

Critical Essay on "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain"

Sheldon Goldfarb

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This is a baffling little poem, and the more it is read, the more baffling it becomes. It inspires a wide variety of responses. Some critics see it as a depiction of a real funeral. Others say that even if it originates with a real funeral about someone's physical death, the funeral image becomes symbolic and metaphorical, representing something else: some sort of agony or perhaps the process of going mad. Some critics see the poem as depicting the extinction of consciousness after death and find the poem despairing. Yet others see Dickinson as suggesting that some new way of perception can be attained after death (if the poem is about death), and they see something more positive going on. One critic (Robert Weisbuch, in *Emily Dickinson's Poetry*) says the conclusion of the poem is neither positive nor negative.

The speaker is like the hero in some archetypal drama, beset by painful forces, and then somehow reaches a better state after an almost mythic confrontation.

What are readers to make of all this? It does seem that Emily Dickinson has left things deliberately vague here, and perhaps that is part of her point: she is talking of the difficulty of knowing and understanding. But although there are difficulties, it does seem that the poem is telling readers that the difficulties can be worked through. At the end, the poem seems to take readers to a better place although a lot depends on the meaning of the phrase "Finished knowing" in the last line. By "Finished knowing," does the speaker mean she can no longer know anything (a rather negative conclusion) or does she mean she now knows everything she needs to know, that is, that she has finally figured things out (a much more positive suggestion)? Or does she mean she has finished with knowing because she has moved on to some better form of perception, such as feeling or intuiting or somehow connecting with the universe more successfully than through conventional forms of knowing (again a more positive view)? Has she moved from "lawyer's truth" to "the poet's truth of never knowing," as Jerome Loving puts it in *Emily Dickinson: The Poet on the Second Story*? This essay will tend toward the two positive views of the poem's ending, largely because of the last line of the first stanza and also because the structure of the poem conveys a positive sense of resolution after crisis.

Looking at the first stanza, the first point to note is that the funeral seems very much to be in the speaker's brain: the mourners "treading--treading" back and forth are, as readers learn in the third stanza, creaking across the speaker's soul; they seem to be inside her. That is, the funeral would seem to be symbolic, metaphorical, a dream-like representation of something else but not of a descent into madness, as critics like Clark Griffith and Paul J. Ferlazzo argue (in, respectively, *The Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry* and *Emily Dickinson*). Joan Kirby (in her book *Emily Dickinson*) seems closer to the truth when she says that what is being depicted is the passing away of old thoughts, old ways of thinking, old approaches to the world. Or as Weisbuch puts it, it is the depiction of "a crucial change in ... consciousness."

The key to understanding this crucial change may be in the last line of the first stanza, which says that as a result of the heavy tramp of the mourners, "sense was breaking through." It is as if the funeral is allowing some barrier to be destroyed so that some new sort of understanding can reach the speaker. The speaker seems to be imagining the death of something in her brain, the death of some old ways of thinking. Now, death of course is painful, even metaphorical death; so is the giving up of old ways--and the speaker does seem to be in pain, especially in stanza two, when the funeral service beats "like a Drum ... beating--beating," until her mind seems to be going numb. But the pain in this poem

seems to be a necessary price to pay for progressing to a better state; the pain is part of getting rid of old ways in order that the speaker can advance to something new.

The poem in fact reads like a miniature narrative, beginning with a crisis (the funeral and the pain), moving toward a climactic encounter, and then achieving resolution. The speaker is like the hero in some archetypal drama, beset by painful forces, and then somehow reaches a better state after an almost mythic confrontation. True, the speaker seems fairly passive in all this; it is not she, but the mourners whose tramping allows Sense to break through. Still, if the mourners are simply symbolic entities in the speaker's brain, then they are a part of her breaking through the barrier that is also part of her: it is a struggle with herself.

The immediate result of the struggle, of breaking through the barrier, is that the speaker finds herself in a surreal and terrifying landscape in which (beginning with the last line of stanza three) space begins to toll, the Heavens turn into a bell, and the speaker herself becomes simply an Ear. And she feels "wrecked" and "solitary," as if having endured an almost unendurable situation, that internal struggle represented by the funeral and the mourners.

Something gravely important has happened. What it is, is hard to tell. The poem resists being pinned down. But the tolling suggests some sort of life passage, some movement into a new stage of existence. It could be referring to life (or extinction) after death, as some critics (like John B. Pickard in *Emily Dickinson: An Introduction and Interpretation* and George Monteiro in "Traditional Ideas in Dickinson's 'I Felt a Funeral in My Brain'"), who see the funeral as a real funeral argue. But it may be more general than that; it may simply signify any major transition.

It is interesting that in this transition there is the struggle and the terror and then a pause, as the speaker sits wrecked and solitary, having come through some wrenching experience. But the pause is brief. "A plank in Reason" breaks to begin the final stanza, again conjuring up the image of a funeral, as if the speaker is in a coffin being placed on planks before being lowered into the ground. The plank is part of reason, though, and it gives way. This seems to mean that conventional rationality is left behind, and the speaker moves into a different realm of perception, plunging down into unconscious realms where the hero in archetypal narratives goes to discover new truths. The speaker does encounter new worlds and, in the ambiguous last line, finishes knowing.

It's true that the speaker hits the new worlds, which sounds like a rather painful process. And she is dropping down at the end, which could be seen in a negative light. There is perhaps a mix of negativity and positiveness here. But the whole movement of the poem seems to be toward new discoveries. First there is sense breaking through, then there is the encounter with the tolling heavens, and finally there is the discovery of world after world. How many new worlds does the speaker hit? The poem is all about the difficult process of moving on in one's life, and as such, for all the pain it evokes, it creates a positive feeling. It is also about the difficulty of understanding, and perhaps that is why it is itself so difficult to understand.

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