

A Funeral for Creativity

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The use of death as a metaphor for the loss of an idea or use of an object is an old cliché in literary works. Emily Dickinson refashions this metaphor in her poem "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" by creating a funeral setting for the death of the narrator's creativity. The poet brilliantly uses words describing motion and sound, terms with implications of the mind, and a narrator with only the ability to use sound and feeling (as opposed to sight being the primary sense) to describe what is taking place in order to create the funeral setting that doubles as a new description of writer's block.

This idea of writer's block is found within the indicators of ideas slowing down and speeding up within the narrator's mind. The most important of these indicators can be found within the terms having to do with sound and motion. Due to the limited use of senses that the narrator is given by Dickinson, these terms are used to describe what is going on most often in the poem. The first sense of motion that the reader comes across is the word "treading" which is describing the movements of the mourners who have come to the funeral; both this "treading" and its moving "to and fro" are found within the first stanza. The "treading" is constant and going back and forth as indicated by the terms "to" and "fro" and signifies the flow of ideas that are moving about in the narrator's mind. This motion ceases in the first line of the second stanza when "all were seated" and "A Service, like a Drum", then replaces the treading where it continues "beating-beating". The sound is constant; a droning noise that causes thoughts to stop due to its overpowering consistency in the brain. It creates a lack of focus that the narrator is clearly feeling. With the dash at the end of the second stanza, the audience is allowed to wait before being reintroduced to motion in the first line of the third stanza. Although this dash is a classic form of punctuation from Dickinson, it takes on new meaning here by causing the reader to pause just as the narrator has due to the desistance of ideas flowing due to writer's block.

The third stanza is the turning point of the narrator's struggle with writer's block and this begins when the narrator states "and then I heard them lift a Box" and "creak across my Soul." The motion has started up again and is slowly moving once more. The box is a coffin and its weight is heavy, hence the creaking. The coffin and its creaking represent the sluggish pace that the narrator's ideas have reached. In the fourth line of the third stanza, the narrator states that "Space-began to toll"; toll is a term for ringing. The "Space" around the author (in the brain) begins to ring. This is reaffirmed in the first line of the fourth stanza when the word "Bell" is placed at the end of the line. The final stanza is full of motion and there are no terms having to do with sound. The words "broke," "dropped" and "hit" are all used to describe the fast descent that the narrator is experiencing at the end of the poem. The idea of the fall being fast is continued by the term "plunge," a dramatic drop in height. This is the reintroduction of a flow of ideas to the brain at a normal pace, once the block has been removed, ideas come rapidly and the work is finished quickly. This is clear with the words "Finished knowing" being placed in the last line of the poem.

The word "knowing" is also important due to its implication of thought. This word and several others bring the poem back into the realm of the narrator's mind at many points in the poem, which perpetuates the theme of writer's block. The very first line is a solid piece of evidence for the poem being about writer's block, with the funeral being in the "Brain." The term is capitalized which firmly places the whole context of the poem within the mind. Another word in the same stanza concerning the mind is "Sense." The word is a synonym for words such as brains, intelligences, and intellect. "Sense" is seemingly "breaking through" according to the narrator; it seems as if the ideas flowing around in the brain were going to make their way onto the page. The seating of the mourners and the "beating-beating" of a "Drum" which causes all ideas to stop flowing in the mind stop the possibility of "Sense" "breaking through." Due to this, the narrator states that their "mind" is "going numb." The word "mind" at the end of the eighth line brings the concept of the mind and the funeral being within it, back to the reader again.

The most prominent line in the third stanza also involves the mind; it indicates a tool for the mind's thoughts to reach the outside world. In the second line of the stanza, the narrator uses the phrase "Boots of Lead." It stands out to the reader because of its capital letters and heavy feeling. Lead is a medium used to transfer ideas from the brain and onto paper; whether this is with a pencil or lead based ink. The "Boots" are the beginning of the flow of ideas starting to escape the grasp of writer's block. The block is eventually broken when a "Plank in Reason" breaks and the narrator describes a drop where a "World" is hit at "every plunge." The phrase "Plank in Reason" has the same effect as "Boots of Lead"; it once again is large due to the capital letters and is the final shovel needed for the writer's block to be beaten by the narrator.

"Reason" relates to the mind once again so that in the closing, it is once again brought to the reader's attention that this whole ordeal was a matter of the mind. When the "Plank" breaks, it causes the narrator to feel as if they are dropping and hitting a "World at every plunge", this part of the line suggests that ideas are being felt at each plunge from the broken "Plank in Reason". The plank is the floor of the mind where ideas can no flow through and onto the page due to the breaking of a plank. The word "World" can easily be replaced by "word"; with this change, a word would be hit at every plunge, a word being written with each plunge of the hand to the paper. This is made possible by the breaking of the floor that left the narrator stranded alone in the fourth stanza where it is stated that the narrator and "Silence, some strange Race" are "Wrecked, solitary." The narrator is stranded with silence; they are a strange race (which in this interpretation is a group of people with similar features). They are grouped together as a race because they are both wrecked and alone. This is the narrator without the ability to interpret their ideas onto paper and the feeling that comes without the ability to interpret their ideas onto paper and the feeling that comes with the death of an idea.

This idea of the implication of the brain is finalized by the term "knowing" in the final line. The whole line, "and Finished knowing-then" suggests that the narrator has finished the work that had been interrupted by this brief funeral in their brain, the "Worlds" hit at every "plunge" have helped to chip away at the writer's block that was holding the creator back. This block also had a hold on the narrator's ability to describe what was taking place in their mind.

The narrator of the poem does not describe anything by the way that it appears. There are no colors, darkness, or lightness described. Everything is through sound and feeling alone. This causes the imagination to work harder to create the images for the reader; this falls right into place with the idea of the poem being about writer's block. The reader is in the same situation as the narrator. Here, Dickinson causes the audience to forgo beautiful imagery often associated with poetry and forces them to experience this "Funeral" through feeling and sound alone. This allows the audience to feel the loneliness that the narrator describes in the fourth stanza. The silence is literally felt because of the lack of imagery to distract from it. The narrator describes it as being "Wrecked" which is emphasized with the capital "W." The whole work is "Wrecked" by the loss of the flow of creativity; a mental block has caused this to be true. Along with the reader's ability to feel "Wrecked" with the narrator, the use of limited senses is a metaphor for the impairment of the narrator.

Using only two senses to describe the goings on of the funeral procession is a brilliant move on Dickinson's part. This limitation goes hand in hand with the death of something. Parts of the dying entity (in this case, an idea) slowly diminish; here it is a narrator stripped of sight and smell. Sound becomes something needed to understand everything going on around the narrator and feeling keeps the narrator connected to the depressing thought of their idea dying within their mind.

Writer's block causes a funeral to begin in the narrator's mind before the idea truly dies and it is eventually set free again and gives the narrator the ability to finish the work and finish "knowing." Though the idea of the subject being writer's block differs from the usual morbidity associated with Dickinson, it proves true due to the use of motion and sound used by an impaired narrator and the constant referral to the brain and intellect.