

I Heard a Fly Buzz
When I died



I Heard a fly buzz – when I died

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 –

[5]

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 –

[10]

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

[15]

[4] **Between the Heaves of Storm:** this refers to the moment of calm or silence that often occurs in the midst of a storm

[5] **The Eyes around:** the people who are gathered around the speaker's bed

[5] **had wrung them dry:** had wrung themselves dry; i.e. had cried until they could cry no more

[6] **gathering firm:** preparing or steeling themselves for what was about to occur

[7] **King:** this may refer to Jesus or to God the Father

[9] **Keepsakes:** mementoes or personal belongings of sentimental value; here the term may refer to a person's property in general

[11] **Assignable:** transferable; capable of being given to another

[12] **interposed:** to interpose is to position oneself between two objects or people

Get In Gear

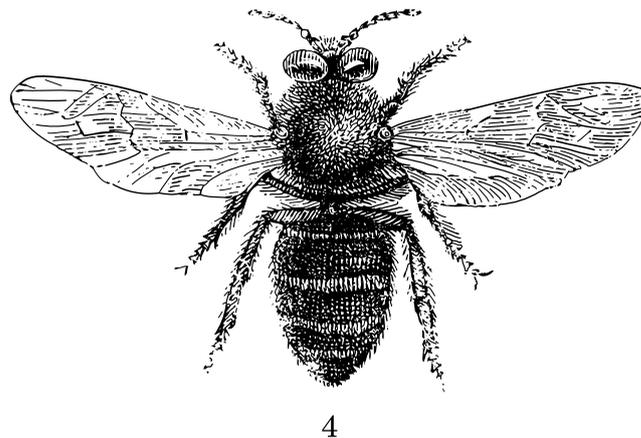
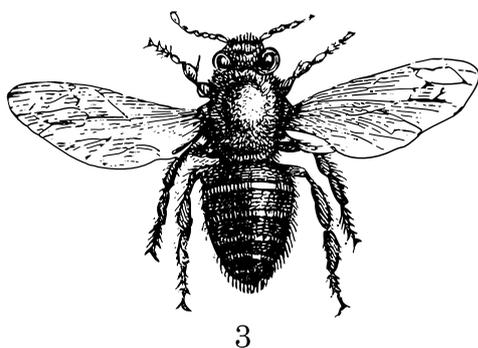
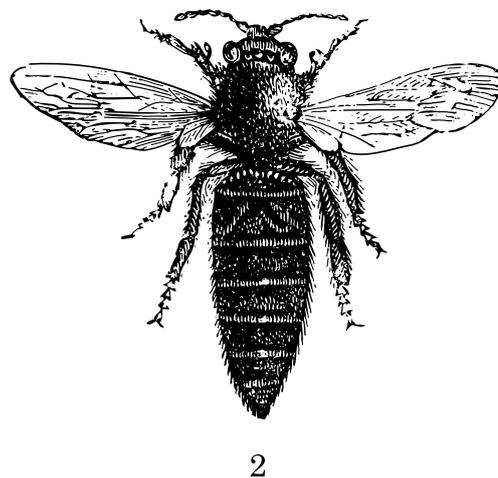
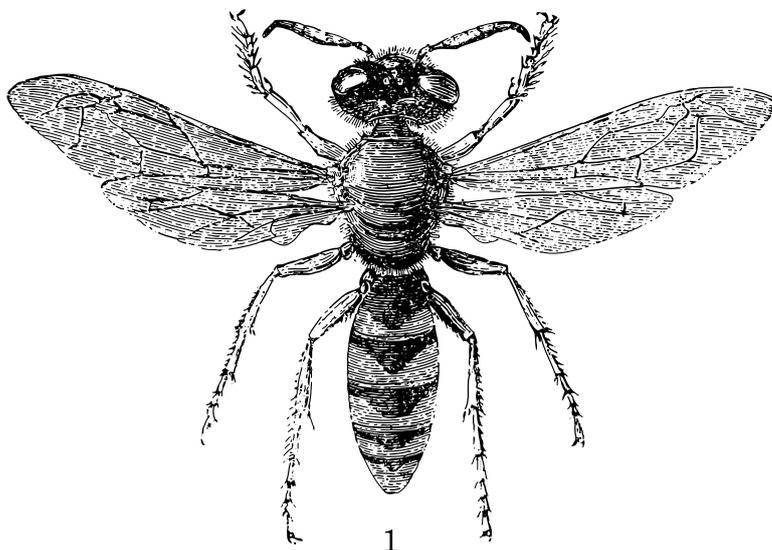
1. Think about flies. List the different associations they usually have for us. Would you agree that the associations are usually negative? Can you think of any positive ones?

Tease It Out

1. **Class Discussion:** What is the speaker's current physical condition? What is about to happen to her?
2. What is the 'Storm' referred to in line four?
3. The room, she says, is filled with 'Stillness'. Why do you think this is?
4. How does she indicate that this stillness is only temporary?
5. Other people are present. Who do you think these people are?
6. How does the poet indicate that these people have been crying?
7. The people in the room are 'gathering firm', preparing for a 'last Onset' or final assault. What exactly are they waiting for?
8. **Class Discussion:** The speaker refers to a 'King' who will soon 'be witnessed' in the room where she lies dying. Who or what do you think she's referring to?
9. In stanza three, what does the speaker do with her 'Keepsakes' or belongings?
10. 'What portion of me be/ Assignable'. The speaker suggests there's a part of her which cannot be assigned or given to anybody else. What do you think she's referring to?
11. What does the speaker hear before she dies?
12. How does she characterise the fly's movement?
13. **Class Discussion:** We're told that the fly 'Interposed' or positioned itself between the speaker and the light. What do you imagine happening here? How could something tiny like a fly block out the light? Do you think this is meant literally? Or is it a metaphor?
14. **Group Discussion:** 'The windows failed'. In small groups try to work out what the speaker means by this.

Think About Themes

1. Find one example of metaphor in this poem.
2. Find an example in this poem where part of something is used to represent the whole. What is the name of this literary device?
3. In your opinion, is the speaker ready to die? Refer to the poem in support of your answer.
4. 'With Blue – uncertain, stumbling Buzz'. Describe how this line might be classed as an example of synaesthesia.
5. **Group Discussion:** Is the speaker somehow hallucinating at the poem's conclusion? Consider this question in small groups and give reasons for your answer.
6. 'This is a frightening portrayal of death'. Read the poem closely and carefully once again. Write two paragraphs saying whether you agree or disagree with this statement.
7. 'You can't take it with you when you go'. What lines in the poem stress that property means little in the face of life or death?
8. **Class Discussion:** 'The moment of one's death should be a serious and solemn, a dignified parting from life and from loved ones. The intrusion of the fly, therefore, is almost an insult, an irritant that robs this moment of its majesty'. Do you agree with this statement?
9. Does this poem mock our attempts to control our lives and indeed the manner in which we leave life behind?



Over To You

1. Imagine you have been asked to make a short video to accompany a reading of this poem. Explain how you would use setting, colour or any other device to make the reading more interesting.
2. Consider the tone of voice in which you would deliver this reading. Would you consider reading it in a serious and sorrowful tone throughout? Or are there moments when you might adopt a more playful or light-hearted tone? Give reasons for your answer.

At a Glance

WHAT HAPPENS	Somebody is dying. A fly enters the room just before the moment of death.
MOOD	Sombre and terrifying.
DEVICES	Likens the stillness in the room to the stillness that occurs in the midst of storms.
THEMES	• Death

THE WORKINGS OF THE MIND

Dickinson is known for her ability to depict the workings of the human mind, a feature of her work evident in both 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain' and in 'I heard a Fly buzz - when I died'. 'I heard a Fly buzz - when I died' memorably deals with the experiences of a mind and the end of life, while 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain' provides an equally powerful depiction of a mind in the throes of a nervous breakdown.

The poem is a powerful portrayal of a mind at the end of its tether, wonderfully evoking states of mind that are almost too extreme for words. The image of a funeral happening inside the brain is strange and startling, but it masterfully captures an extraordinary build-up of psychological pressure that was occurring inside the speaker's psyche.

Several techniques are used to register this build-up of psychological strain:

- The depiction of repetitive, percussive sounds: the 'treading' of the mourners as they mill about before the service, the 'beating' quality of the prayers and responses during the service itself, the thudding of 'Boots of Lead' as the coffin is carried away
- The depiction of force and impact as the mourners' 'Boots of Lead' trudge across her very soul
- The driving rhythm of Dickinson's verse, also, contributes here, its repetitions powerfully registering the build-up of pressure inside the speaker's psyche.

This is a poem then that highlights the fragility of our sanity and mental health. 'Reason', the speaker suggests, is like a wooden floor, comprised of planks, on which we stand with the greatest of uncertainty. At any moment, one of the planks might fracture and give way beneath us. This is a comparison that wonderfully captures the fragility of sanity and mental health. Just as a floorboard might shatter, if subjected to too much weight, so one's mental state might shatter if subjected to too much mental stress.

And just such a collapse is depicted in the poem's unforgettable final stanza, as the speaker's 'Reason' finally gives way. She describes a sensation of plummeting 'down, and down', bouncing from one surface to another. This is a powerful image for the succession of strange, inexplicable mental states that the speaker experiences now that she has moved beyond any conventional form of reason or sanity.

This plummet into unreason is no doubt frightening, the speaker colliding uncontrollably with one 'World', then another, experiencing any number of bizarre psychological conditions. But with this 'plunge' comes a sense of release, perhaps even of relief. We sense that the build-up of psychological pressure, having reached its climax with the collapse of the speaker's reason, is now over. Perhaps the speaker, having reached her lowest point, will now be able to rebuild her shattered psyche.

FORM AND ATMOSPHERE

'I felt a Funeral' uses a form common to most of Dickinson's poetry. It has five stanzas, each four lines long and with an ABCB rhyme scheme. For the most part, it uses lines of six syllables. The third line of each stanza has eight syllables. This poem features an atmosphere of slowly rising tension as the psychological stress experienced by the speaker increases to the point where her 'Reason' itself collapses.

METAPHOR, SIMILE AND FIGURES OF SPEECH

The poem is typical of Dickinson's work in that it features several very inventive similes. In line 6, for instance, the prayers and responses of the funeral service are compared to a 'Drum', which suggests their percussive, repetitive qualities. The speaker uses an astonishing simile to describe the intensity of the ringing she experiences, declaring that it's as if these chimes were issuing from every corner of the 'Heavens', from outer space itself.

There are also several instances of personification. In line 15, as we've seen, the quality of 'Silence' is personified as the speaker's relative or companion. In line 14, existence or 'Being' is compared to an ear, as if, like a person, it were capable of listening.

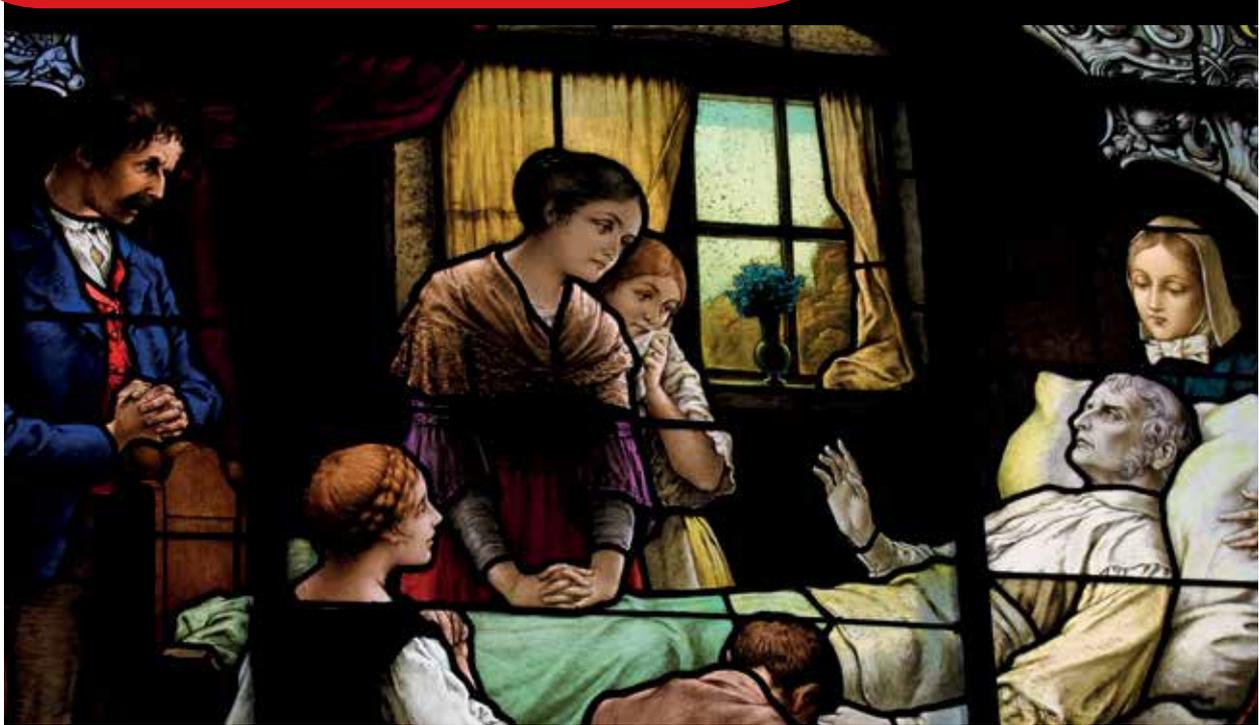
IMAGERY

An interesting feature of this poem is the transition from 'Brain', in line 1, to 'mind', in line 8, to 'Soul', in line 10. Each term, we note, is increasingly more abstract. It's as if the speaker's discomfort begins as physical pain, as a throbbing in the physical organ known as the brain. Then it expands to a state of general mental distress, as suggested by the more abstract term 'mind'. Finally, as suggested by the term 'Soul', the speaker feels as if her entire being has been corrupted. As noted above, Dickinson's genius for imagery is evident in how she makes the 'Soul' and 'mind' seem concrete and tangible, presenting them as creaking floorboards, as a surface made from planks that are always on the verge of collapse.

VERBAL MUSIC

This poem is often noted for its use of repetition, which captures both the ceaseless nature of the mourners' movement and the mounting psychological pressure endured by the speaker. We see this with the repetition of 'treading', 'beating' and 'Kept' in lines 3 and 7. Similarly, the words 'same' and 'again' in line 11 further emphasise the relentless nature of the pressure to which the speaker has been subjected.

I Heard a fly buzz - when I died



LINE BY LINE

In this poem, the speaker addresses us from beyond the grave, telling us about the circumstances of her death.

She describes lying on her deathbed, surrounded by various members of her family. We can imagine the speaker's mental and physical exhaustion, her body wracked, perhaps, by a combination of illness and old age. We can imagine that her family too are mentally and physically exhausted, having suffered the ordeal of watching a loved one drifting towards death. We can imagine an atmosphere of great tension as they wait for the moment when the speaker will finally pass away.

A MOMENT OF CALM

The speaker describes one oddly quiet moment that occurred as she lay upon her deathbed. The room had been noisy while the speaker was suffering on her deathbed. It would be noisy again when she experienced her final death throes. For a few moments, though, it was filled with quietness. The speaker compares this lull to the eerie stillness that can sometimes be experienced at the very centre of a storm system. 'The Stillness in the Room/ Was like the stillness in the Air -/ Between the Heaves of Storm -'.

THE LOVED ONES

The speaker's loved ones had cried until they could cry no more: 'The Eyes around - had wrung them dry -'. According to the speaker, her loved ones' eyes had been

'wrung' in such a fashion until they had no moisture left to give, until they resembled a towel squeezed completely dry.

We imagine an air of stress and expectancy, as the speaker's loved ones waited for the moment of death. We can imagine the unbearable tension they experienced as they waited for the 'last Onset' or attack of the speaker's illness, when she would finally pass away. According to the speaker, her loved ones were so tense that they found themselves almost unable to exhale. The air they breathed in remained held or gathered firmly in their lungs: 'And Breaths were gathering firm'.

The speaker says that her loved ones expect that at the moment of death a 'King' will be present. No doubt, the 'King' they have in mind is Jesus, the Lord of Heaven, who will descend in order to ferry his loyal and faithful subject into Paradise. The loved ones, presumably, don't think that this 'King' will be physically visible beside the speaker's deathbed. Rather they expect that his presence will be felt in their souls and hearts at the moment of her demise.

WILL AND TESTAMENT

Because the speaker knows that the end is near, she has prepared her last will and testament, 'assigning', or passing on, her various valuables to her loved ones. The items that she allocates to her loved ones are described as 'Keepsakes', a term that suggests personal effects, little tokens that will remind loved ones of her after she is gone.

The fact that the speaker will only such keepsakes, rather than stocks and property, reinforces our sense that she is a woman: In Dickinson's time, women were seldom permitted to own and administer more substantial forms of property.

There is one aspect, or 'portion', of the speaker that is not 'assignable', however, one that she cannot simply give to whomever she wants. This is her immortal soul, the ultimate destiny of which she cannot control.

THE FLY

During this final moment of quiet, as the speaker prepares for her illness's final onset, a fly has been buzzing in the room. The fly, we are told, is moving in an 'uncertain' and 'stumbling' fashion. This suggests the jerky, erratic motions of an insect that has been trapped too long in a room and is desperate to escape.

The speaker starts to lose consciousness. She describes how at this moment a fly 'interposed' or positioned itself between her and the available light: 'There interposed a Fly ... Between the light- and me'. This image of a fly blocking out the light is a puzzling one. How could such a tiny creature place itself between the speaker and the available light source? This cryptic statement lends itself to several possible interpretations:

1

Perhaps the image of the fly blocking out the light represents the ebbing of consciousness, the diminishment of the speaker's vision as her system begins to finally shut down.

Perhaps, as the speaker passes away, her sight begins to fail and her vision narrows to a little tunnel. A fly floats into this reduced field of vision, making itself the last thing the speaker sees before she dies and darkness engulfs her completely.

2

Or perhaps the speaker confuses the fly buzzing in the corner of the room with the blackness that floods her vision. We sense that in the speaker's befuddled mind these two events have become mixed up, and she hallucinates that a giant fly is blocking out the light

3

The image of the light-obstructing fly might also refer to the afterlife. Perhaps, as she lingers between life and death, the speaker imagines for a moment that she can see the light of Heaven, the glow of paradise into which she's being summoned.

But at the very second her brain shuts down, and she realises that this glow is only a hallucination. It is replaced by onrushing blackness and the buzzing, stumbling fly. The speaker realises that oblivion, rather than eternal life, lies in wait for her.

4

The fly can also be read as an embodiment of Satan himself, arriving at the speaker's deathbed in order to claim her very soul. It is not surprising that the devil would appear in the form of a fly, because he is sometimes referred to as the 'Lord of the Flies'. Or perhaps the speaker just sees the Devil as a giant fly, mixing him up with the fly that she hears buzzing in the room.

The devil, then, in this unsettling insect form, blocks out not only the light of this world, from which the speaker's spirit is being wrenched, but also the light of paradise, which she will never reach, because the speaker's soul, on this reading, is instead bound for eternal damnation!

THE SPEAKER'S MIND FAILS AS SHE DRIFTS TOWARD DEATH

There is something powerful about the repetition of 'then' in these lines, as the speaker mechanically lists the stages of dying. The word is used repeatedly, which suggests the relentless and unstoppable process of a mind shutting down, one that cannot be stopped or delayed, once it has commenced.

The speaker's sense of logic starts to give way, as evidenced by her declaration that 'the Windows failed'. As she died the room seemed to fill with darkness. To her it seemed that the windows 'failed' – that they were suddenly incapable of performing their function, by letting light into the room.

This mental befuddlement also lies behind the speaker's description of the fly's behaviour. The speaker is aware of three different aspects of the fly's appearance and demeanour:

- The buzzing sound it produces as it flies
- The 'stumbling' and 'uncertain' nature of its movements around the bedroom
- The blue colour of its wings

In her confused mental state, the speaker experiences a moment of synaesthesia. This occurs when we experience something associated with one sense in terms of something associated with another sense. In this instance, the speaker experiences the fly's buzzing not only in terms of sound but also in terms of colour and movement: 'With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz-'. We sense that this occurs because her failing brain can no longer adequately process or organise the sensory input it receives from the speaker's eyes and ears.

The poem's final line, with its repetition of the verb 'see', reinforces our sense of her diminishing capacity. The first instance of this verb refers to the ability to perceive, while the second refers to the ability to focus. The speaker first finds herself unable to focus on the buzzing fly in the corner of the room and subsequently becomes incapable of perceiving anything at all. As we read, we can almost feel her consciousness dwindling away.

There's a sense, here, in which the speaker's consciousness resembles the fly buzzing haplessly against the window, as her mind stumbles from one thought or sensation to the next.

A CLOSER READING

THE WORKINGS OF THE MIND

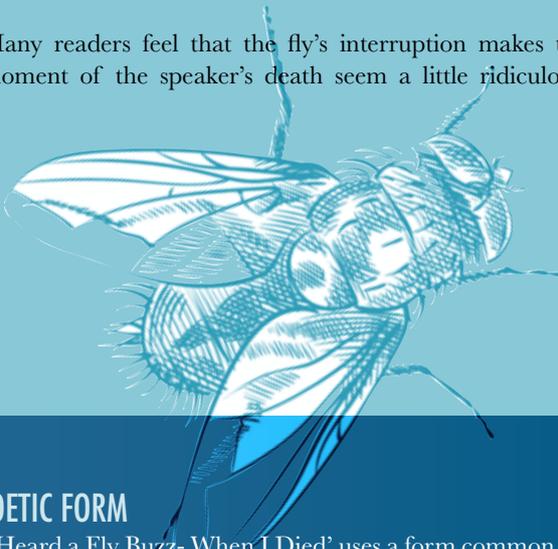
Dickinson's great subject, according to several critics, is the processes and performances of the human mind itself. In this light, 'I Heard a Fly Buzz' can be regarded as a triumph. For it provides, especially in its last six lines, a moving depiction of how a mind disintegrates or dissolves as life departs from it forever.

DEATH

The presence of the fly introduces an element of indignity into the speaker's passing. The speaker has prepared for death; she has made her will and gathered her family around her. The moment of her demise is intended to be the solemn climax of a life well lived.

The last thing she hears, however, is not the soothing words of her family but the buzzing of a fly. The last thing she sees is not the faces of her loved ones but a fly floating in front of her. The speaker's last experience in this world is of a miserable and insignificant insect 'stumbling' as it buzzes around the room.

Many readers feel that the fly's interruption makes the moment of the speaker's death seem a little ridiculous,



POETIC FORM

'I Heard a Fly Buzz- When I Died' uses a form common to most of Dickinson's poetry. It has four-line stanzas and an ABAB rhyme scheme. The poem has a regular rhythmic lilt, with four stresses in the first and third lines of each stanza, and three stresses in the second and fourth lines. The rhythm becomes jerky and irregular in the final stanza, suggesting the breakdown of the speaker's mental faculties at the moment of death.

METAPHOR AND SIMILE

Dickinson uses a fine simile to describe the momentary quietness in the room when the speaker is granted a brief respite from her suffering. The quietness, she says, is like that at the 'eye of a hurricane', the very centre of a storm. On either side of the storm's uneasily tranquil eye are great 'Heaves', a term that here refers not only to gusts or breaths, but also to the storm's force as it pushes and shoves against the landscape.

robbing it of its intended grace and dignity. It's a bit like a bride falling over as she makes her way up the aisle to be married.

We like to think that we can control our lives, that we can live with a certain poise and grandeur. But the poem reminds us that circumstances often intervene, upsetting our plans in ways both big and small. This is especially true when it comes to dying, the manner of our deaths often being unexpected and outside of our control.

RELIGION

The speaker and her gathered loved ones strike us as religious people. The speaker, as we've seen, believes that one portion of her is 'unassignable', her immortal soul. Her loved ones, meanwhile, wait anxiously for 'the King' to be 'witnessed' in the room. They seem to believe that, as the speaker dies, Jesus, the King of Heaven, will appear and carry his loyal subject's soul to paradise.

These expectations are not borne out, however. The poem doesn't explicitly state that there is no heaven. And yet, when the speaker's vision fades to black at the end of the poem, we are left with the distinct impression that the speaker realises that this black oblivion is all there is, that no afterlife awaits her.

This poem, then, presents a rather ironic and sceptical view of religion. There's a sense in which it pokes fun at the gathered family's religious expectations by means of a crushing anticlimax. The last thing the speaker 'witnesses' is not the glorious arrival of the 'King' but the uncertain buzzing of a stumbling fly.

A similarly vivid metaphor is used to describe how the speaker's loved ones had exhausted their capacity for crying: 'The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –' Here, eye-balls are presented as being made from a spongy substance, a material that is squeezed in the act of crying so that moisture is forced out.

TONE AND ATMOSPHERE

'I Heard a Fly Buzz – When I Died' wonderfully evokes an atmosphere of tension and expectation, as the speaker and her gathered loved ones prepare for the final onslaught of her illness.

The poem, as we noted, is spoken from beyond the grave by a speaker who describes her own death. Yet the tone throughout is casual, almost matter-of-fact. The speaker seems to look back from an amused distance at the circumstances of her own passing.