**Taking it apart**

**Basic structure:** The poem retells the scattering of the brother’s ashes and the impact that the death has had on the family. The structure is fairly straightforward, perhaps to reflect the

**S1:** For 13 months the ashes of the persona’s brother has been held in a plastic bag in a container in their mother’s living room. Note the fricative in ‘squat, monolithic in your black-cornered container’.

**S2:** It is easy to say that he has died, but his essence continues to live on in the ashes.

**S3:** They take the ashes up onto a hill, ready to scatter them.

**S4:** They scatter the ashes under each tree and the persona finds himself fearful of that which killed his brother. The extent of their grief is explored.

**S5:** Their mother breaks down crying at the tragic situation.

**S6:** They scatter the rest of the ashes at home. The anaphoric ‘one for’ suggests a lack of emotion or perhaps even a sense of acceptance as the ash scattering comes to an end.

**S7:** The last of the ashes are buried near a young silver birch. The persona ponders on his fear of death, and finally wishes that he could forget this day. Note the alliteration in ‘dark day’ which adds to the sense of gloom. The contrast between ‘oldness’ and ‘youth’, and ‘death’ and ‘life’ is also important. The stanza also contains the only 2 lines in the poem which rhyme: ‘This is a dark day, / I would, if I could now put it away’.
Thematic analysis

Memory

- Ashes as a symbol of memory, and scattering them as a symbol of letting go
- Prevalence of memory

At the very heart of *Scattering the Ashes* is the idea of memory. The persona recalls scattering his brother’s ashes 13 months after his death. Beyond this the poem depicts personal memories of his brother and of the suffering resulting from his demise.

One might argue that ashes are symbolic of memory. A bag of ashes is all that remain of his brother, and the persona believes that he feels his brother’s ‘rough scraping chin’, ‘gangly angularities’ and ‘dark eyes’ in the clustered granules.

Scattering the ashes might in turn represent the letting go of these memories. Now that ash is all that is left of his brother the persona can perhaps ‘begin to forget’. They scatter the ashes based on places they ‘best remembered’: under each tree on a hill where they probably spent ‘many-memoried summers’, and several places in the garden at home.

Yet despite this it is almost impossible to dispense with the memory of his brother, and unlike with ashes, the persona cannot scatter the memory of this ‘dark day’ among his other memories.

Life and death

- Natural cycle
- Tree imagery
- Journey imagery
- Powerlessness of man
- Greek tragedy

The natural cycles of life and death, and the powerlessness of man to control them are also explored.

The image of the tree is particularly important. The tree is associated with not only memory (e.g. the willow where the persona and his brother played hide-and-seek) but also death, rebirth, and the inefficacy of man.

Ashes and tears are ‘gathered’ and ‘sowed’, much like seeds. Most of the ashes are spread around trees, almost as an ‘offering’ or ‘sacrifice’. Of particular importance is the image of the ‘cut down willow’, which can later be linked to the persona's brother being ‘cut down in the maleness of [his] days’. The last of the ashes have been buried ‘by the roots of a young and eager silver birch’, hinting at renewed vitality and at the circle of life and death. In Celtic myth, the silver birch is often symbolic of renewal and purification. Burying the ashes by the roots of this tree perhaps provides a sense of the former to the persona and his mother.

Images of an ‘avenue of trees’ and a ‘lane of childish days’ are implicative of a journey. This idea is further explored by the description that his mother has had to ‘walk’ through an ‘endless avenue of deaths’

There is also some suggestion that his brother must have died of some illness rather than by human agency (e.g. in an accident). The use of the Greek tragedy as a symbolic device further provides the suggestion that death is an age-old truth, uncontrolled by man.

I am uncertain of the origins of the image of a hill which according to myth is made by plague bodies, but I speculate this may well be a reference to the plague pits on which much of London has been built (Fusek Peters lives in London; note that the UK is also within the native range of the silver birch and certain willow trees).
Feelings associated with death

- Grief: incomprehensibility, side-stepping of the matter
- Loss
- Isolation: Pronouns
- Fear: contrast between life and death,
- Colour: grey

The poem also deals with the feelings associated with death; among these are grief, loss, fear and isolation.

Being able to let go and scatter the ashes of his brother perhaps like the ‘bitterest sherbet’ is somewhat bittersweet, but even after 13 months, the loss of the persona’s brother is still felt very strongly. Both ‘weeping mother’ and ‘cold-eyed son unable to comprehend the vastness of his grief’ are unable to fully accept his death.

The persona never explicitly states that his brother is dead, although the rest of the poem indicates that this is most definitely the case. It is almost as though the persona wants to sidestep the matter entirely, claiming instead that his brother is ‘hidden’. Such a claim perhaps expounds further the incomprehensible grief felt by the persona.

The sole rhyming couplet in the final stanza while creating a simple flowing clause has in it a note of sadness which echoes the loss and grief imposed by the memory of the persona’s brother.

Isolation is implied by the shift in pronouns from ‘our mother’ at the beginning of the poem to ‘my mother’ after the ashes have been scattered. Both the persona and his mother are equally isolated when they are being avoided by ‘women with dogs’.

Fear is also a dominant emotion. It is ‘easy to say that the spirit had gone’, yet the persona can still feel his brother in the ashes. In ‘horror’ he wonders if ‘that which killed’ his brother ‘lived still in this sickened chalk’. His death has been a ‘terrible gift’ which has aged the persona (‘an oldness in my youth’). This fear blinds him so that he is unable to appreciate his own baby, the ‘life’ growing in his wife’s womb. The contrasts between age and youth as well as life and death only serve to widen the dichotomy between life and death, exacerbating the sense of fear.

Grey – the colour of the ashes – is mundane and bland, much unlike the ‘silver’ of the young living birch where some of the persona’s brother’s ashes are scattered. The persona’s mother has been made ‘grey’ by the ashes: this could be both literal (refer to how the persona’s hands become powdered after handling the ashes) or figurative (with her son’s death making her lose her vitality).