“I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died”

Emily Dickinson
I heard a Fly Buzz
-- when I died  by Emily Dickinson

• https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6-xyuiaK_Q
Title meaning

- Well, this poem doesn’t actually have a title. Dickinson didn’t publish her poems in her lifetime, and they were found in a drawer after her death, bound up in little handwritten books. Most people called this poem by its first line.
Stanza one

- The poem begins with a **startling statement** and a very unusual view of death: that of a dying person observing a fly buzzing around the room of death.
- Speaking in the **past tense** offers a retrospective view of the moment of dying.
- Repeating the word “stillness” emphasizes the quiet nature of those moments before death.
- This stillness is contrasted with the “heaves” (the wavelike effects) of life and of the afterlife.
- Those witnessing the dying narrator in the room are still.
Stanza two

- The mourners are seen in terms of sight ("the Eyes") and sound ("Breaths").
- The mourners are viewed from the perspective of the dying narrator.
  - The phrase "wrung them dry" suggests that those awaiting death have been waiting for some time.
  - What is "firm" is what is formal: those awaiting the arrival of God ("the King") to take the soul of the dying narrator are following the traditional rituals of a deathbed scene.
- God is compared to a King being witnessed formally by his subjects.
- The phrase "in the Room" is repeated so that the ritual of the death scene is emphasised.
Stanza Three

- The narrator has made a will.
- The “keepsakes” have been “signed away” and assigned.
- However, the poem recognises that what is willed away is only “a portion” of the dying person’s property.
- The other “portion” is the mysterious unknowable and unassignable part of the dying person’s personality.
- However, before God appears or is witnessed or claims what is assignable to him, a fly interrupts.
- The fly has interrupted between the dying person (still alive) and the religious sacristy of death.
- The fly is an infestation of reality in the middle of death, formality and religious expectation.
Stanza four

- The brightest colour in the poem - “Blue” – is that of the fly. The “uncertain stumbling” nature of the fly’s buzzing renders it like a drunken incoherent presence disturbing the calm rituals normally associated with death.
- The fly interposes between the dying narrator and the light. Whether that light is the light “in the Room” or the light associated with the next life is purposely left ambiguous.
- When “the Windows failed” the external (“in the Room”) and the internal (the sense of sight) have both dimmed and gone dark.
- What the narrator “could not see to see” is what remains unknown: a vision of the next life.
- The fly signifies that the next life remains unknowable from the perspective of the buzz of the present life.
- The finality of this oblique message is hammered home by the stark concluding rhyme: me/see
Important points of structure

• In this poem by Emily Dickinson, the speaker is a dead person who is reflecting back on the last moments of her life and the moment of her death. The poem uses great diction, visual imagery, alliteration and other sound devices, and metaphor to convey the frustration the speaker feels about the fact that at the very moment she was ready to die, a fly came into her notice and disturbed her.
Images from the poem

- The first image we get in this poem is of that pesky fly. But we don’t see it yet. We just hear it “buzz.” That’s a great word to put in here, because it describes the noise a fly makes, but the sound of the word also imitates the sound of the fly.
- There must be whole people here, but all we hear about are "The Eyes." When a part of something is made to stand in for the whole thing.
Theme

- The strongest theme is of the poet’s preoccupation with death.
- A second theme is the hardships endured by people in life.
Tone

- A strong sense of despair