Emily Dickinson

Higgledy-piggledy
Emily Dickinson
Liked to use dashes
Instead of full stops.
Nowadays, faced with such
Idiosyncrasy,
Critics and editors
Send for the cops.

Wendy Cope
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 slide down 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, emphasizing 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
A 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's 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.

Theme

This poem deals with death and dying. The view of death we are given 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.