I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -

POEM TEXT

I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air -
Between the Heaves of Storm -

The Eyes around - had wrung them dry -
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset - when the King
Be witnessed - in the Room -

I willed my Keepsakes - Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable - and then it was
There interposed a Fly -

With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -
Between the light - and me -
And then the Windows failed - and then
I could not see to see -

SUMMARY

I could hear a fly buzzing around the room at the moment I died. The room felt very still, like the calm, tense air in between the gusts of a storm.

The people gathered around me had cried until they had no tears left, and everyone seemed like they were holding their breath, waiting for my final moment and anticipating the arrival of God in the room.

I had signed a will that gave away all my possessions, dividing up all the parts of my life that *could* be divided up. And then, suddenly, a fly interrupted the proceedings.

The fly looked blue and buzzed around the room erratically. It flew in front of the light, blocking it. Then the light from the windows faded away, and I could not see anything at all.

THEMES

THE MYSTERY OF DEATH

"I heard a Fly buzz – when I died" attempts to imagine the transition between life and death. While the poem does have questions about whether there is an afterlife, it conveys its uncertainty by focusing on the actual *moment* of death itself. Told from the perspective of someone who seems to have already died, the poem is mysterious and paradoxical—obviously, no one has yet been able to describe what it feels like to actually die! Dickinson tries to imagine it anyway—and her take is decidedly less sentimental than most, as the speaker's final moments are interrupted by a buzzing fly. Perhaps this suggests the sheer mundanity of mortality—there is nothing so ordinary as a bug—or that no matter how well one prepares to face the other side, it's impossible to be ready for something unknowable.

Though the speaker is reciting this poem *after* having died, what the speaker describes takes place just *before* this, as the speaker is on his or her deathbed. In these final moments, the room and the air are notably filled with "stillness." This seems to anticipate the stillness of death, and suggests a sort of blurring of the border between these two states—as if the transition between life and death isn't a sharp jump cut but rather a slow crossfade. Alternatively, maybe the other people in the room are trying to remain still on purpose in order to make the transition from life to death as seamless as possible for the speaker. This, in turn, creates a sort of tension, as everyone is done with the sad part (their "Eyes" have been "wrung dry" of tears), and is waiting with for "the King"—that is, God—to take the speaker away.

Except, instead of God arriving to aid with the passage from life to death, there is only the "uncertain, stumbling Buzz" of the fly. The timing of the fly's arrival suggests that, surprisingly, *it* might be the ambassador of the underworld. Though some critics see the fly as an emissary of death—the grim reaper, perhaps—it might also just be a literal fly. In that case, it represents the *absence* of "the King," undermining any certainties that the speaker might have held on to about the afterlife. Its annoying buzzing sound is darkly funny, preventing the speaker from attaining the state of spiritual contemplation or grace that would seem more fitting for the occasion. In other words, at perhaps the most spiritually significant moment in life, the speaker is distracted by a bug.

The fly, then, is a perfect symbol for spiritual doubt, its seemingly aimless airborne wandering suggesting the earthly *wondering* of the human mind. Indeed, part of the poem's power comes from the fact the fly is interpretable as both significant *and* insignificant, symbolic *and* meaningless. Either way, the moment of death remains shrouded in mystery. Whatever people *hope* comes after life, they can't know for sure. Ultimately, then, the poem ends on an inconclusive note, with the "failing" light of the window representing the speaker's

inability to see beyond these last living moments—despite the fact that the speaker seemingly talks from the afterlife. Death remains as unknowable as ever.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 2-4
- Lines 6-8
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 13-16

RITUAL AND MEANING

Describing the speaker's dying moments, "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died" presents a scene of ritual and ceremony. In essence, the speaker is going through the motions of what people are *supposed* to do when they die, and the people around the dying speaker are playing their part in this ritual too—gathering solemnly around the speaker's death bed, crying, and dealing with the will. These last few moments are a revealing commentary on the way people conceive of life itself—but the presence of the fly casts doubts on the priorities and beliefs of human existence.

The deathbed scene the speaker describes is like a miniature of humankind's long-established traditions and customs around death. Religion, family, and the law are all represented here. The speaker and those gathered around the speaker *believe* in the norms of their world. Loved ones are gathered around, suggesting the importance of human relationships, specifically of family. The crying "Eyes" suggest that life is something to value—and that its loss is worthy of mourning.

The speaker hopes for spiritual salvation from "the King," as is the norm for the speaker's society. Thus the religious institutions of Dickinson's day, so integral to 19th century America *and* to Dickinson's poetry, are also represented. And, as though to underscore the importance of earthly possession, the speaker's final act is to "Sign[] away" his or her "Keepsakes." This is a reference to the will that passes down all the speaker's property and possessions—but only what "portion of me be / Assignable" (which subtly casts doubt on whether these "Keepsakes" are all that important).

Everything is set up, then, for this to be a kind of picture-perfect death—the mourners are in place and the event is unfolding according to traditions and customs of the time. But it's then—and *explicitly* "then" in line 11—that the fly comes into view and earshot. It disturbs this perfect scene in a way that seems ironic, tragically comic, and incredibly well-timed.

Flies, of course, are notoriously annoying; the fly, with its meandering flight and high-pitched buzz, undermines the gravity of the situation. It functions almost like a streaker at a serious public event, farcically mocking the occasion. In turn, the presence of the fly questions whether the "keepsakes" really *were* important—or if maybe it was the *un*-assignable portion of existence that was important after all. Or perhaps even *none* of it was important!

Indeed, if the pre-death rituals are partly about reassuring the speaker that some part of him or her will continue to exist after death—whether in the afterlife, other peoples' memories, or physical possessions—the fly disturbs these reassurances too. Flies are often associated with the decay of the human body. They are scavengers, happily feeding on decomposing fruit and flesh. Here, then, the fly is a reminder of what will happen to the speaker's body once he or she is (presumably) buried. Over time, the physical features that made the speaker recognizable will waste away, leaving only bones. This is a stark reminder of the physical reality of death and seems to undermine what usually gives life meaning, whether that be possessions, beliefs, or interpersonal relationships.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 5-12
- Lines 13-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -

"I heard a Fly buzz - when I died" opens with an intriguing statement that draws the reader in immediately. The poem recounts a story from an unusual speaker—one that's dead! Instantly, then, the poem feels intensely paradoxical, the speaker offering a faithful account of the moment of death *after* the fact (even though that is, of course, impossible).

In just one short line, then, the poem establishes its main juxtaposition—between life and death mainly, but also between mundanity and profundity. Dying, especially for this speaker (who can reasonably be understood as living/dying in the 19th century, the same as Dickinson), is meant to be a profound and serious occasion. Yet, as the poem will go on to explain, this nagging, annoying fly seems to be literally and metaphorically getting in the way. This first line places the fly front and center in the poem, so that the speaker's focus on the fly in turn becomes the reader's.

The meter reflects the fly's irritating noise, with two stresses in succession varying the poem's iambic meter almost immediately:

I heard | a Fly | buzz - when | I died -

The close stresses make the line itself noisier, suggesting the

fly's buzz. If instead it was perfectly iambic, such as in the following manner,

I heard | a buzz- | ing fly

the line would be far less evocative. As it stands, the poem begins by evoking the disorder the fly creates.

The poem's juxtaposition between life and death, and between mundanity and profundity, is also developed by the first line's caesura. On one side of the characteristic Dickinsonian dash there is the fly, and on the other the speaker's death. On one side, life (in the form of the fly)—on the other, death.

LINES 2-4

The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air -
Between the Heaves of Storm -

Lines 2 to 4 begin to establish the poem's setting. The speaker, telling the reader about the speaker's final moments, explains that he or she died in a "room" (in stanza 2 it also becomes clear that the speaker's surrounded by loved ones). The speaker, then, is lying in bed awaiting death. The room is "still" because it is a solemn occasion, but the "stillness" also anticipates the "stillness" of being dead.

The poem employs a simile here, comparing the "stillness in the Room" to the "Stillness in the Air" of a storm between strikes of lightning and thunder. This sets up the moment of dying—as opposed to actually being dead—as a kind of brief rest between the "storm" of life and the "storm" of death. It's worth noting the similarity, or parallelism, between lines 2 and 3. The sameness of the language conveys its own form of "Stillness" by being relatively unchanged.

These lines also make effective use of assonance, with the /i/ sounds of "Stillness" and "in" contrasting with the more violent sounds of line 4:

Between the Heaves of Storm -

These /e/ sounds convey physical power, conjuring nature's intimidating side and juxtaposing with the quieter sounds in the two lines before. Similarly, the poem's first use of rhyme employs Dickinson's characteristic slant rhyme to emphasizes how the still "Room" contrasts with gusty "Storm."

These lines don't reference the fly at all. Though the fly has already been mentioned in line 1, it's not until line 12 that it's mentioned again. These lines, then, are intended to build a sense of occasion and suspense for the reader. There is a solemn atmosphere in the room, one which is also quite self-conscious. That is, the gathered loved ones and the speaker are *expecting* the speaker's death, but nobody knows exactly when it will come. Accordingly, they are all engaged in a kind of ritual, the silent "Stillness" of the room—as opposed to conversation—intended to allow the speaker a dignified transition into death and, perhaps, the afterlife.

LINES 5-8

The Eyes around - had wrung them dry -
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset - when the King
Be witnessed - in the Room -

The second stanza adds detail to the poem's setting, describing the people gathered around the dying speaker. They are referred to in line 5 by a synecdoche: "Eyes." This is a powerful word choice because it creates the sense of both genuine grief and a kind of self-conscious pressure to conform to the rituals of grief. The eyes are "wrung" "dry"—they have cried as much as they can.

These are truly the last moments of the speaker's life, the dry eyes suggesting that death has been imminent for a while. It as though the performance of grief, in which the loved ones prove to the speaker the extent of their emotions, is over—now there is only the mystery of what happens next. In general, these observations suggest a hyper-awareness on the part of the speaker.

Next, lines 6 and 7 describe the "Breaths" "gathering firm" among the mourners as they await the moment of death. This "gathered" breath is part of the "stillness" described in the first stanza, a brief pause between two events (life and death, or the "Heaves of Storm"). But breath, of course, is ultimately what will divide the mourners from the speaker, the living from the dead. The speaker is about to breathe his or her final breath, while the others will keep on breathing.

The attention to this detail evokes the mystery of death, the impossibility of grasping what really happens between the last breath and the one that never arrives. The similar (though not identical) /th/ sounds in "Breaths" and "gathering" use a kind of consonance to give the line a breathy quality, which the /f/" of "firm" contributes to as well.

Lines 7 and 8 explain just what everyone in the room is expecting. Here, the poem dials up its use of caesura, which makes the lines flow less easily and perhaps mimics the dying speaker's difficulty breathing. The speaker here describes the actual moment of death as the "last Onset." This is an oxymoron, as "onset" actually means "beginning." This, then, characterizes death as a last beginning, a kind of journey—the final one on which the speaker will embark.

Of course, death as a journey is a traditional idea that runs through many eras and cultures. The second half of line 8, however, ties the poem more specifically to the Christian tradition through allusion. The Bible frequently refers to God as a King; Jesus is the "King of Kings" (Revelation 19:16). In other words, everybody gathered at the speaker's deathbed is

anticipating the speaker's journey from life to the afterlife, a journey that is guided by God.

These lines are like the set-up of a joke—with the fly's arrival as the imminent punchline. There is something darkly comic about the scene. Everyone present is fixated on life's deepest questions—on what life means and what comes after—but ultimately nobody is any closer to this kind of knowledge, not even the speaker on death's door.

LINES 9-11

I willed my Keepsakes - Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable

From line 9 to the caesura in line 11, the poem depicts the next stage in the playing out of death's customs and traditions. However, this stage is distinctly more mundane than the hoped-for arrival of "the King" in the previous stanza. Now the speaker makes the will official, "assigning" different "Keepsakes," presumably to those gathered around the death bed. The enjambment between lines 9 and 10, and again between 10 and 11, suggests the speed with which these "Keepsakes" are signed away, gone with a brief motion of the hand as it signs the page.

There's something quite dry about this moment, compared with the momentousness in the previous stanza. It suggests that the speaker is perhaps more interested in material goods than spiritual transition. On the other hand, the speaker also seems to suggest that the "stuff" of life is not as important as people think. The speaker signs "away" only "What portion of me be / Assignable," implying that perhaps there is something in human life that is *not* assignable—that is, not able to be owned or traded. This *something* that can't be sold could be the Christian soul, or it could be more down-to-earth, such as love or friendship.

The "apportioning" here also relates interestingly to the poem's focus on death. One of life's greatest mysteries is the question of what actually *changes* when people die—what part of a person makes them who they are, and where it goes when they're gone. However, the poem aims to highlight these mysteries, not to solve them. Indeed, any attempt to answer such profound questions on the speaker's part is undercut by the appearance of the fly. After all, the fly—and *not* the reality of an afterlife—is the very first detail that the speaker gives to the reader in the entire poem.

LINES 11-14

- and then it was
There interposed a Fly -
With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -
Between the light - and me -

The caesura in line 11 is perhaps the most significant in the entire poem. This dash marks the precise moment when the fly makes its entrance into the otherwise picture-perfect death scene. Everything so far, in terms of the social rituals of death, has gone according to plan: people are crying, spiritual salvation is anticipated, and the speaker has "signed away" his or her possessions.

The fly—a creature that humans tend to think of as small and insignificant—is an unwelcome guest in the room, not to mention an irritating sound. The speaker can hardly enter a state of spiritual contemplation or grace with this distracting fly around. The way the enjambment of line 11 introduces the word "there" helps make the fly's appearance seem sudden and unmistakeable.

The choice of the word "interposed" to follow "There" in line 12 is beautiful, especially given that so many other words could have filled its place. "Interposed" refers specifically to something comes between one thing and another, and the fly here *interposes* between the speaker and the significance of the moment of death. In other words, the fly's interruption represents the unknowability of what comes after death

Not only is the fly's sound annoying, but the way that it flies is distracting too. It is the one source of movement within the "Stillness" of the room. Its seemingly "uncertain" flight is an unwelcome reminder that the speaker's own journey between life and death is "uncertain" too. Indeed, it may be that no such journey even exists! *Everything* in this scene is uncertain.

The two dashes around "uncertain" in line 13, both functioning as caesurae, intensify this sense of uncertainty, as though the line itself may not find its way to its completion. The distantly alliterating /b/ sounds here also evoke the flight of the fly, almost placed at random through lines 13 and 14:

> With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -
> Between the light - and me -

Line 14 is almost psychedelically disorientating. The fly comes between the speaker and "the light" that shines through the window. Of course, this is technically impossible: a fly is far too small to block out a window. The poem is dealing in symbolism here, associating "light" with life and contrasting it with the dark unknowability of death. This image also suggests the closing of the speaker's eyes, the speaker's field of vision narrowing as he or she takes the mysterious step from being into non-being.

The power of the fly's interruption lies precisely in its ambiguity. There are a number of ways to read this moment. A fly is a scavenger, often found on decomposing flesh (whether animal or plant). It has a long-standing association with death because it often appears at the site of death shortly thereafter. With this in mind, then, the fly serves as a stark reminder that the speaker's body will rot away and leave a pile of bones.

If this first interpretation is relatively literal—indeed, literally

down-to-earth—then the fly can also be interpreted more figuratively: perhaps the fly *is* the emissary of death, arriving to take the speaker on a spiritual journey. Some critics even interpret the fly as the grim reaper.

A third interpretation is that the fly ultimately doesn't represent anything—and that's *the point*. Its insignificance serves as a comically timed reminder that life is ultimately meaningless—that no amount of "Keepsakes," loved ones, or religion can change that.

LINES 15-16

And then the Windows failed - and then
I could not see to see -

Lines 15 and 16 describe the moments that are as close to death as possible. Part of the poem's power is in the way that, though it appears to come close, it never actually depicts the precise moment of death. The actual transition from being into non-being is still utterly mysterious. Right before the moment of death "the Windows fail[]," symbolically representing the fading "light" of life. The lack of light also signifies the lack of knowledge that surrounds the poem's core questions: what happens when people die, and is life meaningful despite death?

Here the poem makes effective use of diacope in the repeated phrase of "And then." This use of diacope creates a kind of fragmentation (which line 15's caesura also contributes to), conveying the paradox of the poem's attempt to describe the moment of death. It's as if time is broken down into smaller and smaller chunks, trying to nail down the moment of death. Yet no matter how small these chunks get, the poem's never able to depict the moment *after* death.

"And then" is a phrase that indicates the succession of one moment to another. The final moment in the poem (and the speaker's life) seems to be in line 16. Except, it isn't! The poem is told in the past tense, so technically the poem takes place *after* the speaker's death. And yet, as if to confirm the mystery of death, the speaker offers the reader no insider knowledge as to what actually happens (after all, the poem was written by someone living).

The poem also employs diacope in the repeated "I could not see to see," distinguishing between two different types of seeing. On one hand, the speaker's literal sight has "failed." On the other, the speaker's ability to see beyond the moment of death, or into the future, or to imagine anything at all, has also failed. The speaker's mind has gone dark. The poem, then, ends in literal and figurative darkness—and leaves the reader in the same state.

The poem's only perfect rhyme, between "me" and "see," mirrors this finality. Whereas the previous slant rhymes always seemed to leave the speaker's questions unresolved, this final instance indicates that there shall be no more questioning. The poem and the speaker's life are over.

SYMBOLS

THE FLY

The fly appears at both the beginning and the end of the poem; it seems to be the last thing that the speaker thinks about before dying and, apparently, something the speaker is still obsessing over even *after* death! The fly is thus undoubtedly important to the poem, but *why* is open to interpretation.

On the one hand, flies have a long-standing association with decay and death. In the Biblical book of Exodus, for example, flies are one of the plagues that wreak havoc on Egypt. The fly's presence is a reminder of bodily decomposition, the gruesome nature of which seems at odds with the hoped-for Christian afterlife. So while the speaker is hoping for a dignified exit, the fly's "interposition" is a reminder of the stark realities of death.

Some readings of the poem take the arrival of the fly to be more purposeful, however. That is, the fly is seen as a kind of emissary of death—perhaps the grim reaper himself. Certainly, the fly's timing is impeccable, arriving just at the moment of death (as a grim reaper would).

That said, the great power of the fly as a symbol is that, ironically, it might be utterly *non*-symbolic. Sometimes, that is, a fly is just a fly. To humans, flies are pretty insignificant creatures, both irritating and small. The fly's arrival, then, can also be read as a reminder of a *lack* of meaning. That is, its insignificance could stand in for the insignificance for human life—precisely the opposite of what the solemn deathbed scene is intended to make the speaker feel.

Finally, the fly, though small and irritating, is also very much alive. Perhaps part of the speaker's fascination with it is based on the fact that, once the speaker dies, the fly will carry on flying its "uncertain - stumbling" path around the room. The speaker, then, is confronted with the fact that the world will continue on after the speaker is gone.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -"
- **Lines 12-14:** "There interposed a Fly - / With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz - / Between the light - and me -"

LIGHT AND DARK

In the poem's concluding moments, the speaker describes the window light fading. This plays into a well-established idea of light as symbolic of knowledge and life, and darkness as symbolic of mystery and death. For example, the Christian God creates light in the opening of the Bible's Book of Genesis, thereby enabling the flourishing of all life on

earth. Also think of the way the "Enlightenment" is the name for a period of rapid advancement in scientific knowledge. The use of light in the poem here plays on both of these meanings, suggesting the speaker's passage into death and the mystery therein.

It's also worth noting that it's the fly that seems to mark this transition from light to darkness, "interpos[ing]" between the speaker and the window light. This is, of course, physically impossible, but represents the arrival of death and perhaps the closing of the speaker's eyes. It's also interesting that people often conceive of dying as a kind of light; those who have had near-death experiences often mention a bright white light (such as a train coming through a tunnel). Here, the shift is into darkness, suggesting the speaker's uncertainty about what—if anything—comes next.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-16:** "Between the light - and me - / And then the Windows failed - and then / I could not see to see -"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used sparingly in "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died." In the first stanza, the /st/ sound repeats three times (though this includes repetition of the word "stillness," an example of diacope). This sonically connects the "Stillness" in the room to that between gusts in a "Storm." The calm within or before a storm is a moment filled with tension, since the wind and rain will soon return; as such, this alliteration subtly underscores that the "Stillness" in the room is also filled with tension, with the knowledge that something big (the speaker's death) is about to happen.

The other meaningful example of alliteration is in lines 13 and 14.

> With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -
> Between the light - and me -

The fly has just arrived, disrupting the solemnity of the deathbed scene. Its noise is annoying, but so too is its flight, and its erratic nature is an unwelcome reminder of the speaker's inability to know where they themselves are going after death (if anywhere). Accordingly, these lines place three obvious /b/ sounds in close proximity, but almost at random. This seems to emulate the way the fly's flight path looks kind of aimless, and also the irritating loudness of the fly's buzzing sound.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "St"
- **Line 3:** "St"
- **Line 4:** "St"
- **Line 6:** "f"
- **Line 7:** "F"
- **Line 13:** "B," "B"
- **Line 14:** "B"
- **Line 16:** "s," "s"

ALLUSION

"I Heard a Fly buzz – when I died" makes one allusion, found in line 7. Here, the speaker describes how they and those gathered in the room are awaiting "the King." This is a reference to God/Jesus within the Christian tradition, which makes sense given that Dickinson lived in in Protestant America. The world is often characterized in Christian texts as the "Kingdom of God." In the Book of Revelation, Jesus is referred to as the "King of Kings." The allusion, then, shows that the people in the poem are immersed in this Christian tradition, and are following the relevant customs and social behavior.

The speaker expects—or feels that they *ought to* expect—some kind of sign from God to signal that it's the end, some holy emissary from the spiritual world to act as a guide. Whether or not the speaker really believes this or if it's just part of the social expectation of the occasion is unclear. But the allusion serves a vital purpose in the poem: if the arrival of the fly is the poem's punchline, then the *expected* arrival of the King is the set-up. This questions whether religion really offers spiritual comfort for the dead, or just temporary solace for the living.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "the King"

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem investigates the greatest juxtaposition of all—between life and death. It sets this up immediately in the first line, counterbalancing the opening of the poem's story—the buzzing of the fly—with the fact that this line (and the others) appear to be spoken from the great beyond (death). The fly is a small creature, not much loved by human beings, but It is alive nonetheless—it sits on one side of the first line's caesura. On the other side of the caesura, and apparently on the other side of the border between life and death, is the speaker. However, the speaker offers no information how they are speaking or from where exactly, thereby only adding to the poem's main argument: that what happens when people die is essentially unknowable.

The poem develops this juxtaposition in its setting. The speaker, lying on their deathbed, contrasts with the people standing around the room and crying. These people might represent the

continuation of life, yet they are nevertheless intrigued by what will happen to the speaker after death. The juxtaposition is then developed in the poem's closing image, which describes the fading of the light from the window. Light is associated with life, while darkness relates to the mystery of death. Accordingly, the juxtaposition between light and dark maps neatly onto the poem's main subject—the distinction between life and death, and their shared border.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -"
- **Line 15:** "And then the Windows failed"

ASSONANCE

The poem first uses assonance with repeated short /i/ sounds of "Stillness" and "in"—a phrase that repeats in lines 2 and 3, first in reference to "the Room" and then in reference to "the Air." As with the alliteration of /st/ sounds in these lines, the assonance here connects these two spaces—linking the atmosphere in the room to the spooky quiet at the center of a storm, or those moments when the storm seems briefly to subside. The calm during a storm is indeed still but is *also* filled with tension and a sense of anticipation—just as the room is still yet filled with anticipation for the moment of the speaker's death.

Line 4 also uses long /e/ sounds—"Between the Heaves of Storm"—which contrast with the established /i/ sound that comes beforehand. These long vowels slow down the line, as do the round /o/ sounds of "of" and "Storm" (though these may or may not feel truly assonant, depending on how one pronounces them). Altogether, then, line 4 plays out the calmness it describes via sound.

The other key example of assonance is in the final stanza. Line 13 employs an attention-grabbing short /uh/ sound to evoke the woozily meandering flight path of the fly: "uncertain - stumbling Buzz." This a noisily assonant line, almost as if the line itself is clattering into the poem. And, in its way, the fly being described is a violent interruption. It is physically small, of course, but highly impactful on this particular moment. With the speaker contemplating what happens after death—and whether they await a spiritual afterlife—the fly is an unwelcome distraction, and a reminder both that life goes on for everyone/everything else and that the speaker has no certainties about what is coming.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "i," "i"
- **Line 3:** "i," "i"
- **Line 4:** "ee," "ea"
- **Line 10:** "e," "e"
- **Line 13:** "u," "u," "u"
- **Line 16:** "ee," "ee"

CAESURA

"I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –" is full of Dickinson's characteristic dashes, which often function specifically as caesuras. The dash in the first line helps set up the opposition between the fly and the speaker, with the fly occupying the first part of the line, and the second providing the paradoxical information that the speaker is already dead. This also helps set up the juxtaposition between life and death.

The caesuras in lines 5, 7, and 8 also feel significant. Here, the speaker describes how everyone in the room is practically holding their breath, expecting the speaker's death to happen at any moment. Presumably, the speaker is either ill or very old, and so probably struggles with breathing too. The caesuras here break up the lines, making them feel difficult and effortful. It is as though the lines *themselves* struggle to breathe, as though the phrases might not make it to the end of the line. Indeed, put most simply, death is the moment that people stop breathing permanently. Breath, then, is a clear marker that separates the living from the dead—and the caesuras here help build the sense of the speaker's nearness to death.

The caesuras in the final stanza are also important. With not one but two caesuras, line 13 both echoes the difficult breathing described above and conveys the erratic flight path of the fly. The line itself seems to "stumble" in "uncertainty." And as the stanza continues, the use of caesura contributes to a feeling of fragmentation. Indeed, the poem is trying to get as close as is logically possible to the moment of death itself, and accordingly the caesuras seem to divide the passing time of the poem into smaller and smaller fragments, until it ends with a final dash—the speaker unable to see any further into what lies ahead.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "-"
- **Line 5:** "-"
- **Line 7:** "-"
- **Line 8:** "-"
- **Line 9:** "-"
- **Line 11:** "-"
- **Line 13:** "-," "-"
- **Line 14:** "-"
- **Line 15:** "-"

CONSONANCE

For a Dickinson poem, "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died" is actually relatively light on consonance. As discussed in the alliteration overview of this guide, the first stanza employs

alliterative consonance through a repeat of /st/ sounds across "Stillness" (lines 2 and 3) and "Storm" in line 4. The recurring sound is intended to emulate the recurring "stillness" in between bouts of thunder and lightning. This in turn builds a picture for the audience of the tension in the room, as everybody waits for the speaker to die.

In the second stanza, the poem uses feather-light /th/ sounds to create a sense of breathlessness. This matches with the way in which those in the room are practically holding their breath, morbidly captivated by the imminent death. The "f" in "firm" is a closely related sound that contributes to this too:

> And Breaths were gathering firm
> For that last Onset

The final stanza uses consonance, alliteration and assonance in a way that is intended to feel deliberately un-patterned. This comes when the speaker describes the intrusion of the fly, which in turn seems to impose itself on the sound of the poem. The consonance used to achieve this effect relies on /b/ and /l/ sounds:

> With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -
> Between the light - and me -
> And then the Windows failed - and then

The /b/ here represents the buzzing sound of the fly, acting as a kind of irritating and unsubtle presence throughout the lines.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "St," "lln," "ss," "n"
- **Line 3:** "St," "lln," "ss," "n"
- **Line 4:** "St"
- **Line 5:** "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 6:** "r," "th," "th," "r," "f," "r"
- **Line 7:** "F," "r," "th"
- **Line 9:** "w," "K," "s," "k," "s," "S," "w"
- **Line 10:** "W"
- **Line 13:** "B," "l," "c," "t," "st," "bl," "B"
- **Line 14:** "B"
- **Line 15:** "th," "th"
- **Line 16:** "t," "s," "t," "s"

DIACOPE

Diacope occurs three times in the poem. The first time, the repetition of the word "Stillness" (really, of the entire phrase "Stillness in the...") serves to draw a parallel between these two spaces—the room and the sky during the calm of a storm. The diacope underscores that this "Stillness" is not all that comforting, because it's also characterized by a sense of tension and anticipation.

The other two instances of diacope happen in the poem's closing two lines: the repetition of "And then" and later of the word "see." The "And then" relates specifically to the poem's attempt to get as imaginatively close as possible to the actual moment of death itself. As a phrase, it signals the shift from one moment in time to another—but the actual division of time here is very small. Accordingly, it creates a sense of fragmentation, as though the speaker's world is dividing up into smaller and smaller pieces as part of the "onset" of death.

The repeat of "see" is deliberately mysterious. It asks the reader to question why the poem uses "I could not see to see" instead of "I could not see." The diacope accordingly suggests two different types of sight. One of these is vision, with the speaker's periphery growing smaller and smaller as their eyes close in preparation for death (though people often die with their eyes open too). The other is more ambiguous. Most likely, it relates to the inability of the speaker—or any human being—to see beyond death. To see and to be dead are inherently contradictory, but humanity has of course come up with many theories as to what happens when people die. The speaker's inability to "see" ends the poem on a doubtful note, offering no attempt to claim certain knowledge about any afterlife.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Stillness"
- **Line 3:** "Stillness"
- **Line 15:** "And then," "and then"
- **Line 16:** "see to see"

ENJAMBMENT

"I heard a Fly buzz - when I died –" uses enjambment to great effect. While enjambment is often used to create a sense of movement or motion, this almost sarcastically undercut in lines 2 and 3. The enjambment speeds the reader on from the "Stillness" of line 2, but this is only met by another "Stillness" in line 3.

The enjambment between lines 6 and 7 relates to the way that everyone present in the room is practically holding their breath, anticipating the speaker's moment of death. The enjambment makes the phrase longer, accordingly taking up more breath (especially if the poem is read out loud, since there is no indicated pause between these lines). The caesura in line 7 thus transforms into a kind of intake of breath.

The third stanza contains the most enjambment. It's here that the speaker signs away their "Keepsakes"—their personal possessions and artifacts—and the smooth enjambment perhaps relates to the speed of a signature. Signatures are often very significant, but take very little time to do. This hints that material possessions, when faced with death, suddenly seem far less significant. That is, there is a contrast between the

serious formality between what the speaker has to do and the speed with which it is done.

Though we have not marked it as such, line 3 is arguably also enjambed given that the comparison is not just to "Air," but specifically to "Air - Between the Heaves of Storm"; line 3 thus spills over onto the next. It could *also* be read as awkwardly end-stopped, however, with its final dash representing that stillness—that pause or calm—"Between" those heaving winds of the storm.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Room"
- **Line 3:** "Was"
- **Line 6:** "firm"
- **Line 7:** "For," "King"
- **Line 8:** "Be"
- **Line 9:** "away"
- **Line 10:** "What," "be"
- **Line 11:** "Assignable," "was"
- **Line 12:** "There"
- **Line 15:** "then"
- **Line 16:** "I"

PARADOX

The poem is paradoxical from start to finish. The fact that the speaker says "when I died" indicates that the speaker is already dead—yet, somehow, this speaker is clearly still talking and thinking about their final moments. The speaker seems both dead and alive throughout the poem, which adds to its sense of mystery. Indeed, the poem seems to backtrack from the moment of death—back to the speaker on their deathbed surrounded by others and the interruption of the fly. Just as the poem is about to circle back to where it began—the actual *moment* of death—the poem ends, the speaker no longer able to "see." Yet, here the speaker is, talking about how they died. Circular and confusing, isn't it?

Dickinson opts not to try to describe an imagined afterlife and instead has the speaker describe their actual dying moments; rather than focusing on something unknowable (what happens after death), the speaker focuses on the exact point of *transition* between life and death (or, rather, gets as close as possible to this moment), allowing for a more nuanced commentary on both subjects. This may make the poem somewhat confusing or ambiguous, but it also allows Dickinson to consider the extent of human understanding and knowledge in the face of mortality.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

SIMILE

The poem employs one simile, found in the first stanza. Here, the "Stillness" of the "Room" in which the speaker is awaiting death is compared with the "Stillness" between strikes lightning and thunder (also relating to the calm at the eye of a storm). The simile describes the way in which the speaker themselves is between two "Heaves." They are awaiting one of life's most mysterious events—dying—and do not know what is coming for them. Similarly, a pause in the storm always sets up a tension as to whether another hit will come, or if the storm is actually over. By comparing the "Stillness in the Room" to that during a pause in a storm, the speaker thus imbues the room with a sense of anticipation and tension.

Another interesting thing about this simile is that its two comparative elements are very similar—it's comparing one type of stillness with another, not the *room* with a *storm* per se. This similarity might equate to a kind of imaginative stillness, because it's not much of a leap to understand what the simile means. If the poem compared the room to an empty cup, for example, it would be more imaginative work for the reader. The lack of work required intentionally creates a powerful sense of stasis and inertia.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "The Stillness in the Room / Was like the Stillness in the Air"

OXYMORON

The poem uses what is arguably an oxymoron is used in line 7. Here, the speaker describes how they and their loved ones are awaiting the actual moment of death, in which the "King" (meaning God or Jesus) will come to take the speaker away. The speaker describes this moment as the "last Onset." "Last" relates to finality and ending, while "Onset" means "beginning." So the speaker sees this as the *last beginning* of their life. They think (or hope) that they are about to embark on the last journey of their life, and that this will have as its destination a reassuring and spiritually fulfilling afterlife. That said, it's not clear that the speaker *really* believes this or is just relating to the standard, accepted beliefs of the society that they live in. Either way, the phrase means both ending and beginning, capturing the mysterious nature of death and humankind's inability to know what happens after.

Where Oxymoron appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "last Onset"

SYNECDOCHE

"I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -" uses synecdoche in line 5. Here, the speaker refers to "The Eyes around," meaning the

people that have gathered in the room to watch the speaker die. The choice of "Eyes" is important for two main reasons. Firstly, focuses the reader's attention on the emotion of the occasion—these are eyes that have done so much crying that they've been wrung dry and cannot cry anymore; they've used up all their tears. The dry eyes signal to the speaker that those in the room will miss the speaker.

But the other interesting effect is the way that the choice of "Eyes" paints a picture of the psychology of the deathbed scene. The speaker perhaps feels self-conscious, noticing that all of the eyes are looking at them. There is a kind of expected behavior for both the dying and the observers which relates to the dominant social and cultural rituals of the day. The attention foisted on the speaker signals that people care, but it also means that the speaker is being closely watched and, accordingly, under pressure to behave in a certain way. Furthermore, the "eyes" suggest curiosity, as though part of the reason the speaker is watched so closely is because those in attendance want to see what happens when somebody makes the transition from life to death.

Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** " Eyes"

VOCABULARY

Heaves (Line 4) - To heave means to use great physical effort to lift or move something; to haul. It can also mean to rise and fall or to churn and seethe (as turbulent ocean waves might). Used in its noun form here, it is referencing the strong winds of a storm.

Wrung (Line 5) - Wringing is a twisting action that is usually applied to a wet material, like a towel, which thereby drains that material of water. The speaker is basically saying these people have cried to the point that they are all out of tears.

Firm (Line 6) - Strongly or resolutely.

Onset (Line 7) - An onset is a beginning. The phrase here is arguably an oxymoron, because this is a "last Onset." In other words, a concluding beginning; the beginning of the end; death.

King (Line 7) - This is an allusion to the Christian God and/or Jesus, who is described in the book of Revelation as the "King of Kings."

Willed (Line 9) - This relates to the signing of a will, a legal document that would divide up the speaker's property (presumably between the other people in the room) upon the speaker's death.

Keepsakes (Line 9) - This is a word for the objects that the speaker has selected to give to loved ones, specifically those objects that are small and meant to act as mementos (that is, things to remember the speaker by).

Assignable (Line 11) - Assignable here relates to the parts of the speaker's life that are physically and logically possible to give away (personal possessions, property, etc.). This part of the poem suggests there might be a part of human life that is *unassignable*, perhaps a soul.

Interposed (Line 12) - This means to get in the way, to get between one thing and another.

Blue (Line 13) - It's not certain why Dickinson characterizes the fly as "Blue." It could be that this is literally a blue-colored insect (such as the bluebottle fly), or that blue has been chosen for the word's connotations of sadness.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -" has a regular form comprised of four four-line stanzas, or quatrains. This is typical of Dickinson's poetry and is closely aligned with the ballad stanza format (based on an ABCB rhyme scheme and an alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter). This form also closely relates to church hymns, which seems appropriate given that the poem is a kind of vexed meditation on what it means to die (and to have lived).

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the form is the poem's chronology. The speaker announces the first line almost casually, but it is highly contradictory. The poem is spoken from beyond the point of death, describing the moment of dying (or as close to as possible). There is, then, the moment described in the actual poem itself and the mysterious moment from which the poem is actually spoken.

The poem begins and ends with the fly, which underscores its importance. The usual social rituals of death described in lines 2 to 11 are thereby given less significance, placed in the poem in order to question their value.

METER

"I Heard a Fly Buzz - when I died" uses a metrical format common to many of Dickinson's poems. The basic scheme is an alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter (meaning each line has either four or three iambs, a.k.a. poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern). This closely aligns the poem with the ballad stanza form and church hymns. The poem is very regular in its meter for the most part. Take the final stanza:

With Blue - | uncer- | tain - stumb-| ling Buzz -
Between | the light - | and me -
And then | the Wind- | ows failed - | and then
I could | not see | to see -

This regularity might be ironic, given that the poem is otherwise filled with a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty. Perhaps the steady meter reflects the speaker's attempt to make sense of the world, even as the actual content of the lines highlights the limits of human knowledge when it comes to the afterlife.

That said, the poem has what might be a variation in the very first line, with "buzz" arguably being a stressed syllable (though it can be read unstressed in order to conform with the metrical scheme):

I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -

The placement of this stress conveys the disruption of the fly, the way in which its sound is an annoying and distracting presence.

It's also worth considering the way that the characteristic Dickinson dashes affect the poem's meter. Arguably, they dictate a brief pause, thereby disrupting the poem's rhythms. This makes sense, because the poem's main subject is doubt and the unknowability of death (and the afterlife). The way the phrases unfold, then, has an awkward searching quality to it. The final stanza, as quoted above, is a strong example of this.

RHYME SCHEME

This poem, like much of Dickinson's work, follows the ballad stanza rhyme scheme:

ABCB

All but one of the rhymes in the poem are slant rhymes. Take "Room" and "Storm" in the first stanza; these words do sound alike, but they're not full rhymes. The ballad stanza is a common one, and as such the *lack* of full rhymes where the reader might expect to find them perhaps suggests the poem's atmosphere of doubt and mystery—the way in which the speaker, approaching death, isn't sure what is to follow (even though they speak from beyond death!).

Only one rhyme pair in the entire poem is a perfect rhyme, and this comes at the very end. This final rhyming pair—me/see—might make the poem's ending feel steadier than everything that has come before it, like a surefooted conclusion to the speaker's thoughts. That said, this line is saying that the speaker can no longer "see" at all (i.e., the speaker is dead), and here any insight into the poem's subject, what it's like to die, abruptly cuts off. Thus even as the rhymes seem to wrap up the poem neatly, the poem remains anxious and doubtful from start to finish.

SPEAKER

The speaker's identity is one of the most mysterious and hotly debated elements of "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -." The poem is told in the first person, announced by the poem's very first word. But just as soon as this is established, the poem throws the reader something deeply paradoxical—the speaker explains that they are talking about the time that they "died." To speak or to write is to engage in action, and to do so requires being alive. But this speaker is also dead, and so the reader must work to understand this logical impossibility.

Readers also don't get any indication about the speaker's gender or age. This is a person with loved ones or caregivers—making up all those "Eyes" standing around the room—and who owned enough stuff to warrant creating a will. Otherwise, the speaker's identity is very vague.

Also of note is that the speaker doesn't talk about their *current* situation—they want to discuss their dying moments. If people could really talk to the dead, the first thing they probably would want to know is what it's like to be dead. But this speaker offers no such information, and instead seems endlessly preoccupied with the irritating presence of the fly.

SETTING

In a way, this poem has two settings. The first is the more obvious: the poem is a deathbed scene, probably in a 19th century Protestant home similar to Dickinson's own. The people in the poem conform to the expected social and cultural rituals of the time. These include the visible act of mourning, with the loved ones of the speaker gathered around the death bed; the expectation of spiritual assistance from God; and the legal organization of the dying person's property. The setting is, in its morbid way, perfect, like a well-tuned example of how someone *ought* to die. But of course, this is interrupted by the presence of the fly, whose erratic flight and annoying noise seems to question the meaning of these social and cultural rituals.

The other setting is far more mysterious. The speaker talks in the past tense, implying that their vantage point is from somewhere beyond the moment described. This means that the speaker is apparently speaking/writing from the afterlife—but they offer no information about this at all. Accordingly, this second setting reaffirms the poem's main point—that dying, death, and what comes after (if anything) are inherently beyond human comprehension.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson lived in Amherst, Massachusetts in the 19th century. She published very little during her lifetime—indeed, published work was predominantly put out by men—and was a famously reclusive figure, choosing to stay indoors for most of

her adult life. Her posthumous influence was far-reaching, however, and she is now considered one of the most important poets in the English language.

She is known to have valued the writings of William Wordsworth, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charlotte Bronte, and Shakespeare. During her early life, Dickinson went to a religious school and continued to be preoccupied with questions about faith and the meaning of existence. Church literature, then, was also a major influence on Dickinson, and her poems often employ a meter and diction similar to that found in hymns.

This poem is one of Dickinson's best-known, and is one of many of her poems that are preoccupied with death. Other key poems on this subject include "Because I could not stop for Death," "I Felt a Funeral, in my Brain," "As imperceptibly as grief," and "Death is the supple suitor." Death, of course, is one of the oldest subjects in literature, and Dickinson is not the only poet of the time to take an unflinching look at dying. Notable American poems around the same time include Edgar Allan Poe's "The Conqueror Worm" and "Thanatoposis" by William Cullen Bryant.

The fly, too, is no stranger to the page. Flies appear in the Bible (Book of Exodus) as the fourth plague of Egypt, and Jean Paul Sartre wrote a play in the 20th century called *The Flies*. William Blake has a fly poem as well (called "The Fly"), which is unusual in portraying flies in a relatively positive way—most mentions of flies usually associate them with impending doom, death and decay.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dickinson grew up within a Puritan environment that placed great emphasis on Christian morality. Her father was a congressman and the patriarch of the family—and Dickinson could only begin writing her poetry because her father gave her implicit permission. In this respect, then, Dickinson was a female author in a time and place when this was not encouraged. Dickinson's America was one of religious revivalism, with competing ideas about the way in which people ought to serve God, including the temperance movement of which her father was a part. The morality of slavery—and whether slavery should be abolished—was also an intensely debated issue at the forefront of the political scene, and which, of course, led to the outbreak of the American Civil War.

The deathbed scene presented in the poem is typical of the 19th century New England Protestant world in which Dickinson lived. Death was something to be prepared for, particularly in the religious and spiritual sense. Dickinson lost many loved ones during her life, observing scenes similar to the one described in the poem. Furthermore, her "blackouts" (considered by some to have been epilepsy) gave her a pronounced awareness of death. Indeed, she herself was bedridden for seven months before she died.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Dickinson's Meter — A valuable discussion of Emily Dickinson's use of meter. (https://poemshape.wordpress.com/2009/01/18/emily-dickinson-iambic-meter-and-rhyme/)
- In Emily's Words — An image of the only known draft of the poem in Dickinson's own handwriting. (https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/online/emily-dickinson/8)
- The Poem Animated — A spooky animation of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzK0mQER28A)
- More From Dickinson — A link to numerous other Emily Dickinson poems. (https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poems/45673)
- The Dickinson Museum — The Emily Dickinson Museum, situated in the poet's old house, has lots of resources for students. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/)
- On Playing Emily — A clip in which actor Cynthia Nixon discusses playing Emily Dickinson on screen in "A Quiet Passion." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_SId6che2k)
- In Our Time podcast — Experts talk about Emily Dickinson's life and work on the BBC's In Our Time podcast/radio show. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDBADIHwchQ)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- As imperceptibly as grief
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- Success is counted sweetest
- There's a certain Slant of light
- This is my letter to the world
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

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