Dickinson's "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" is primarily a poem about death, but also about memory, religion, the senses, and many other ideas and experiences. The ideas and associations in this poem make it ripe for consideration. As a result, many critics have written about it, and it is not a hard poem to locate secondary source material about.

From the first line, the reader is made aware of two unusual conditions: The speaker of the poem has died, and the moment of dying coincided with the speaker's perception of the sound of the fly's buzzing. The presence of the fly and the speaker's heightened awareness and fixation on it both seem less than fitting the dignity of the deathbed scene. The fly's buzzing stands out in sharp relief to the silence maintained by those surrounding the dying person. In order to write about this poem, you would want to arrive at an understanding of the fly for yourself. What does the fly mean? Why is it here? Why would Dickinson choose to place a fly in this most solemn of scenes?

Any writer would also likely want to ask how this poem differs from other poems about dying and how it goes against most readers' expectations for a scene such as this. One noted difference in Dickinson's poem from other poems of death is the tone: It is basically devoid of sentiment. The speaker, while relating the circumstances of her dying, is to some extent a detached observer. The choice of the word *onset* in line seven also complicates. Although one can experience the onset of an illness, and *onset* does signify a beginning, in Dickinson's poem the word seems to carry its more negative connotation, as if it is an onslaught that is anticipated, or the beginning of a battle.

Writing about "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" requires some attention to the way the senses are used in the poem. Much of the poem is devoted to sensory description, what the speaker perceives. The second stanza describes what the dying person "sees" in the room. In line five, the speaker says: "The Eyes around—had wrung them dry." The people who have gathered to witness the death are reduced to "Eyes" in this line and then "Breaths" in the next. These are perhaps the two characteristics the speaker equates with the living. These eyes have apparently already done their crying; they know that the death is imminent. They have steeled themselves to this.

Their "Breaths were gathering firm / For that last Onset—when the King / Be witnessed—in the Room" (6–8). They are waiting, breath held in, for the speaker's last breaths and for the moment when the divine will make its entrance. That the divine presence is characterized as a "King" lets the reader know that the expectation is for something magisterial, an authority beyond any they have ever encountered, far beyond their limited human knowledge. This is a sort of threshold moment, and the tension in the poem, now at its halfway mark, is running high. A writer will want to consider how the poem concludes—whether that king comes and in what form, and how the dying speaker moves toward and into death.

**Topics and Strategies**

This section of the chapter will seek to provide you with various approaches you might take in writing a paper about this poem. These ideas are by no means exhaustive and should be looked at as a starting point for your own investigation.

**Themes**

One theme present in "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" addresses the boundary between life and death. How great is that boundary? Can we "see" or experience it, either by watching or by crossing it ourselves? As the first stanza shows, "The Stillness in the Room / Was like the Stillness in the Air—/ Between the Heaves of Storm" (2–4). The room is still (the repetition of the word *stillness* in lines two and three serves to emphasize this fact), but for the fly; that stillness is pregnant with anticipation. Like the proverbial calm before the storm, the witnesses are quietly anticipating something tremendous: the passing of the loved one into eternity. Dickinson curiously places this stillness "between the Heaves of Storm," so there is the suggestion that as life is difficult or trying, like a storm, so might life after death be a similar sort of
Another question the poem moves its readers to ask is, What does Dickinson seem to suggest happens to the soul after death? Although Dickinson knew much of the Bible by heart and was an essentially spiritual person, she was not religious in the outward and conventional sense. Dickinson was the only member of her immediate family not to undergo the public conversion to Protestantism. Her refusal to do so at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, where such a public proclamation of faith was expected, was also cause for personal difficulty. Her inability to conform in matters of faith set her apart from her contemporaries and from her family.

Dickinson's poem explores in depth the metaphoric implications of "seeing." It asks what it means to see, and that word can be understood in many ways—as understanding, perceiving, witnessing, knowing, and so on. Other senses are also elevated, such as hearing and the act of breathing. The people who are present at the deathbed are described only by those sensory acts: watching and breathing. Another theme introduced in part by this emphasis on the senses is the nature of the dying person. Is a person essentially an animal or a spiritual being? How does the act of dying serve to show us the essential self?

Sample Topics:

1. **The boundary between life and death:** What does "I heard a Fly buzz—when I Died" suggest about the boundary between life and death?

   How great does this boundary seem to be? Can anyone observe another's crossing of it? How much does the dying speaker understand about her own crossing over? What composes the boundary? How much do we rely on our senses to show us we are alive? These are only a few questions you might want to consider as you write an essay that tries to explain how this poem illustrates the boundary between life and death.

2. **Life after death:** What do you think this poem is trying to say about life after death?

   The poem features a speaker who has already died, so there is some sort of existence for that speaker beyond her earthly one. What kind of existence do you think it is? How does it differ from life? How does it differ from conventional religious representations of life after death?

3. **The metaphor of seeing:** Consider the poet's use of metaphor. How might death be like the closing of the windows or the closing of the eyes? How might death be like blindness?

   A paper on this topic would look at the poem's many references to seeing, eyes, light, windows, and other forms of sensory perception. What does it mean to "see" in the poem? Also consider words such as *witnessed* (line eight) and *vision*, which does not appear in the poem but is suggested. A paper like this need not "explain" what Dickinson means by seeing in this poem; it could be enough to explore how richly loaded this metaphor is.

4. **The nature of man:** How much is the dying person a part of the natural, physical world? How much is the dying person a part of the spiritual?

   In Dickinson's poem readers have a chance to, in a sense, be present at a deathbed scene. The poem may lead you to consider what Dickinson is saying about the nature of our selves. Is the dying person largely animal or spiritual? You could write an essay that attempts to answer these questions for yourself and your audience.

**History and Context**

Thomas H. Johnson dates "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" to the year 1862, coincident with the Civil War (*Poems* 224). Although Dickinson has been sometimes taken to task for not addressing the war explicitly in her poetry, it should also be noted that the Civil War years were Dickinson's most productive. It would not be unreasonable to expect a writer working during a national crisis such as a civil war to exhibit an interest in mortality.

Even without the war, mortality was high in the 19th century. Many of Dickinson's letters are letters of condolence. So, while her interest in death should not be seen as unusual, her treatment of death in "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" is. It
notably lacks the sentimentality or religiosity common to 19th-century depictions of the deathbed scene. This death, also, is without context. We do not know who the dying person is, how she is dying, or any other details that might lend specificity to the scene. Therefore, it could be the death of anyone at anytime.

As critic Sabine Sielke writes, Dickinson "kept a clear, often ironic distance from Victorian values, Calvinist traditions, and conventional thinking" (388), but she was not unschooled in any of these. One Calvinist tradition important to this poem is that of watching the death of someone for a sign of the hereafter. Congruent with this is the idea of the "good" death. It was thought that if a person died well—peacefully, composedly, in little pain—this person was likely a member of the elect and would enter the kingdom of God. What happened at the deathbed, then, became a window into the hereafter and the dying person's fate.

The reader waits to learn what will happen, and what does and does not happen says a great deal about what differentiates Dickinson from her peers. For, even at a remove of 150 years, we know how we expect this scene to be depicted. There is something essentially unsettling about the death that occurs in "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died," and it is conveyed even in that first line. Dickinson's fly is completely unexpected, and this death goes against our conventional views of how a person should die.

Sample Topics:

1. **The context of the Civil War:** Can this poem be read in terms of the war?

   This poem showcases an intimate view of death, one more intimate than contemporary readers will generally possess. Although the death here is considerably more peaceful than that of a soldier on the battlefield, the many deaths that occurred during the Civil War could have easily moved the poet to a consideration of the experience of dying. A paper could be written arguing that this rather unsentimental look at death was a result of the tremendous amount of dying that Dickinson witnessed during the war years.

2. **The context of 19th-century death:** How does Dickinson's poem illuminate dying in 19th-century America?

   Dying was once a much more intimate affair, usually done at home, not in a hospital. The dying person was surrounded by friends and family. The corpse was prepared by the family and exhibited in the home. Putrefaction came quickly, and little could be done to hide the decay of the body. Dickinson's poem provides a window into the history of death, but it also moves us beyond these particulars. An essay could be written that discussed how "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" makes us more aware of what it might have been like to die in 19th-century America.

3. **Calvinist beliefs:** How does this poem illuminate Calvinist beliefs and traditions?

   You may wish to consult Richard B. Sewall's biography of Dickinson for discussion of beliefs and traditions as they were practiced by the Dickinson family and their neighbors. After some research, an essay could be written that explained how this poem is and is not reflective of the Calvinist belief system.

4. **Irreverence:** An essay could be written discussing the ways Dickinson's poem thwarts our expectations. How does this death differ from what we might expect death to be?

   A paper such as this could contrast the attitudes of the witnesses with that of the dying person. It could also look at other representations of death or simply discuss conventional notions of what the deathbed is like. The very unusual nature of this poem is what makes it memorable, and a promising essay could be written discussing what is unusual about "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died."

**Philosophy and Ideas**

As death comes closer, the speaker makes further preparation for it: "I willed my Keepsakes—Signed away / What portion of me be / Assignable" (9–11). This last action, while not unusual, is also filled with significance. The willing away of the possessions is certainly meant, but as these "keepsakes" are also "portions" of the speaker's self, the reader is invited to consider that the speaker is somehow willing away the earthly self. What constitutes a life? What is left after the possessions are signed away? The reader is assured that not everything that belongs to the speaker is assignable. What the
The poem also reveals Dickinson's interest in the consciousness, intellect, or understanding of an individual. To what extent is a person what he or she knows and perceives? Here is the moment where the poem turns, because at the moment of death, "There interposed a Fly" (12). She seems to wish for the reader to consider what happens to the mind after death, just as those gathered are interested in the soul.

As a scientific document, "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" does attempt to answer the question of what happens, physically, at the moment of death. For Dickinson, one possible explanation, and perhaps a particularly frightening one for her as she was experiencing problems with her own vision at this time, is that death was a failure of the senses. There is a certain underlying terror in the failure of the eyes and the way the hearing seems to isolate the buzzing of the fly so that it, faint as we know it to be, is the last sound to remain. Of course, the fly's presence invites us to consider the fate of the body after death. The blowfly (often large and blue-green in color) can pick up the faintest odor of decay in the search for a corpse in which to lay its eggs. The fly is a certain, physical sign of the death of the body.

"I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" reveals to us a deathbed scene of the 19th century. The assembled company waits for a sign of the soul of the loved one's acceptance into a heavenly company. We must assume they are disappointed. Further, the poem suggests that the private relationship between an individual and God is superior to any public one. "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" might also ask how great an ability does any individual have to know God. But, for many readers, "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" is a poem of doubt.

Sample Topics:

1. What makes a life?: The poem seems to ask this question. When the speaker wills away what she can, what is left?

   An essay could be written that attempts to identify what the speaker possesses. Is she in possession of her body? Does she possess her soul? What does "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" suggest is the "assignable" portion of an individual, in this case, the dying speaker? Here, the poet's diction seems particularly important. Why this choice of words?

2. Perception: What does awareness consist of in the poem? What does Dickinson seem to be saying about consciousness?

   One possible thesis is that "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" is a poem about perception. It is also possible to imagine an argument that says that in this poem, death is the loss of perception. A paper such as this would focus on the many sensory details given.

3. Decay: Seek out a scientific discussion of what happens to the body at death. How does Dickinson's poem compare?

   A paper could be written arguing that "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" is a straightforward examination of the death of the body. This would involve reading the fly more literally and less symbolically. Dickinson and her contemporaries were well aware of how a corpse progressed through the process of decay.

4. Religion: What does Dickinson seem to be suggesting about Christian beliefs concerning life after death?

   Does the fly mock their belief by underscoring the physicality of death? Does the replacement of the "King" with a fly somehow suggest that there is no king and that the waiting for his appearance is an exercise in futility? Or does the fly suggest that God is in the smallest things, even the lowly fly? The last might come closest to being a tenet of Dickinson's own spiritual belief. After all, she is the poet who wrote, in poem #324, "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church— / I keep it, staying at Home" (1–2), which suggests that faith is a private matter.

Form and Genre

The poem consists of four quatrains. Typical of Dickinson's poems, these quatrains are ballad stanzas following hymn, or common, meter. Each stanza in this meter should rhyme at the second and fourth lines so that the rhyme scheme would be
ABAB or, less often, ABCB. The meter is iambic, with four iambs in the first and third lines and three iambs in the second and fourth. It is the meter used for most Protestant hymns, such as "Amazing Grace." Dickinson and her contemporaries would have been familiar with the sound and rhythm of this meter from their church services and hymnals.

Also present are Dickinson's oddities of punctuation and capitalization, along with the disrupted syntax that opens up the poem's meanings to multiple interpretations. The only punctuation used throughout this poem is the dash, and it appears in places where the reader might expect a comma, semicolon, or period. The dash does seem to lend Dickinson's poems a sense of speed or urgency. The pauses that would normally occur with conventional punctuation seem hurried over. The lack of the final period seems to leave, particularly in this poem, a sense of something more to come. The significance of Dickinson's inconsistent capitalization is also uncertain, but, in general, the scattered words throughout the poem that she chooses to capitalize might be seen as particularly important to the poem's meaning. They tend to be words that are stressed by the meter as well, although not all stressed words are capitalized. (This is a characteristic of Dickinson's prose as well.) The rhymes are irregular for the ballad stanza until the last stanza of the poem. Until that point, each stanza has had a slant rhyme in lines two and four. The whole, or perfect, rhyme of "me" with "see" in the final stanza gives the poem a certain closure, even without a final period to mark its end.

Sample Topics:

1. **Hymn meter**: Is there any significance to the use of hymn meter in this poem?

   Dickinson often wrote in hymn meter, but the choice here could be significant. Using the tune to "Amazing Grace," try to hum "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" and read the poem with attention to its music. Does this reveal anything further about the poem?

2. **Punctuation**: How does Dickinson's unique punctuation help you to understand this poem?

   You might wish to consider how Dickinson's punctuation helps the reader to understand "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died." An essay could be written discussing the effect her use of the dash has on your reading.

3. **Capitalization**: Can isolating the capital words of this poem give you a deeper understanding of it?

   An essay could be written that discusses the capitalized words in "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died." Read the poem out loud, giving those words extra emphasis. List the capitalized words on a separate sheet of paper. Can you find any particular logic behind the choices Dickinson made?

4. **Rhyme scheme**: Similar to the topic above, can you discover more about "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" by isolating its rhymes?

   Paying careful attention to Dickinson's rhymes could help you create an essay that discusses their significance. You would want to look at rhymes that occur between stanzas, such as "was" in line 11 and "Buzz" in line 13. You would also want to look at internal rhymes and repetitions, such as "Stillness" in lines two and three.

**Language, Symbols, and Imagery**

Your reading of this poem hinges on your interpretation of the symbolic meaning of the fly. The fly disrupts the deathbed scene and upsets the speaker's expectations. The fly does not seem to be the expected king. It could be that the fly is a last worldly distraction. Perhaps, the fly has come to appropriate the body and is a sign or reminder of deathly decay. It may be that the fly's presence suggests that there is no king and that the only future for the dying is decomposition, not a life beyond the current one. The fly is the last presence of which the speaker is conscious: seeing and then lastly hearing it. The fly is heard even after the "Windows" (15) fail, when the speaker can no longer "see to see" (16).

Synesthesia is when one perceives one sort of sensory experience when, in fact, another sort of stimulus was received, such as when one can "hear" a certain color. Synesthesia can also be the describing of one sensory experience by using another. In this poem it occurs frequently, such as when the fly moves with a "Blue" (13) buzz. This produces a rare and unusual sort of imagery, an almost multilayered sensory experience.
"I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" is also a poem whose language, symbols, and imagery suggest much about religion. Any reader is likely to have his or her own interpretation of what the poem says in this respect. One possible way to approach an essay on this topic would be to consider this poem as another example of Dickinson's unique view of religious belief.

Sample Topics:

1. **The fly:** Why does she use a common insect? Why does the writer move from hearing the fly in the first stanza to seeing it in the third?

   An essay could attempt to state what the "Fly" in this poem symbolizes. What language and imagery is used in reference to the fly? Is there more than one possible interpretation of the fly?

2. **The king:** Is the king death or Jesus? How is the buzzing fly related to the king?

   An essay on this topic would attempt to explain the symbolism of the "King." Exploring the questions above would be one place to begin. You might also wish to think about the word *king* and all that it connotes. Why did Dickinson choose this particular word? Why does the juxtaposition of king and fly seem so unlikely?

3. **Synesthesia:** This poem is curious in its emphasis on sensory experience, particularly the overlapping or confusion of the senses. Do you think this confusion arises only because the speaker is coming closer to death? Do the sensory details help you to understand the experience of the speaker?

   Pay attention to the poet's use of the senses. How many can you identify and how are they used? Some are fairly obvious, but look also for those less so, such as the insistence on breath, air, and the "Heaves of Storm." If synesthesia is a failure of the mind and body to work in congress with each other, how does this inform your reading of the poem?

4. **Religious imagery:** Various images and words in the poem—from the "Heaves of Storm," the "Onset," and the "King," to the use of "witnessed"—have religious connotations. Does the poem hold to their conventional meanings?

   You might want to write an essay discussing the religious imagery of this poem. One possible thesis would be that although the poem has a great deal of religious imagery, the imagery is employed in unorthodox ways. Dickinson's poem #324—"Some keep the Sabbath going to Church" could be considered another poem useful for comparison to "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" if you wanted to pursue the thesis that both poems showcase Dickinson's independent and idiosyncratic view of religion.

**Compare and Contrast Essays**

There are any number of ways to construct an essay that compares or contrasts Dickinson's "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" with another work of literature, whether a poem by Dickinson herself or another work that you find relevant. "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" depicts the process of death from the perspective of the one who has already completed it, as do some other important poems by Dickinson, notably, #712—"Because I could not stop for death" and #449—"I died for Beauty—but was scarce." These are some other obvious poems to look at for a possible essay that compares or contrasts Dickinson poems. The following have death as their subject: #216—"Safe in their Alabaster Chambers," #389 —"There's been a Death, in the Opposite House," #856—"There is a finished feeling," #860—"Absence disembodies—so does Death," #922—"Those who have been in the Grave the longest," #943—"A Coffin—is a small Domain," and #949 —"Under the Light, yet under."

The deathbed poem was tremendously popular in 19th-century America. A poet who produced them in bulk, Julia A. Moore, was satirized by Mark Twain in *Huckleberry Finn.* In that novel, the character Emmeline Grangerford writes the hysterically funny elegy for Stephen Dowling Bots. An interesting essay could be written looking at the work of Twain writing as Emmeline Grangerford ("Every time a man died, or a woman died, or a child died, she would be on hand with her 'tribute' before he was cold…. The neighbors said it was the doctor first, then Emmeline, and then the undertaker" [139]) or contrasting instances of other deathbed poems contemporary to Dickinson's. There are also at least two short
stories that famously depict the deathbed scene: "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" by Leo Tolstoy and "The Jilting of Grannie Weatherall" by Katherine Anne Porter. You might find it interesting to look at either for another depiction of the act of dying.

Sample Topics:

1. **Other voices of the dead:** In at least two other poems, Dickinson has a speaker who is already dead. What effect does a deceased speaker have on the message delivered?

Looking at either #712—"Because I could not stop for death" or #449—"I died for Beauty—but was scarce," compare or contrast the speaker of one of those poems to the speaker of "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died." Are their voices similar? Are their concerns the same? Do the poems exhibit any similar theme, such as death as the gradual loss of sensory feeling?

2. **Other views of death:** You might choose any number of Dickinson poems about death to compare or contrast with "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died." How does Dickinson represent death throughout her work? How is her view of death unique? What gives her the reputation in some circles as a morbid poet?

Dickinson has a reputation, which you might give more or less credence to, as a poet of death. You could choose a poem from the list above or another of your own choosing and profitably compare or contrast it with "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died."

3. **Contemporary views of death:** Death was a much greater preoccupation in 19th-century America than it is today, and poems, photographs, obituaries, and epitaphs all reflect this. If you look at a poem by one of Dickinson's contemporaries, such as Julia A. Moore, you will find a very different view than the one presented in "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died." How is Dickinson unlike her contemporaries?

You might write an essay contrasting Dickinson's deathbed scene in "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" with other presentations of the same scene by other writers contemporary to her. It might also be fun to look at Twain's characterization of Emmeline Grangerford in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for one writer's view of deathbed poetry.

4. **Prose depictions of the deathbed:** Leo Tolstoy and Katherine Anne Porter are two writers who have depicted death through the eyes of the dying protagonist. Either of their stories might further illuminate your reading of "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died." How do different writers, here prose writers, depict the deathbed?

In Porter's "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," the bridegroom (perhaps, like the fly, a stand-in for Christ) fails to appear. Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich achieves grace at the very final moment. You might write an essay comparing or contrasting either of these figures with the speaker of Dickinson's poem.

Further Information


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