooks was Calvin Cutter's *Anatomy and Physiology*. The poem, then, compellingly incorporates *both* religious concepts of God, and scientific, anatomical knowledge, presenting the human mind as something that is able to encompass and "contain" both.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Biography of Emily Dickinson — Read about Emily Dickinson's life, and find links to many of her poems, in this biographical page from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)
- Original Manuscript of the Poem — View the poem in Dickinson's own handwriting. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/75221)
- The Emily Dickinson Museum — Learn more about Dickinson's life and work at the website of the Dickinson Museum, which is located at Dickinson's former home in Amherst, Massachusetts. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org)
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- Introduction to Dickinson's Poems — Learn more about Dickinson's distinctive subject matter and style in this introduction to her collected poems from the Academy of American Poets. (https://poets.org/text/guide-emily-dickinsons-collected-poems)
- Article about the Poem and Neuroscience — Read this article at Psychology Today to learn more about how Dickinson's poem anticipates and intersects with contemporary neuroscience, or the study of the human brain. (https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/waking-dreaming-being/201504/the-brain-is-wider-the-sky)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- A Bird, came down the Walk
- After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
- A narrow Fellow in the Grass
- As imperceptibly as grief
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I dwell in Possibility –
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- I started Early — Took my Dog —
- I taste a liquor never brewed
- 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 —
- There's a certain Slant of light
- The Soul selects her own Society
- They shut me up in Prose –
- This is my letter to the world
- We grow accustomed to the Dark
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

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