

Emily Dickinson- Brief Biography

Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts in 1830. She was the middle child of a wealthy family. She received an excellent education, both at home and in school. However, she became increasingly reclusive as she grew older, and by the time she reached her thirties, Dickinson was almost completely isolated from the outside world. She seldom left the house, and rarely entertained visitors. At the same time, she was an active correspondent, reader and poet, and she was regarded fondly by her family and by her brother's children in particular. She became the subject of speculation and rumour in the town, but her family protected her desire for seclusion. She was very rarely seen by those outside her close circle of family and friends, and she adopted the habit of dressing all in white and wearing her hair severely pulled back from her face.

Dickinson is remembered chiefly for her unusual style, and her refusal to adhere to the rules of grammar, syntax and punctuation. One writer to whom she sent several of her poems, told her that she should rewrite them in a more conventional way. Dickinson refused to change anything and in so doing, ensured that her work was not published during her lifetime. Dickinson wrote prolifically and after her death in 1886, her sister discovered almost 1,800 poems in hand-made booklets.

*dwell in
possibility...*

*emily
dickinson*

I taste a liquor never brewed-

I taste a liquor never brewed-

From Tankards scooped in Pearl-

**Tankards: large metal cups, usually for beer*

Not all the Vats upon the Rhine

Yield such an Alcohol!

Inebriate of Air - Am I-

And Debauchee of Dew-

**Debauchee: someone brought low by drinking*

Reeling – thro endless summer days-

too much alcohol

From inns of Molten Blue-

When 'Landlords' turn the drunken Bee

Out of the Foxglove's door-

When Butterflies – renounce their 'drams'-

I shall but drink the more!

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats-

**Seraphs: the highest order of angels*

And Saints – to windows run-

To see the little Tippler

**Tippler: someone who drinks frequently*

Leaning against the – Sun-

Summary and analysis

Stanza One

Dickinson uses the metaphor of drunkenness to describe the effect nature has on her. She may be comparing herself to a hummingbird, "Reeling" from flower to flower and becoming almost intoxicated on the nectar it drinks. This nectar is "liquor never brewed", yet it is more wonderful than the finest wines from the Rhine. This hyperbole is our first indication that the poem is not meant to be taken too seriously. It is a whimsical and light-hearted way of telling us how exhilarated and elated she is by the beauty of nature on a summer's day. The "Tankards scooped in Pearl" may be white flowers which are like cups holding this precious liquor. The line may also refer to the white head on a tankard of beer, or the famous white

wines of the Rhine. Whatever the explanation, the important thing to note in these opening lines is how "high" the poet is on life as she samples the splendours of the world around her. She is as giddy and as excited as if she were drunk. Her high-spirited delight is signalled by the exclamation mark at the end of the stanza.

Stanza Two

It is not just the nectar which intoxicates Dickinson; she is also inebriated by the air around her and drunk on dew. The night is like an inn of "Molten Blue". When the bright sky of the day has melted away, everything must rest. But as soon as it is morning, the poet goes "Reeling – thro endless summer days" once again. She is reckless and filled with heady excitement. Everything about the summer seems to fill her with boundless joy. Every line in this second stanza ends with a dash, suggesting that the celebration of these "endless summer days" is ongoing. There is no closure, no full stop.

Dickinson was possibly influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson when she wrote these lines. In his essay on poetic theory, Emerson says, "So the poet's habit of living should be set on a key so low and plain, that the common influences should delight him. His cheerfulness should be the gift of the sunlight; the air should suffice for his inspiration, and he should be tipsy with water."

The playfulness and humour of the first stanza is continued here with the use of the word "Debauchee". Someone who is debauched is someone who is debased and corrupted, which the poet is not, clearly. Few things could be more innocent than being high on summer and nature, but Dickinson insists that she is "Reeling" or staggering about, she is so drunk on the beauty she sees around her.

There is a lovely, musical quality to this stanza. The alliteration in "Debauchee of Dew" and the repeated "e" sound in "endless summer" create a pleasing effect which is most appropriate to such a celebratory poem. It seems to swing along from line to line when read aloud, almost like the poet "Reeling" through the long summer days.

Stanza Three

The reckless, joyful feeling continues in the third stanza, when Dickinson tells us that even though the insects might not drink any more, she will. The foxglove may close to forbid the "drunken Bee" to sip any more nectar, and the butterflies may realise they have had their fill,

but Dickinson says she will continue to revel in nature. She is happily determined to carry on delighting in the splendour of nature and will not stop until she dies, possibly. She will never have enough of summer and the ecstasy it brings. There is an element of tipsy bravado in the line, "I shall but drink the more!" The exclamation mark adds to the feeling of joyful defiance as the poet ignores the signs which indicate that it may be time to stop celebrating.

Stanza Four

Now the poet has reached a state of rapture. She is in heaven, metaphorically. The angels and the saints seem to cheer her on and delight "To see the little Tippler / Leaning against the – Sun-". The alliteration on "Seraphs", "swing" and "snowy" adds to the musicality and sense of celebration of the poem. The image of the poet leaning drunkenly against the sun is humorous, and the description of herself as a "little Tippler" is endearing and playful. It seems that even the saints and angels in heaven approve of her euphoria. Like many of Dickinson's poems, we are left with an unusual and striking image at the end of the last verse. In this case, it is an image which makes us smile and which makes us want to cheer along with the saints and the seraphs. This is a very positive depiction of the afterlife; it is portrayed as a welcoming, happy place. However, it is still worth noting that even in a light-hearted, fun poem such as this, Dickinson is preoccupied with the notion of mortality.

The poem is fast-paced all the way to this end line, but if we read the dashes here as pauses, then the last words trail away as if the poet is falling asleep, having finally drunk her fill of nature for the day.

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners, to and fro
Kept treading – treading - till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through -

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum
Kept beating – beating - till I thought
My Mind was going numb -

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then space - began to toll

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange race,
Wrecked, solitary, here -

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down and down -
And hit a World at every plunge,
And finished knowing - then-

Stanza One

The poet tells us that she "felt" a funeral in her head. It is difficult to know exactly what she means by this. Perhaps she is telling us how a dead person would experience a funeral, or perhaps she is talking about the death of reason, and a descent into madness. The metaphor of the funeral may stand for the death of the poet's reason. The mourners may represent her mental agony. Death and insanity are linked in the horror we feel when we think of both. She says that she can feel the mourners walking backwards and forwards, repeatedly. The word "treading" is repeated, emphasising the continuous footsteps of the mourners. There is a sense of mounting pressure and tension, here. Then she tells us that "Sense" is "breaking through". This is an ambiguous (two possible meanings) comment. Does she mean that she is beginning to see reason and sense, or that sense is breaking down under the continuous tread of the mourners? Whatever the explanation, there is a real sense of suffering and mental anguish in these lines. It is clearly a dreadful experience. The poet seems to experience the funeral, but also to observe it. It is as if her sense of self is divided, further signalling her loss of reason.

Stanza Two

In the second stanza, the funeral service is described. Although it is orderly and calm – the mourners are "seated" now, there is no sense of calm in the speaker's mind. To her, the funeral service is an overwhelming, throbbing noise and she hears a repeated "beating" like a drum, which makes her feel as if her mind is "going numb". This seems to indicate that her ability to think rationally is being eroded by the constant noise.

Stanza Three

Now the coffin is carried to the grave, and the horror intensifies. The mourners begin to walk again, and their footsteps are like lead boots, heavily crushing her soul. There is no sense of calmness or comfort here, but rather an increasing sense of dread and terror. The funeral bell begins to toll, signalling that the burial is about to take place. The end is near. It seems to the poet that the bell fills all of space, or fills her mind completely.

Stanza Four

The ringing of the church bell fills the speaker's senses until "all the Heavens [are] a bell". In this extraordinary world, it is as if the speaker is merely an ear, and there is nothing to experience but the tolling of the funeral bell. This could signal the mental breakdown of the speaker, who is now "wrecked" and "solitary" in this detached, surreal place. Her removal from the real world or the death of the rational self is complete. She is separated from other people by her condition, and is now like a member of "some strange Race". She is no longer rational and therefore cannot communicate with those around her, hence the "Silence".

Stanza Five

In this stanza, the poet's reason seems to completely break down. She uses the metaphor of standing on a plank which breaks and which plunges her into insanity or despair. The word "plunges" suggests the speed of this final descent into madness. She touches a number of different worlds as she falls, each of which might represent something in her past, something she is leaving behind, or they may stand for reality and rationality. Either way, they are left behind.

The last line is open to a couple of different interpretations. The poet says that she "Finished knowing – then- "She may mean that by dying she ceased to be and ceased to know anything, or she may mean that she came to know something which cannot be shared with us. So, the end of the journey may be the end of understanding, or the beginning of a deeper understanding. If it is the end of understanding, if the poet has finished with knowledge, then there is the prospect of further horrors to come.

Theme

"I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" seems to describe the poet's descent into madness. Dickinson effectively captures the horror and despair of the loss of sanity and of self by using the metaphor of a funeral in this deeply unsettling poem.

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.

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 -

Stanza One

The poet tells us about the moment of her death. She describes a seemingly peaceful moment which is compared to the moment of calm at the centre of a storm or the eye of a hurricane. Presumably there had been noise before, perhaps the dying speaker's final struggles, but now there is a brief lull before the moment of death. The introduction of the fly into this scene seems oddly inappropriate. The tone of this stanza is calm. The events are described, but with no emotion. There is a sense of stillness and anticipation.

Stanza Two

The loved ones gathered at the deathbed have cried until they have no tears left, and now they hold their breaths, waiting for the "last Onset" when the speaker dies. The words "last Onset" are an oxymoron (contradictory words used side by side) as an onset is a beginning. Is the poet saying that death is merely the beginning? If so, then the poem would appear to have religious significance. This idea is taken up again when we hear that "the King" is expected to be witnessed in the room. The normal meaning of this in a religious context would be to think that God will take the dying woman away to heaven. But as the poem progresses, we see that the poet does not necessarily share in this belief.

Stanzas Three and Four

She tells us that she has signed her will and left all her valuables to loved ones. Yet she cannot will away all of herself. There is a part of her that is not "Assignable". Presumably, that is her soul. So what will happen to that? She cannot control its destiny now.

At that moment, as she begins to die, the fly appears. His buzzing is the last thing she hears as he flies between her and the light. Remember, there had been a sense of waiting for "the King", but now all we have is the fly. Is he the king? Does he represent death and all that is waiting for us beyond the grave? If so, then there is little hope of an afterlife, as flies feed on dead flesh. Is that all that awaits us? Or is he the devil? Beelzebub, or The Lord of the Flies, is one of the seven demons of hell, in Christian writings.

The fly's flight is described as an "uncertain stumbling Buzz" which seems to strip the speaker's death of dignity. Although she is on her deathbed and surrounded by loved ones, the last thing she hears and sees is a fly. The solemnity and importance of a person's final moments are reduced to a slightly ridiculous, hopeless image of a buzzing bluebottle.

It is also possible to see the fly's appearance as a sign that death is not terrifying, but just as uncertain and unsure as life is. After all, he is the only sign of life, ironically, in this entire poem. The final interpretation is up to you, but remember that you do not necessarily have to come down firmly on one side or the other. You can always raise the questions and offer the alternatives in the way I have done in these notes.

The view of death we are given in this poem is not a particularly hopeful or pleasant one. At the end, the speaker "could not see to see -". It seems that all that awaits us is oblivion. The notion of a heavenly afterlife is dismissed as "the King" never appears. All that appears at the final moment is a fly.

After great pain, a formal feeling comes -

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
The stiff Heart questions ‘was it He, that bore,’
And ‘Yesterday, or Centuries before?’

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
A Wooden way
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go

Stanza One

Dickinson describes how someone might feel after having known ‘great pain’ and the feelings which follow. The suffering might be physical or mental. We never learn what it is that caused this pain.

Dickinson does not speak in the first person in this poem: this is a universal experience and something we will all go through at some stage. It is simply part of the human condition.

When the suffering has ended, a ‘formal feeling comes’. The word ‘formal’ suggests stiffness, precision and ceremony. The body has lost its vitality and is now reduced to its component parts. The image of the nerves sitting ‘ceremonious’ evokes the idea of mourners sitting stiffly and ill-at-ease at a funeral. This link with the funeral is continued when the nerves are compared to tombs. The pain has left the nerves – the centre of the body’s vigour - numb, cold and lifeless.

The heart is also ‘stiff’ and deadened. In its pain and tension, the heart wonders how it endured such great pain and it feels as if it – like Jesus Christ- is carrying or has carried a cross. The pain the heart has suffered is so intense that it has become disconnected from the everyday world and has lost track of time. It is no longer sure if Christ’s pain happened centuries ago or only yesterday.

Stanza Two

The body, when it moves, does so in a 'mechanical' and 'Wooden' way. It is numb and lacks spontaneity. The feet go through the motions of touching the ground and lifting again, but they are merely going around without any real purpose. The circularity of the motion: 'go round' suggests constant, pointless motion. There may also be a link between 'the Wooden way' and the Way of the Cross when Christ carried his wooden crucifix towards the place of his death. He was toiling on that journey, but there was no relief at the end of it. His pain and suffering only led to greater pain and suffering.

The feet are so numb, so dull and unfeeling that they do not notice the surface on which they are walking. It could be ground, or air, or nothing at all. It doesn't matter.

Notice the short lines,

A Wooden way
Regardless grown,

These lines slow down the poem and perhaps echo the narrow focus of our feelings at a time of great pain. If you have ever suffered from a cripplingly bad migraine, for example, you will know how the outside world means little or nothing and all you can think of is your own, narrow world. The same is true of emotional pain. If you are unfortunate enough to have suffered a great loss – perhaps the death of a loved one – then you will know how the world seems to shrink and you are (temporarily) incapable of seeing or caring about anything in the wider world.

The feet are 'Regardless grown'. They do not care what happens now.

The body reaches a state of 'Quartz contentment'. This is an interesting image and worth exploring. First, there is the word 'Quartz'. It implies that the person has become as stony and numb as quartz. Why quartz? Perhaps it is because it is a stone formed from a lengthy process. It has been transformed into its present state. The harsh sound of the word is also appropriate for this poem. Still, in the midst of all of this there is a sort of peace or 'contentment'. It is a cold, stony contentment but it exist nonetheless.

Stanza Three

This stanza begins with a dreadfully depressing and painful image. This is 'the Hour of Lead'. Those that survive it will never forget it. It is similar to a person freezing to death in the snow. First there is the 'Chill', then the numbness: 'Stupor' and finally the slide into unconsciousness or death. This idea of 'letting go' suggests a sort of release, albeit a very negative one.

Themes:

Mental anguish or pain: This poem brings us past the ordeal suffered in 'I Felt a Funeral, in My Brain' and tells us what happens afterwards.

The body and mind are too shattered and numbed by the experience to feel anything now.

Death: There is a suggestion that the suffering is so great that the person may simply let go and die. This is explored in the last stanza when the poet describes people freezing to death in the snow.

Some quotes from Emily Dickinson:

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry.

People need hard times and oppression to develop psychic muscles.

The soul should always stand ajar, ready to welcome the ecstatic experience.

A wounded deer leaps the highest.

Hope is the thing with feathers-

Hope is the thing with feathers-
That perches in the soul-
And sings the tune without the words-
And never stops – at all-

And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard-
And sore must be the storm-
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm-

I've heard it in the chilliest land-
And on the strangest Sea-
Yet, never, in Extremity,
It asked a crumb – of Me.

GLOSSARY

Sore: In this context, it means severe

Abash: Defeat or embarrass

In Extremity: In terrible times

Stanza One

Dickinson begins by offering a definition of hope, using the metaphor of a bird which "perches in the soul" and sings to us constantly. It is small and fragile, like a little bird, but it is very powerful, even in the worst of times. The song it sings transcends language; words are not needed. Hope is always alive with in us and it offers comfort when we need it. The use of dashes in the last line: "And never stops – at all -" reinforces the idea that hope is constant and strong. It will carry on singing in the soul no matter how trying the circumstances we are facing.

Stanza Two

As hope is compared to a bird, so times of hardship are compared to storms or gales. The worse the storm, the sweeter and stronger the bird's song. Although the bird is only small, it is courageous and resilient. A storm would have to be very severe indeed to "abash the little Bird". The word "abash" suggests the buffeting wind of a gale, beating against the perching bird. The last two lines of the stanza run into one another, reminding us of the wings of a bird encircling its young in the nest, keeping them warm and protecting them from harm. So too does hope comfort and protect us during difficult times, as it has done for "so many".

Stanza Three

Dickinson has felt the presence and the assistance of hope during the darkest times. She compares such times to travels in "the chilliest land" and "on the strangest Sea". Yet, although it has helped her so much, hope has never made any demands of her. It has never "asked a crumb – of Me." The word "never" is a definite, absolute word which stands out because it is placed between two commas. The effect of this is to highlight the fact that hope is constantly giving, yet asking nothing in return. It is always there and we can draw from it whenever we need to do so.

This poem offers us a sense of solace that is lacking in some of Dickinson's other poems, notably "I Felt a Funeral, in my Brain". In contrast to that poem, Dickinson now offers us a vision of hope which can comfort a person who is suffering. There is none of the emptiness and despair we see in the depiction of mental anguish in some other poems. Instead, the poet tells us that even when we are close to despair, we are not alone. Hope is always with us and can give us the strength we need to carry on.



A Bird came down the Walk -

A Bird, came down the Walk -
He did not know I saw -
He bit an Angleworm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw,

And then, he drank a Dew
From a convenient Grass -
And then hopped sidewise to the Wall
To let a Beetle pass -

He glanced with rapid eyes,
That hurried all abroad -
They looked like frightened Beads, I thought,
He stirred his Velvet Head. -

Like one in danger, Cautious,
I offered him a Crumb,
And he unrolled his feathers,
And rowed him softer Home -

Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam,
Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon,
Leap, plashless as they swim.

Stanza One

This is quite a simple, uplifting poem. Dickinson observes the bird as it moves, and eventually interacts with it.

In the first stanza, Dickinson watches the bird closely; it is unaware that she is doing so. The tone here is playful: she refers to the earthworm as a 'fellow'. The bird eating the worm is part of nature and is not a negative image.

The only part of this scenario that is unnatural is the 'Walk'. As we will see later, when the bird is disturbed, it leaves this place and returns to a more natural habitat.

Stanza Two

Here we get an idea of how small the bird is. He does not drink 'the dew'; he drinks 'a dew'. This conjures up an image of a bead of dew on a blade of grass, but that is more than enough for this little bird. All of nature is as in a sort of harmony: the bird eats the worm, the 'convenient' grass provides a drink and the courteous bird hops aside for the passing beetle.

The verbs in the first three stanzas create an impression of movement and busyness: the bird is very active as he bites the worm, drinks the dew and hops about.

Stanza Three

In the third stanza, the tone changes as the bird becomes nervous. Dickinson describes the creature in brilliantly economical language. Its eyes are 'frightened Beads' and its head is like velvet. The poet's admiration for the beautiful little bird is clear.

Stanzas Four and Five

The word 'Cautious' in this stanza could refer to Dickinson herself or to the bird. It is at this moment, however, when she makes her presence known to the bird, that the sense of harmony which had been so evident in the first two stanzas, vanishes completely - along with the bird. She offers it 'a Crumb' but this is rejected. It is not a natural foodstuff for the bird, and it takes flight in fright.

These final stanzas are remarkable in their depiction of the bird's silent disappearance. His flight is compared to rowing a boat or butterflies hovering above banks of flowers before diving in. The soft 'r' sounds and the long 'o' in the words 'unrolled' and 'rowed' in the fourth stanza give a sense of this movement being smooth, natural and somehow unhurried. The place the bird is going to is a pleasant one; Dickinson describes him as going 'softer home'. Again, the 'o' sound is picked up in the word 'home' and links this word to the words 'unrolled' and 'rowed', creating a sense of movement towards the bird's home.

The bird's wings are compared to oars which propel a boat silently and softly through the water. The water in its wake is silver: a beautiful image which makes the bird's flight seem somehow precious and lovely. (It is worth comparing this to the other materials Dickinson has mentioned in the poems we have studied so far. She talked about 'Boots of Lead' in 'I Felt a Funeral, in my Brain', and the 'Hour of Lead' in 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes'. The lead is associated with heaviness, oppression and suffering. Silver, on the other hand, is associated with beauty and wealth and adds to the sense of positivity in this section of the poem.)

The bird is also compared to butterflies silently diving into the flowers below. The bird's flight is as soft and quiet as a boat sliding through water or a butterfly dropping onto flowers.

Dickinson's admiration for the bird is clear in this celebratory, delightful poem. She is entranced by its vitality and its grace. It belongs to the world of nature, but when she tries to intrude, she is rejected and the bird leaves. Her impulse was a kind one, but she and the bird are from separate worlds and she can only ever be a secret observer.

Forming a Response to the Poetry of Emily Dickinson

This essay covers the feelings evoked by Dickinson's poetry and the way in which she manages to evoke those feelings through her unique style.

<p>Of all the poets on my Leaving Cert course, Emily Dickinson is the one whose work holds the most appeal for me. When I first read her poems, I have to admit that I found them a little off-putting, but the more I studied them, the more I began to appreciate her unique vision and her memorable, idiosyncratic style. What strikes me most about Dickinson's poetry is the intensity of her emotions, whether she is describing a mental breakdown in "I Felt a Funeral, in my Brain", facing death in "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died-" or, at the other end of the scale, offering us comfort in "'Hope' is the thing with feathers" and outright celebration and joy in "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed". I am intrigued that a poet who can write about mental anguish and mortality in such dreadful detail in one poem can also lift my spirits with her charming, playful depiction of a summer's day in another. In this essay, I will discuss the way in which Emily Dickinson manages to bring me with her on her journey from the depths of despair to the heights of ecstasy.</p>	<p><i>In my introduction, I name the four poems I will use and I outline my main points.</i></p>
<p>I will begin with "I Felt a Funeral, in my Brain", a poem which always leaves me feeling disturbed but which impresses me nonetheless with its chilling description of the speaker's descent into madness. Dickinson effectively captures the horror and despair of the loss of sanity and of self by using the metaphor of a funeral in this deeply unsettling poem. The poet tells us that she "felt" a funeral in her head. This line is typical of Dickinson's style in that it defies simple interpretation, yet we understand on a visceral level what the poet means. Death and insanity are linked in the horror we feel when we think of both, and the funereal imagery throughout this poem is starkly powerful in conveying the sense of dread and despair that accompanies the speaker's realisation that she is losing her grip on rationality.</p>	<p><i>I show an appropriate level of personal response, using the word "I" frequently.</i></p>
<p>There is a sense of mounting pressure and tension as the poem progresses. To</p>	<p><i>I show how the poem affects me emotionally.</i></p> <p><i>I try to discuss the themes and the style equally.</i></p>

the speaker, the funeral service is an overwhelming, throbbing noise and she hears a repeated "beating" like a drum, which makes her feel as if her mind is "going numb". When I read these lines, I can almost feel the poet's suffering and fear as she undergoes what is clearly an appalling experience. She seems to experience the funeral, but also to observe it. It is as if her sense of self is divided, further signalling her loss of reason.

There is something dreadfully compelling about this poem, and by the time the "Plank in Reason" breaks we are swept along with the speaker as she plunges into madness and despair, losing all contact with the rational world. The poem finishes with Dickinson's trademark dash at the end of an ambiguous line. The speaker says that she "Finished knowing – then - " She may mean that she has fallen so far from reality that she has ceased to know anything, or she may mean that she has moved to a different plane and has come to know something which cannot be shared with those of us left in the rational world.

The poem leaves me feeling chilled, disturbed and uneasy, but it sticks in my mind and I find myself returning to it time and time again. This is the power of Emily Dickinson; although I may not always find her poems pleasant reading, they are haunting and compelling.

Like "I Felt a Funeral, in my Brain", "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died -" is an intriguing poem which raises more questions than it answers. In this poem, the speaker takes us with her once more, this time on her final journey. Although this is a first person narrative, the tone is unemotional. Again, as in "I Felt a Funeral, in my Brain", there is a sense in which the speaker is both participator and observer. This ability of Dickinson to sweep us along with her on her emotional journeys, yet at the same time keep a part of herself detached adds to the sense of mystery.

Like the loved ones gathered around the deathbed, we wait with bated breath for the "last Onset". Of course, "last Onset is an oxymoron, as an onset is a beginning. Is the poet saying that death is merely the beginning? If so, then the poem would appear to have religious significance. The speaker is ready for this journey into the next world. She has "Signed away / what portion of

Personal response. The essay should not be a rehash of your notes.

Quotes should be relevant and woven into your sentences when possible.

It is important to link your paragraphs, particularly when moving on to a new poem. Think of the linking words and phrases you use in your Comparative Study answer.

me be / Assignable". All that is left, it is implied, is her soul. The room is quiet as everyone awaits the moment when "the King / Be witnessed – in the Room-".

At that moment, as she begins to die, the fly appears. His buzzing is the last thing the speaker hears as he flies between her and the light. The fly's flight is described as an "uncertain stumbling Buzz" which seems to strip the speaker's death of dignity. The solemnity and importance of a person's final moments are reduced to a slightly ridiculous, hopeless image of a buzzing bluebottle. If he is the "King" for whom the gathered family and friends have been waiting, then it does not bode well for the afterlife. Perhaps all that awaits us is the gradual decaying of our bodies as we are eaten by insects. I found this image both unnerving and oddly humorous. Dickinson manages to puncture the pomposity of those who believe that a glorious afterlife awaits deserving souls. Perhaps death is just as "uncertain and Stumbling" as life is.

What are we to make of this description of death? We are not reassured and no questions are answered. Oddly, however, this is part of what appeals to me about Dickinson's poetry. She does not flinch from describing death and despair, and she does not feel she owes us answers. Instead, she makes us think, and that is perhaps the greatest gift any poet can give us.

It is not just in her rather grim explorations of despair and mortality that Dickinson moves me, however. In "'Hope' is a thing with feathers" she says that even in the bleakest moments, hope is always with us and can give us the strength to carry on. This may not seem to tally with the view of life and of death she presents us with in the two poems I have already discussed, but it is this honesty and willingness to share all her emotional highs and lows that makes Emily Dickinson such an appealing poet. I believe she accurately reflects the vicissitudes of feeling to which we are all subject to some extent.

This rather charming poem attempts to define hope by using the metaphor of a bird which "perches in the soul" and sings to us constantly. The song it sings transcends language; words are not needed. Hope, after all, is not a logical response to all situations: our minds may tell us that there is no hope in certain situations, but our hearts and souls tell us differently. Hope is

Personal response.

The use of rhetorical questions is appropriate in a discursive essay.

Link to next poem. I am moving from bleak poems to uplifting ones, so I mention this and say why I chose these poems.

Remember to

always alive within us and it offers comfort when we need it most. The use of dashes in the line: "And never stops – at all –" reinforces the idea that hope is constant and strong. I find this a very consoling notion.

Dickinson tells us that she has felt the presence and assistance of hope during the darkest times. She compares such times to travels in "the chillest land" and "on the strangest Sea". Yet, although it has helped her so much, hope has never made any demands of her: " Yet, never, in Extremity, / It asked a crumb – of Me."

This poem offers us a sense of solace and reassurance that is lacking in "I Felt a Funeral, in my Brain" and "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died -". There is none of the emptiness here that marks those powerful but bleak poems. Instead, the poet tells us that we are not alone, even in our worst moments. Hope "perches in the soul", and despair need not overwhelm us.

The buoyancy and slight whimsicality that mark "'Hope' is a thing with feathers" are also seen in the last poem I will discuss. "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed" is a celebration of summer and of nature, and it is a poem which never fails to cheer me up.

Dickinson uses the metaphor of drunkenness to describe the effect nature has on her. It is a whimsical and light-hearted way of telling us how exhilarated and elated she is by the beauty of nature on a summer's day. The splendours of nature are headier than the "Vats upon the Rhine" which could not "Yield such an Alcohol!" She is as giddy and as excited as if she were drunk. Her high-spirited delight is signalled by the exclamation mark at the end of the stanza.

It is not just the nectar which intoxicates Dickinson, she is also inebriated by the air around her and drunk on dew. She is reckless and filled with heady excitement. Everything about the summer seems to fill her with boundless joy. Every line in this second stanza ends with a dash, suggesting that the celebration of these "endless summer days" is ongoing.

The reckless, joyful feeling continues when Dickinson tells us that even

comment on language as well as content.

I show the effect the poem has on me.

though the insects might not drink any more, she will. I find this disregard for caution very endearing and amusing. Dickinson seems like a naughty child, here. The foxglove may close to forbid the "drunken Bee" to sip any more nectar, and the butterflies may realise they have had their fill, but Dickinson says she will continue to revel in nature. She will never have enough of summer and the ecstasy it brings. There is an element of tipsy bravado in the line, "I shall but drink the more!" The exclamation mark adds to the feeling of joyful defiance as the poet ignores the signs which indicate that it may be time to stop celebrating.

Even the angels and the saints seem to cheer her on and delight "To see the little Tippler / Leaning against the – Sun-". The alliteration on "Seraphs", "swing" and "snowy" adds to the musicality and sense of celebration of the poem. The image of the poet leaning drunkenly against the sun is humorous, and I find the poet's description of herself as a "little Tippler" endearing and playful. Like many of Dickinson's poems, we are left with an unusual and striking image at the end of the last verse. In this case, it is an image which makes me smile and which makes me want to cheer along with the saints and the seraphs. This is a very positive depiction of the afterlife; it is portrayed as a welcoming, happy place, compared to the grim alternatives offered in some of her other poems.

I began this essay with one of Emily Dickinson's bleakest poems, and I have ended it with one of her most joyful and delightful works. Dickinson's poems on the Leaving Cert course have made me run the full gamut of emotions, but it is because of this, and because of her thought-provoking, sometimes teasingly paradoxical style that I find her to be a poet whose work stays with me and moves me more than I would have thought possible.

Personal response.

Personal response.

Link to other poems.

Conclusion, reflecting back to the opening paragraph.