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Explication Essay: Theme of Death in "I Heard a Fly Buzz – When I Died"

"I Heard a Fly Buzz – When I Died" (1862) is a poem by Emily Dickinson. In the poem, Dickinson is the narrator. The piece's setting is during the final hours as the speaker transitions from life to death. Despite her body undergoing decomposition, as illustrated by the fly's presence, the narrator's senses connect her to the physical world. The poem raises several fundamental questions. However, the most critical one regards how several elements within the poem work together to expound the theme of death. A closer reading of the poem might not provide all the answers to this query. In addition, one must go beyond to uncover the historical background of the poet to understand their connection with the death. Despite the poem's complexity, understanding death in "I Heard a Fly Buzz – When I Died" by Emily Dickinson relies on evaluating literary aspects and the poet's sociocultural attributes.

The choice of words Dickinson uses in the poem helps readers understand the theme of death. A poem's physical elements include imagery, diction, rhyme, rhythm, and figures of speech. According to the author, "I Heard a Fly Buzz – When I Died" incorporates word choice that complements the theme of death (Ramadhani et al. 68). The readers can easily understand the words, making phrases that paint a familiar picture in the reader's mind. For instance, at the poem's beginning, the poet references "The stillness in the room" (Dickinson, line 2). The choice

of words best characterizes a situation involving death. The authors explain by saying, "She used the word stillness to explain the atmosphere in the room and air and to strengthen the feeling of death in this poem" (Ramadhani et al. 68). The audience can easily associate "stillness" and "death." Accordingly, diction has played a critical role in enhancing the apprehension of the poem and, more importantly, the expansion of the primary themes, such as death.

Besides the choice of words, Dickinson relies on a language style hallmarked with figures of speech to pass the direct messages. Using motifs allows her to communicate deeply with the audience regarding life and death. For instance, Dickinson has utilized metaphor as one of the most significant figures of speech. The narrator in the poem says, "And then the Windows failed – and then I could not see to see" (Dickinson, lines 15-16). According to the narrator, the window metaphorically represents life. As the speaker puts it, once the window failed, they could not see as life had already vanished (Ramadhani et al. 69). Using a fly in "I Heard a Fly Buzz – When I Died" helps contextualize the dying experience. Typically, one would expect to find flies on a carcass or a corpse as the body decomposes (Ramadhani et al. 69). The narrator says they had a fly buzz, indicating they were conscious of their death. Therefore, using the fly as a motif for a corpse plays a critical role in communicating the overriding message to the audience.

Alqaryouti and Sadek argue that the poem informs the readers of several aspects, including Dickinson's views regarding the process of demise and the afterlife. According to the authors, Dickinson uses a significant level of ambiguity to represent the meaning of death. As a result, the audience is likely to develop diverse views regarding the end of life (Alqaryouti and Sadek 16). In addition, Dickinson uses the poem to represent death as the start of eternity. The authors explain this by saying, "Her vision of death indicates the process of putrefaction that

occurs when one dies" (Alqaryouti and Sadek 16). The fact that the speaker communicates post-death indicates the poet's underlying beliefs concerning the afterlife. In the first stanza, the readers can appreciate that although the speaker is dead, she hears the buzzing sound of the fly. Besides the afterlife, the poem further communicates the differences between the body and the soul. Throughout the poem, the narrator insinuates that part of her being is alive despite the physical termination of the body. The speaker says, "For the last onset – when the king is witnessed – in the room" (Dickinson, lines 7-8). Despite her physical nonexistence, the dead speaker understands what happens in her life. Therefore, the differences between the body and the soul remain one of the most significant views of Dickinson about death.

Dickinson's obsession with death as the central theme in "I Heard a Fly Buzz – When I Died" gives the readers a glimpse of her personality. Alqaryouti and Sadek look at the thematic representation of dying and what it tells the readers about the poet's life. Dickinson suffered from social isolation throughout her life (Alqaryouti and Sadek 17). She spent most of the time alone in the house and would refrain from interacting or communicating with her counterparts. Over the years, Dickinson adapted her communication by venturing into letters she sent to a select group of individuals (Alqaryouti and Sadek 17). As a result, the loneliness might have contributed to her obsession with death, a taboo in many societies. Dickinson opens the poem by saying, "I heard a fly buzz – when I died" (Dickinson, line 1). The mere fact that she imagined herself dead would have attracted condemnation from different societies worldwide. In addition, she uses this poem to express her loneliness by painting the picture of being in a room alone with the fly as the only significant creature (Ramadhani et al. 70). The wild thoughts are a byproduct of her isolated life that almost ruined her psychological well-being. Thus, Dickinson's

personality might have played a significant role in influencing her to explore this controversial theme.

The poem has religious connotations that give readers ideas regarding Dickinson's faith. Alqaryouti and Sadek argue that Dickinson's obsession with death and the afterlife was partly a product of his early Christian teachings. She grew up in a society indifferent to religion, forcing her to juggle faith and skepticism (Alqaryouti and Sadek 18). Despite the ambivalence, Dickinson accepted death as a significant part of her life. In "I Heard a Fly Buzz – When I Died," she accepts its inevitability. She immerses herself in the experience (Ramadhani et al. 70). The narrator's reference to the "king" has religious undertones worth interpreting. Christians and religious groups believe death brings a reunion with the maker or a higher power. From a spiritual standpoint, royalty is a motif for God or Jesus Christ (Alqaryouti and Sadek 18). Accordingly, correctly understanding the poem requires an individual to appreciate Dickinson's religious background.

In conclusion, appreciating the representation of death in the poem requires an understanding of the literary devices and the acknowledgment of Dickinson's behind the scene life. The physical aspects are diction, metaphor, symbols, and motifs. In addition, the piece of literature depicts several elements associated with the poet, like isolation, Christianity, and an eccentric character. Accordingly, such traits could have pushed her to explore this controversial topic.

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