

# Death: triumph or tragedy?

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Emily Dickinson's poem, "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died," is an attempt to answer one of the premier questions of life: What happens when we die? In her word choice, images, and patterns of sound, Dickinson reflects the incongruence between the prevailing religious attitudes about death and the afterlife and her personal feelings about immortality. She seems to say that we may think we have figured out how death will be, but maybe it isn't that way at all. Maybe it is not attended by the strains of heavenly choirs or brilliant lights illuminating the mysteries of eternity. Maybe death is as ordinary as a fly buzzing around the room, and when it's over the soul is left sitting in the dark. Like her life, the poem is a mixture of conformity and nonconformity. It is written in the form, rhythm, and meter of a church hymn – four stanzas of four iambic lines with four stresses in the first and third lines, and three stresses in the second and fourth lines. Thoughts of death and immortality may require this kind of dignity, but the likeness to a hymn ends there. She does not perfectly rhyme the second and fourth lines, but uses slant rhyme instead, as in "Room-Storm," "firm-Room," and "be-Fly." Using "these approximate rhymes often capture[s] the jarring discords and painful doubts [of her] thought[s]" (Pickard 51). The message here is not the praise of Almighty God. In fact, we are led to wonder if God enters at all. From the first line Dickinson sets us up for an untraditional view of death. "I heard a fly buzz–" is what we might say about a sound we hear at a picnic or on a walk through a garden, but she startles us by ending with "when I died–." Immediately we know that the speaker is delivering the message to us from beyond the veil. We are startled that a dying soul would be able to focus on such insignificant background noise, but the description of the room

in the next three lines supplies a reason why a fly might be heard: The Stillness in the Room Was like the Stillness in the Air- Between the Heaves of Storm- (L 2-4) She compares the stillness in the death room to the feeling that the air has between heavy storms, as when the eye of a hurricane passes over the land before the next onslaught of wind and rain. There is a hush of tense, dreadful anticipation, ears open for the tiniest sound. The final consonant “ m” in room and storm adds to the feeling of heaviness and thickness in the atmosphere, as does the use of the word heaves, which, even though it means to rise or come up, has a sensation of weight to it. Also, it is an example of how Dickinson is able use the precise word to support her underlying premise that nothing is what it seems to be in this poem. Using upper case letters at the beginning of “ Stillness” and “ Room” gives them the quality of proper nouns – this is a special kind of stillness and a special kind of room made sacred by respect for the dying and by the nearness of eternity. Dickinson uses consonance to add to the rhythm of these lines as she repeats the initial “ st” in stillness, stillness, and storm, but because they are opposite in nature she continues the incongruity of the poem , linking them together by their sound just as the sound of the fly is linked to dying. With two simple words in the second stanza, Eyes and Breaths, Dickinson creates an entire image of mourners gathered around the bed in silent expectation, “ The Eyes around – had wrung them dry-.” These mourners have shed their final tears, and although eyes can’t be wrung like a wet handkerchief, we can imagine a few women standing near the bed with twisted handkerchiefs held tightly in abeyance, ready in case another crying bout comes over them. In the next line we almost see the rise of their

breasts as they inhale deep “ Breaths. . . gathering firm / For that last Onset-,” the moment when the spirit slips away from the body and all is over. According to one Dickinson biographer, John Pickard, “ it was a common practice in Emily Dickinson’s time to observe the dying. For those with a religious faith, the moment of death meant that a soul left its body to enter paradise. Thus the dying person’s final actions were carefully scrutinized for an indication of immortality’s approach” (103). It may be that the curious onlookers want to hurry the moment along so that they can ease their own minds regarding death’s mystery. Dickinson surely witnessed a few such scenes at the deaths of her own loved ones, and because she always lived with dubious faith, she needed to examine this moment. Pickard concludes that, “ she was continually preoccupied with death, resurrection, immortality, and judgment and never ceased examining the undeniable reality of God” (8). So this “ onset” of death is a crucial moment for her. However, an “ onset” is not only defined as a commencement of something positive, as the onset of spring, it can also be an attack or assault, as to withstand the onset of the army (Webster 802), which is a further confirmation of her uncertainty about death being a triumph or tragedy. With this thought in mind, let us look at the next two lines of the poem. “ when the King / Be witnessed – in the Room-.” Who or what does the King symbolize? One reviewer believes Dickinson equates the King with death itself: “ All of the elements in this part of the poem lead up to the impending arrival of ‘ the King’ who is Death” (Beck 31). Another views the King as a symbol of the Lord Jesus Christ, as in the Christian tradition, the Lord is commonly titled the King of Kings. Death is thus a moment when the King of

Terrors is defeated by the King of Kings, and the equanimity with which Dickinson's narrator awaits death strongly suggests that the 'King' who is to be 'witnessed' then is as much or more the Lord as he is Death. (Bachinger 13) Either interpretation allows the King to usher in the time of death. If the King is death, his onset is an attack on life. If the King is Jesus Christ, his glorious onset brings the gift of eternal life. Whether death is the King because it has power over life, or Christ is the King because he also has power over life does not change the essence of the poem. Having the King represent Christ would fit with Dickinson's agnosticism in that if Christ the King is supposed to come and escort the soul of man to its eternal home accompanied by great light and angelic music, it certainly doesn't happen here. There is only a buzzing fly and darkness. It is as if her hopes are for eternal life, but her fears persist in telling her otherwise. Pickard notes that, "for her death remained the supreme experience, which brought either new spiritual existence or lifeless immobility" (124), so the question remains unanswered. The third stanza continues the dilemma as the dead one explains his preparations for death, "I willed my Keepsakes - Signed away / What portion of me be / Assignable-" (9-11). Dickinson creates an inner rhythm with the words Signed and assignable, just as the speaker may feel inner peace by allotting his worldly goods to others. But, in truth, the speaker has little control over life or death. He has made his earthly arrangements; the spiritual arrangements are out of his hands. He can't assign any heavenly reward to himself - that can only be done by God. What he is able to transfer to others is not part of himself, merely objects outside of himself associated with memories. The word Keepsakes implies that the

objects are material things kept sacred, and perhaps Dickinson is saying that sacredness is left behind when we die because there are no heavenly mansions awaiting us as the ministers of her day taught. In support of this idea, Pickard quotes from *Emily Dickinson: The Mind of a Poet* by Albert J. Gelpi that “ she believed that the ‘ supernatural is only the natural disclosed’ and continually wondered if heaven could possess all the beauty found on earth” (38). At this point the dying soul and his mourners are prepared for the final moment to come, and there is nothing left to do but await the entrance of the King. Then quickly, before we know what is happening, Dickinson breaks the poem apart as sharply as the snapping of a dry, brittle tree branch with these lines “ and then it was / There interposed a Fly-.” The word interposed lets us know precisely that this is no wandering summer insect who has accidentally flown into the room. It is an unholy intruder upon this somber scene. It has taken a position between the dying and death and signals that there will be no happy ending. Not only does this fly appear at the most inopportune moment, but it appears “ With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz-“. The word Blue could refer to the color of the fly, but with Dickinson it means so much more. In *Emily Dickinson’s Imagery*, Rebecca Patterson has made an extensive study of the use of color in Dickinson’s poems and letters. She says that “ Whether azure, mazarine, sapphire, or plain blue, the color is most often and naturally associated with the sky. If [she] is happy, blue connotes warmth, freedom... unlimitless power. If unhappy, it is the color of death or of the cold, frightening... veil between this world and the next” (Patterson 123). This interpretation seems to fit perfectly within this poem. The speaker is not experiencing freedom or

unlimitless power, rather he is up against the veil of the invisible world beyond. The fly has an uncertain, stumbling, Blue Buzz – and as Dickinson creates this synesthesia of color and sound, she reflects the uncertainty in her own mind regarding what is going to happen to the spirit at death (Pickard 52). As the fly comes “ between the light – and me – “(14), it interferes with the expected peaceful passing on. Whatever vision is anticipated is obscured because of the fly. Is the fly just a “ petty irritant which distracts from the magnificent approach of death” (Pickard 104)? Is it “ representative of decay and putrefaction of something ugly and unpleasant” (Beck 31)? Katrina Bachinger believes that “ For Dickinson, that little Fly is God. He who hears its ‘ uncertain stumbling Buzz’ and sees its ‘ Blue,’ a favorite romantic color for Eternity, does not neglect God, the King of Kings, but enters Heaven before death” (15). According to her interpretation, God, in the form of the Fly, comes “ between the light” and takes the persona of the poem to Heaven before his final expiration. However, because the final two lines of the poem “ And then the Windows failed – and then / I could not see to see-,” indicate that whatever light there might have been on the other side of the window was blotted out by the fly, Pickard’s and Beck’s interpretations seem to better fit the mood of the entire poem, that death is not the ultimate spiritual experience. Peck’s interpretation of the fly as an irritant also supports Dickinson’s feeling that nature, God, and man are rarely in harmony (Pickard 38). We must also reiterate that Dickinson did not hold with the traditional religious views of her time. She was not confident about the existence of immortality, although she desired it. If, when the last breath is exhaled and the eyes – the “ Windows” of the soul – look toward

eternity and see nothing, it would confirm her suspicions that all the grandeur and illumination are myths. “ Instead of a King, the last thing the speaker sees is a fly, something small, ugly, unpleasant, and in the context rather sinister, the very ironic opposite of a King” (Beck 31). It is interesting that here in the last stanza, where the speaker experiences the most confusion, Dickinson uses exact rhyme, me-see-see. Again, the theme of incongruity is reinforced. At the moment of death the rhyme ties the lines together to a complete ending, which is the office of death, to settle the confusion of life. But the words do not shine with a glorious, celestial light. Instead, “ the Windows failed.” It is as if Dickinson is saying that in trying to see or understand more than a person is given to know (“ I could not see to see”) the speaker in the poem causes his own bewilderment. The poem achieves harmony in letting go of the traditional heavenly reward. Thus, if we focus on the heaven we can find in living, and let go of the promise of heaven in dying, we can also achieve harmony. Works Cited Bachinger, Katrina. “ Dickinson’s ‘ I Heard a Fly Buzz.’” *The Explicator* 43. 3 (1985): 13-15. Beck, Ronald. “ Dickinson’s ‘ I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died.’” *The Explicator* 26. 4 (1967): 31. Dickinson, Emily. “ I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died.” *Literature: A Portable Anthology*. Ed. Janet E. Gardner, et al. Boston: Bedford, 2004. 489.” Onset.” *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*. 1977. Patterson, Rebecca. *Emily Dickinson’s Imagery*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1979. Pickard, John B. *Emily Dickinson: An Introduction and Interpretation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967.