

Sample Explication: Poetry

He scanned it--staggered--
Dropped the Loop
To Past or Period--
Caught helpless at a sense as if
His Mind were going blind--

Groped up, to see if God was there--
Groped backward at himself
Caressed a Trigger absently
And wandered out of Life.

Emily Dickinson's poem presents the final moments and the final state of mind of a man who commits suicide. The form of the first stanza, fragmented and lacking clear direction, reflects his stunned, numbed state of mind. If the "He" of the first line is unidentified, so is the "it." Vagueness of reference reinforces vagueness of mind. It is, however, a terrifying vagueness: "as if / His Mind were going blind." Literally, *eyes* go blind. Here, the eye of the mind--the clear vision, the clear understanding--is going blind. The single complete rhyme in the poem, "Mind" and "blind," turns the possibility (the "as if") into implacable fact.

The poem opens with a scanning action--to look over, to examine quickly--which requires the use of vision. By the fifth line, that vision is being blinded. In the sixth line, he "Groped up, to see . . ." Groping is a fumbling, blinded action: "to see" here means to ascertain. Vision and blindness, where vision means both sight and foresight, insight, etc., are clearly important features for a poem about an unsuccessful search (scan) for reassurance and hope.

The "it" of the opening line very likely refers to life. His quick review of life causes him to stagger, a word whose hard consonants imitate a staggering, lurching motion. The dashes on either side of "staggered" exaggerate that sudden lurch. The "Loop" is a further example of deliberate ambiguity or vagueness. In the context of suicide, it suggests a noose. But in the context of the lines, he "Dropped the Loop / To Past or Period--", he seems to be searching for help, for moorings, for reasons not to give up hope. The "Loop" could be something like a life preserver. The language of the fourth line, "Caught helpless at a sense as if" is stumbling, clumsy, literally "caught helpless." One feels the mental paralysis setting in--the mind going blind. In a blind, clumsy, desperate motion he searches for God's help; in a similarly desperate action he tests his own inner resources. The contortion of "Groped backward" suggests his anguish.

Then, after a series of strong verbs--"staggered," "dropped," "caught," "groped," "groped" --all with harsh, clipped consonants, the turmoil of the poem settles into the calm of "caressed," "absently," "wandered." It is a numbed, uncaring, dreadfully desolate peace. He carelessly, almost gratefully, accepts release from life. The use of "a Trigger" rather than "the Trigger" suggests his utter detachment from the horror of this brutal end to his life. His "wander[ing] out of Life" is a blind unconscious exit.