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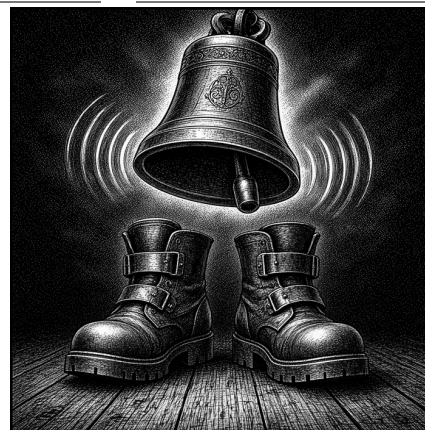
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I Felt a Funeral, in My Brain

by Emily Dickinson

Grades 9–12 · Common Core RL.9–10.4, RL.9–10.2, RL.9–10.5

Emily Dickinson wrote this poem around 1861. Readers often see it as a description of a mental breakdown, deep grief or losing consciousness, told through the steps of a funeral. Our version follows an early printed text in four quatrains.



THE POEM

- I felt a funeral in my brain,
And mourners, to and fro,
Kept treading, treading, till it seemed
That sense was breaking through.
- 5 And when they all were seated,
A service like a drum
Kept beating, beating, till I thought
My mind was going numb.
- And then I heard them lift a box,
10 And creak across my soul
With those same boots of lead, again.
Then space began to toll
As all the heavens were a bell,
And Being but an ear,
15 And I and silence some strange race,
Wrecked, solitary, here.

VOCABULARY

mourners — people grieving at a funeral
treading — walking with heavy steps
service — a religious ceremony
numb — without feeling

lead — a heavy gray metal
toll — to ring slowly, as a bell does for a death
solitary — alone

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the extended metaphor of the poem?

2. Find two examples of repetition in stanzas 1 and 2. What effect do they create?

3. What does “boots of lead” suggest about the mourners?

4. In stanza 4, “all the heavens were a bell, / And Being but an ear.” What is happening to the speaker’s senses?

5. How does the speaker feel at the end, “Wrecked, solitary, here”?

WRITING PROMPT

Choose a strong feeling (fear, stress, joy) and describe it as an event happening inside your mind, such as a storm, a parade or a game. Keep the metaphor going for at least three stanzas.

I Felt a Funeral, in My Brain — Answer Key

1. A funeral happening in the speaker's brain stands for mental suffering, perhaps grief or a breakdown.
2. “treading, treading” and “beating, beating”: the repetition imitates relentless footsteps and drumbeats, pounding the speaker's mind.
3. They are extremely heavy and crushing; they press down on her “soul” and make the pain feel physical.
4. The whole world seems to become sound and she becomes nothing but hearing; she is overwhelmed by the tolling.
5. Broken, isolated and alone with “silence”; she feels cut off from other people, like a shipwrecked survivor.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/i-felt-a-funeral-in-my-brain-emily-dickinson/