The Bustle in a House

POEM TEXT

1 The Bustle in a House
2 The Morning after Death
3 Is solemnest of industries
4 Enacted upon Earth—

5 The Sweeping up the Heart
6 And putting Love away
7 We shall not want to use again
8 Until Eternity—

SUMMARY

The flurry of activity that takes place in a house the morning after someone has died is the most somber, serious work ever done on this planet.

Those left behind have to sweep up the pieces of their broken hearts and store the love they had for the deceased somewhere out of sight. They won't want to use either again until the eternal afterlife.

THEMES

DEATH AND MOURNING

"The Bustle in a House" explores the way that a person's death affects the loved ones they've left behind. The work a family does the morning after someone dies, the poem suggests, isn't just about tidying the house and arranging the funeral, but about sweeping up the broken pieces of their hearts. In other words, the rituals of mourning are a way of trying to come to terms with great loss.

A house is never more hectic, says the speaker, than the morning after a death. The "bustle" of that day is the "solemnest of industries" (that is, the most serious of labors), undertaken with a strong sense of duty: someone must arrange for the funeral, inform other family members, clean the house in anticipation of visitors, and so on. In other words, death creates a lot of work!

This work might also be a way for the surviving loved ones to distract themselves from their grief, or at least to manage it. Indeed, the "morning" after a death in the family is also a time for *mourning*, and this activity is the "solemnest [...] on earth" because it's agonizing. In trying to "sweep up" the broken shards of their "Heart[s]," the loved ones left behind are doing their best to work through an unendurable pain. They must try to put away their love for the dead person because there's no longer a place for it to go—and it's too painful to keep out in the open.

A loved one's death, the poem thus suggests, causes such a great impact that it seems hard to see how the "Heart" and "Love" could ever come out in the open again—at least, in this life. The speaker imagines the family members tidying their "Heart[s]" and their "Love" away as if they were putting away holiday decorations, waiting for the time when they'll "want to use" those things again. But that time, the speaker concludes, won't arrive until "Eternity" (that is, the eternal afterlife) does. It's only in heaven, when people are reunited with those they've lost, that the "Heart" and "Love" will be useful once more.

These closing lines suggest that the rituals of mourning might be both a way to cope with impossible pain and a way of giving oneself hope. The metaphor of "bustle" and tidying makes a quietly hopeful claim that a mourning person's shattered heart might just be going into winter storage for a while, ready to come out again when everyone is reunited in heaven.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

The Bustle in a House
The Morning after Death

The poem's opening lines set the scene: it's the morning after someone has died, and there's a "bustle," or flurry of energy, "in a House." Readers can assume that the deceased's loved ones are rushing around as they deal with the practical considerations that arise in the aftermath of a death.

The speaker doesn't go into detail regarding these chores and duties, but they might include making arrangements for the funeral, contacting other friends and family, cleaning the house in anticipation of visitors, and so on. In short, death can create a lot of work—a lot of hustle and "bustle."

These lines set up the poem's meter. For the most part, the poem uses iambic trimeter. This refers to lines of three poetic feet, each of which follows an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern:

The Bus- | tle in | a House
The Morn- | ing af- | ter Death

This steady rhythm perhaps conveys the swift efficiency with which the people in this house go about their death-related chores. The enjambment between these lines (and, indeed, the entire stanza) adds to the sense of hurry. This flurry of activity, of course, contrasts with the lifelessness of the deceased.

Note that there's also a pun in line 2 on the word "Morning." While this refers to the actual time of day, it's also a play on the word "mourning"—that is, a period of grief. This is both a morning full of immediate practical concerns *and* the early stages of the grieving process. There are two realities going on at once, running in parallel: the mundane tasks made necessary by the death, which keep everyone occupied, and the thornier emotional labor going on below the surface.

That "Bustle," then, can perhaps also be taken as a metaphor for a busy internal world of thoughts and feelings in the wake of death (an idea that the second stanza will explore further).

LINES 3-4

Is solemnest of industries
Enacted opon Earth—

The speaker completes the sentence begun in lines 1-2. That "Bustle," the speaker says—the flurry of activity that takes place after a loved one dies—is the "solemnest of industries." In other words, it's serious business. This makes sense: it's hardly enjoyable to have to get everything in order after someone has died. It's "solemn" work because, well, people have to do it in a cloud of sadness and grief.

Line 3 is iambic tetrameter, rather than trimeter. This means it has four iambs instead of three:

Is sol- | emnest | of in- | dustries

In dragging out the line, the speaker subtly conveys the intensity of all this work.

In the next line, the speaker declares that this bustle is, in fact, the most serious activity "Enacted opon Earth." There is no industry more solemn in *existence*. This emphasizes just how serious the "bustle" after a death is, and it also further separates the living from the dead; the deceased is no longer on "opon Earth" at all.

LINES 5-6

The Sweeping up the Heart
And putting Love away

In lines 5 and 6, the speaker reveals that they're talking about more than the *practical* duties that follow a death. That "bustle" in the house also refers to:

The Sweeping up the Heart
And putting Love away

Housework, here, becomes a metaphor for the *process* of grieving. People's hearts get broken when a loved one passed away, the poem implies, and these little shards need tidying up. This "sweeping up" represents a kind of coming to terms with death, and an attempt to move on with daily life.

There's potentially another subtle pun at work here, too. "Heart" sounds a lot like "hearth," which is the area in front of a fireplace. Just as a family member might clear the ash from a hearth before mourners arrive, so too they might feel a need to compose themselves emotionally. To "sweep[] up" the heart also hides it from view: with the loved one gone, a kind of emotional retreat takes place.

The poem takes this idea further in line 6, where "putting Love away" becomes the next task on the mourners' to-do list. Of course, "Love" is an abstract noun and can't *literally* be put away. This is instead a metaphorical way of describing what people do with the love they had for the person who died. "Love" is like some object that can no longer be on display because it's too painful a reminder of someone who is no longer around. It's better tucked away in the cupboard, say, where it can be stored for safekeeping.

LINES 7-8

We shall not want to use again
Until Eternity—

The mourners have carefully swept up the pieces of their broken "Heart" and put their "Love" away for safekeeping. They won't have any desire to use these things, the speaker now says, during earthly life. They'll only reach for them once they're reunited with the deceased in "Eternity"—that is, in the afterlife.

The word "We" in line 7 is the first pronoun in the poem, and it makes the discussion of grief and death feel universal. That sensation that life has changed irrevocably is a feeling that anyone who has lost someone dear can relate to. "We" also separates the living from the dead; "we" remain on earth, while "they" (the dead) head on to "Eternity."

In the last line, the poem alludes to the Christian idea of the afterlife ("Eternity"). Emily Dickinson had a complex relationship with religion and the concept of heaven, but mentions of immortality and/or eternity appear throughout her poetry. Here, "Eternity" seems in keeping with a common belief at the time: that heaven is a place a bit like earth but better, where loved ones separated by death can find each other once again. It's a comforting thought, of course—that the dead have not really disappeared forever, but merely stepped into another room.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

In its last line, "The Bustle in a House" alludes to an idea of the afterlife:

> The Sweeping up the Heart
> And putting Love away
> We shall not want to use again
> Until Eternity—

This allusion portrays life and death almost like a cycle of the seasons. Human beings come from "Eternity," live brief lives on earth, and then go back to "Eternity." After life as a physical being in the material world, a new chapter begins for the soul.

Dickinson's precise thoughts about what comes after death are much debated; she grapples with questions about God and the afterlife throughout her poetry. Here, though, the speaker seems to believe in "Eternity" as a place where loved ones, separated by death, can finally meet again.

This idea, of course, is a comforting one. It doesn't matter if earthly life never feels the same again and the "Heart" and "Love" are cleared away for good, because soon enough the people on earth will die, too, and make their way to "Eternity." The bustle in the house seems less important—*all* the concerns of earthly life seem less important—with the promise of the afterlife waiting on the horizon.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "Eternity"

METAPHOR

The "Bustle" in this poem can be read as both literal and metaphorical. On the one hand, it refers to the actual duties, chores, etc. that take place after someone dies: creating funeral arrangements, cleaning the house for visitors, getting the deceased's affairs in order, etc. But this bustle also refers to the *emotional* work that takes place after a loved one's death.

This work involves "The Sweeping up the Heart / and Putting Love away." The poem captures the ache of grief with this metaphorical image of a broken heart being swept up, like the shards of a knocked-over vase. There is a sense that the "heart"—that is, the capacity to feel love—has lost its original purpose (just like a broken vase can no longer hold flowers).

Next, the speaker says that "Love" must be "put" away. The speaker likens love for the deceased to a physical object that the living now have no use for; they hide it away, perhaps because it's too painful to look at.

Not coincidentally, both of these actions—sweeping and putting things away—mirror actual tasks that the living undertake after a death, when they tidy up the deceased's belongings, room, and so forth. The bustle from the first stanza, then, might be a way to work through or distract from the pain of grief.

It's important to note, though, that both defunct objects ("Love" and the "Heart") may be restored to their original purpose in the afterlife. Really, they're being put away until they're needed again—like summer clothes packed away for the colder months.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 5-7

PUN

There are two possible puns in "The Bustle in a House." Each relates to one of the poem's main ideas: that people's actions after someone has died (such as doing a bunch of housework) might be a way of distracting from the emotional turmoil going on below the surface. This linguistic playfulness hints to the reader that there might be more going on than meets the eye.

The first pun is in line 2:

> The Bustle in a House
> The Morning after Death

The speaker is talking about the literal morning the day after someone has died, when people are rushing around to take care of the deceased's affairs, clean the house for guests, and so on. But "morning" is also a homonym for "mourning" (that is, the two words are spelled differently but sound exactly the same). This emphasizes that all this activity is taking place during the grieving process—perhaps in an attempt to keep sadness at bay.

The other pun is more subtle:

> The Sweeping up the Heart

The sweeping here suggests cleaning up the pieces of a shattered heart. But the word "heart" looks and sounds a lot like the word "hearth," which refers to the area in front of a fireplace and often represents the "heart" of a home. The hearth often needs sweeping, too, because it gets covered in ash, and it's easy to imagine someone sweeping it up to try and keep busy while grief-stricken.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-2:** "The / after Death"
- **Line 2:** "Morning"
- **Line 5:** "The Sweeping up the Heart"

ENJAMBMENT

"The Bustle in a House" uses lots of enjambment as it unfolds down the page. This adds momentum to the poem, the swift motion of which subtly evokes the "bustle" being described. That is, the poem's actions come at the reader thick and fast, mirroring the flurry of activity in the wake of a loved one's death.

Notice, for example, how enjambment creates a sense of frantic activity in the first stanza:

> The Bustle in a House
> The Morning after Death
> Is solemnest of industries
> Enacted opon Earth—

This quatrain consists of a single sentence that unfurls without pause. The way these lines just keep moving calls attention to the way that mourners may try to stay busy in order to keep their grief at bay.

The second stanza is likewise enjambed until its final line. It's as though mourners are about to arrive, and the members of this hypothetical household are trying to "Sweep[] up the heart / And put[] love away" as quickly as they can before they hear the knock at the door. That is, they're trying to get their emotions in check, to compose themselves in order to take all the strange rituals that accompany a death (indeed, the poem implies that this tidying up of emotions *is* one of those rituals).

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "House / The"
- **Lines 2-3:** "Death / Is"
- **Lines 3-4:** "industries / Enacted"
- **Lines 5-6:** "Heart / And"
- **Lines 6-7:** "away / We"
- **Lines 7-8:** "again / Until"

VOCABULARY

Bustle (Line 1) - Flurry of activity.

Solemnest (Line 3) - The most serious (and somber).

Industries (Line 3) - Endeavors, work.

Enacted (Line 4) - Performed.

Opon (Line 4) - Upon.

Eternity (Line 8) - The afterlife.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Bustle in a House" is a short poem consisting of two quatrains (four-line stanzas). These stanzas have a steady meter (iambic trimeter and tetrameter, to be specific) and rhyme scheme (ABAB). They're very close in form to the ballad stanza that Dickinson turned to often in her poetry. They also feature Dickinson's famously idiosyncratic use of capitalization; this helps add emphasis to certain words and makes the actions—like "The Sweeping up the Heart"—seem like universal practices.

Overall, the poem has a simple, musical feel to it. The stanzas are also heavily enjambed, resulting in a poem that moves swiftly down the page in a way that mirrors the flurry of activity the speaker describes.

METER

"The Bustle in a House" is written using a mixture of iambic trimeter and iambic tetrameter.

An iamb is a poetic foot with an unstressed-**stressed** syllable pattern; trimeter means there are three feet per line while tetrameter means there are four. The third line of each stanza uses iambic tetrameter, while the rest all use trimeter. This is called "short meter."

Here's the meter at work in the first stanza:

> The **Bus-** | tle **in** | a **House**
> The **Morn-** | ing **af-** | ter **Death**
> Is **sol-** | em**nest** | of **in-** | dus**tries**
> Enact- | ed **o-** | pon **Earth**—

The steady heartbeat of those iambs evokes the "bustle" going on—all that activity taking place in the wake of someone's death. The slightly longer third line, meanwhile, stretches across the page like mourners following a coffin.

Short meter is also commonly used in hymns. Dickinson, who grew up in a religious household, was quite familiar with such rhythms.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Bustle in a House" uses an alternating rhyme scheme in each stanza:

ABCB DEFE

The second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme: death/Earth and away/Eternity. In classic Dickinson fashion, these are all slant rhymes, barely perceptible on the ear. They add subtle music to the poem without overwhelming it.

SPEAKER

"The Bustle in a House" doesn't reveal much about its speaker. The poem feels timeless and universal in part because the speaker draws little attention to themselves, instead focusing on death, grief, and the afterlife. That said, the speaker clearly has some first-hand experience with the "Bustle" after a "Death (and Dickinson certainly knew what it was like to lose someone dear).

The speaker uses the plural pronoun "We" in the poem's second-to-last line. This suggests that the speaker is describing an experience to which most people can relate.

SETTING

"The Bustle in a House" talks in general terms about what happens in a house immediately after someone who lived there has died. Though the poem doesn't go into specifics, it's easy to imagine some of the duties that might make up the "Bustle" the speaker describes: making arrangements for the funeral, notifying other friends and family, dealing with the deceased's will, tidying the house in anticipation of visitors, and so on. The poem subtly contrasts this "solemn[]" earthbound "Bustle" with the "Eternity" that the speaker declares awaits people after death.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) published almost nothing during her lifetime, and after 1865 she rarely even left her family home in Amherst, Massachusetts. But from within this circumscribed world, she explored the heights and depths of human experience through her groundbreaking, world-changing poetry.

While Dickinson wasn't too publicly involved in the literary world of her time, she was still part of a swell of 19th-century American innovation. Her contemporary Walt Whitman (who became as famous as Dickinson was obscure) was similarly developing an unprecedented and unique poetic voice, and the transcendentalists (like Emerson and Thoreau) shared her deep belief in the spiritual power of nature. Dickinson herself was inspired by English writers like William Wordsworth and Charlotte Brontë, whose works similarly found paths through the everyday world into the sublime, terrifying, and astonishing.

Death was a frequent theme for Dickinson; she wrote about it from every conceivable perspective, from that of a heartbroken mourner to that of the deceased. Some of her most famous poems on the subject include "Because I could not stop for Death," "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—," "I Felt a Funeral, in my Brain," and "As imperceptibly as grief." Like "Bustle," her poem "There's been a Death, in the Opposite House" specifically describes what happens to the living in the wake of someone's death.

Dickinson went to a religious school as a child and continued to be preoccupied with questions about faith and the meaning of existence throughout her life. 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.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dickinson wrote most of her poetry during the American Civil war, which ran from 1861 to 1865. She was firmly on the Union side of that bloody conflict, though she rarely addressed the political world around her directly in her poetry. Instead, she preferred either to write about her immediate surroundings or to take a much wider philosophical perspective.

Still, many of Dickinson's poems about death—this one included—might indirectly reflect her feelings about wartime grief; she would have been surrounded by families grieving their war dead. By the time this poem is thought to have been written, Dickinson had also already experienced her own fair share of loss: her second cousin, Sophia Holland, died when Emily was just 13, and she was deeply moved by the death of her former principal, Leonard Humphrey, in 1850.

Dickinson also grew up in a religious community and came of age during the religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening. Dickinson herself was even swept up by this religious movement for a time. Though she ultimately rejected organized religion, her poems remain preoccupied with theological concerns. Many express wonder about the afterlife, speculating on what it's like to meet God—if that's what happens when people die (something Dickinson wasn't sure about).

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Emily Blaster — A video game based on Dickinson's poetry—have fun learn some of her lines at the same time! (https://gabriellezevin.com/emilyblastergame/)
- Dickinson's Legacy — Listen to three contemporary writers discussing Dickinson's influence on their work. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000198y)
- Dickinson's Rhythms — Check out an informative discussion of Emily Dickinson's distinctive use of meter. (https://poemshape.wordpress.com/2009/01/18/emily-dickinson-iambic-meter-and-rhyme/)
- A Manuscript of the Poem — Check out "The Bustle in a House" in Dickinson's own hand.

(https://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/12176753)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- A Bird, came down the Walk
- After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
- A narrow Fellow in the Grass
- An awful Tempest mashed the air—
- As imperceptibly as grief
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- Before I got my eye put out
- Fame is a fickle food
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I cautious, scanned my little life
- I died for Beauty—but was scarce
- I dwell in Possibility –
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- If I can stop one heart from breaking
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I like a look of Agony
- I like to see it lap the Miles
- I measure every Grief I meet
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- I started Early — Took my Dog —
- I taste a liquor never brewed
- It was not Death, for I stood up
- I—Years—had been—from Home—
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- One need not be a Chamber — to be Haunted
- Publication — is the Auction
- Safe in their Alabaster Chambers
- Success is counted sweetest
- Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
- The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
- There came a Wind like a Bugle
- There is no Frigate like a Book
- There's a certain Slant of light
- There's been a Death, in the Opposite House
- The saddest noise, the sweetest noise
- The Sky is low — the Clouds are mean
- The Soul has bandaged moments
- The Soul selects her own Society
- The Wind – tapped like a tired Man –
- They shut me up in Prose –
- This is my letter to the world
- We grow accustomed to the Dark
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*The Bustle in a House.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 28 Jun 2022. Web. 12 Jul 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*The Bustle in a House.*" LitCharts LLC, June 28, 2022. Retrieved July 12, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/emily-dickinson/the-bustle-in-a-house.