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"I felt a Funeral, in my Brain"

Born on December 10, 1830, to an influential Puritan family, Emily Dickinson grew up in Amherst, Massachusetts. Due to her family's role in the education of Amherst, Emily received an unusually thorough education for a female at the time, attending first the Amherst Academy, then the Mount Holyoke Seminary. There, Dickinson developed her mind under the prominent suffragist, Mary Lyons. Rebelling against religion, Dickinson left and returned to her parent's home, becoming a recluse. She never married, and instead cultivated many friendships through letters, electing to compose poetry. When she died at fifty-five from Bright's disease, Dickinson had ultimately produced nearly 1800 poems, the vast majority of them unpublished (Crumbley, *Emily Dickinson* 247-249). Each of these poems exhibits the distinctive mark of Dickinson and the external forces that acted upon her, both consciously and unconsciously. Likewise, these influences in Dickinson's life are evident in poem "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain", as the speaker reflects upon the inexorable descent into madness and death.

Dickinson began writing at the tail end of Romanticism and greatly influenced the development of Modernism. Romanticism renounced the rationalism of the Enlightenment, believing in the possibility of a spiritually healed mankind ("A Brief Guide to Romanticism"). From this, the growing Transcendentalist movement influenced Dickinson, upholding a tenet of "replac[ing] God with people as a subject of devotion and praise, and… belie[ving] in the power of human consciousness to discover eternal truths in the natural world" (Martin 33). For example, in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain", Dickinson contemplates knowledge and reason, lamenting how "a Plank in Reason, broke," (Dickinson 17). Other eternal truths would include death and the afterlife, freedom, truth, fame, and a wide spectrum of emotions. Meanwhile, Modernism broke away from many Romantic ideas, including strict verse patterns, traditional rhythm, and a belief in the sublime

(Albright). Through this, Dickinson straddles the gap in between the two movements, by containing elements of both.

Dickinson's refusal to profess Christianity reflects both the Modernism rejection of religion and the Romanticist idea of the sublime, leading to her fascination with what lies beyond death, disregarding the religious afterlife, in favor of "immortality, or the idea of permanence, and the physical process of death or decay" (Tate 22). An example of this obsession features in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain", where the speaker compares his/her breakdown in reason to a funeral,

> "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
> And Mourners to and fro
> Kept treading – treading – till it seemed
> That Sense was breaking through –" (Dickinson 1-4).

Although Dickinson disavowed religion, it clearly influenced her preoccupation with death, "suggest[ing] various narratives of religious searching" past the societally accepted views on religion and Christianity, and towards the metaphysical (Eberwein 16). For instance, Dickinson writes "And hit a World, at every plunge, / and Finished knowing – then –" (Dickinson 19-20), the speaker meaning that as he/she dropped, he/she met a deterrent to understanding, while the state of the speaker's knowledge remains ambiguous, alluding to the uncertainty of what lies beyond death.

An important feature of the Modernism movement, the irregular form of poetry, allowed for this addressing of the metaphysical. Dickinson "mixed meters, forms, and discourses" (Parmar 31); in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain", breaking from iambic meter to emphasize how the speaker has had her world upturned, feeling "Wrecked, solitary, here –" (Dickinson 16) Dickinson's frequent letter writing also significantly influenced her poetry, with "stylistic similarities [between] her poems and letters… several of her poems were literally 'letter[s] to the World'" (Miller 9). The use of first person serves as evidence for this, "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (Dickinson 1) and references to a greater object, "Then Space – began to toll, / As all the Heavens were a Bell," (Dickinson 12-13). Dickinson communicated her ideas on intangible death by maintaining the speaker in first person, and "overc[ame] the barriers of separation… yet serving to protect

her from immediate or direct intimacy" (Miller 10). These speakers, not always Dickinson herself, acted as proxies, speaking of how he/she felt confused and his/her "…Mind was going numb –" (Dickinson 8). Ultimately, this serves to translate Dickinson's ideas in her poems to a more universal scale.

Dickinson's unconventional punctuation testifies to another aspect of Modernism. The first editions of her poetry, published posthumously, had the original punctuation stringently edited out (Denman 23). But in doing so, editors lost a vital component of Dickinson's poetry; she used punctuation to "disrupt conventional grammatical patterns and create new relationships between words… to create musical and rhythmical effects; and to affirm the silent and the nonverbal" (Denman 24). For example, "Kept beating – beating – till I thought / my mind was going numb" (Dickinson 7-8), emphasizes the word 'beating' and its onomatopoeia-like effect. Since then, efforts have been taken to correct these missteps, and her works now appear with the original manuscript punctuation. Most significantly, Dickinson preferred the dash as her "primary form of punctuation" (Crumbley, *Dickinson's Dashes* 9); by disjointing the lines and the speaker, the self develops, "[emerging] *through* rather than *in* language…. normal oppositions between self and other, inner and outer… are impossible to maintain" (Crumbley, *Dickinson's Dashes* 10). She used the dash so prolifically, in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain", it appears 12 times though out the 20 lines, and at the final line, ending with "And Finished knowing – then –" (Dickinson 4).

Posthumous publication affected Dickinson's word choice to an equal, or even greater, extent than her punctuation. Endeavoring for economy of words, "there is so much deletion in Dickinson's poems, and… some of it is both nonrecoverable and essential to understanding" (Miller 29). An example of this in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain", appears when Dickinson ends by writing "And Finished knowing – then –" (Dickinson 20), omitting what exactly the speaker finished knowing, or got through knowing, leaving the reader to the job of learning what the speaker has discovered. This line also exemplifies Dickinson's careful selection of her words, with some poems "contain[ing] one or more variants for a word or line without indicating which choice the poet preferred" (Miller 46). This uncertainty creates alternative interpretations of the same poem. One such poem that Dickinson provided alternative words, "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain", states "And hit a World, at every plunge"; alternatively, "And hit a World, at every crash" (Dickinson 4). The

significance of the alternative words, 'plunge' versus 'crash', lies in their meaning; both have a metaphorical meaning of death, whereas the former means a fall or dive, as well as a difficulty, while the latter means a shock or upheaval (Hallen). This stems from Dickinson "spen[ding] days with Webster's *Dictionary* (in the 1844 edition)" (Lerer 187), and she based her word choice heavily on it, "many of Dickinson's collocations mime those of the dictionary" (Lerer 187). These different words lend alternative meaning to Dickenson's poetry, expanding the scope of her ideas.

Irregular capitalization also aids in adding meaning to Dickinson's work. The capitalization occurs inconsistently, as Dickinson saw fit, in "not only nouns, but also pronouns, verbs, adjectives and even articles" (Winther 16), but for the most part, "Dickinson's capitals begin nouns" (Miller 58), such as "Service", "Box", and "Boots of Lead" in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (Dickinson 6, 9, 11). This phenomenon reveals the remnants of the German and Old English technique of distinguishing nouns (Winther). However, for a more figurative significance, the capitalization "suggest concrete, immediate present… [lending] particular substantiality to ideas or things" (Miller 58) and draw attention to what would otherwise pass by ignored. In "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain", Dickinson writes "And Being, but an Ear, / and I, and Silence, some strange Race" (Dickinson 15), changing the meaning from the less literal to metaphorical. Emphasizing the figurative meaning reveals Dickinson's search for the "what lies beyond death, both in cosmic terms and in the feeling of those bound to die" (Frost 22).

This movement towards the transcendent and determining the truth highlights what would be Dickinson's thematic material for the vast majority of her poems, including "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain". She contemplated her relationship with religion in these poems, struggling between Christianity and her personal beliefs, but ultimately rejected it. Thus, she developed her poetic eccentricities, allowing for the exploration of death and what comes after. Dickinson ultimately conveyed the inevitability of death, and what she imagined it would be like, spiritually, mentally, and physically. Through her search for this truth, Dickinson attained renown for her characteristic style, and influenced many generations of poets to come.

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