



“Death” in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Death is the definitive “in-itself” which cannot be experienced and it is beyond communication. Emily Dickinson was surely acquainted with sacredness of life in the presence of death. Death, the ultimate experience, is for Dickinson the supreme touchstone. Death is personified in many guises in her poems, Dickinson’s imagery and effective use of the basic elements of poetry has produced a poem with several different meanings. Her conception of death and how she portrays it in “Because” exposes the reader’s mind to a variety of ideas about death. Surely, after reading the poem, the reader could never view death in a singular way again. Poetry at its best leaves the reader with new ideas about the topic at hand. As a result of the writing of the poets of the nineteenth century, readers are given many different ways of regarding various aspects of life in this paper We have discussed about her Perspectives on Death.

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1. Introduction

Emily Dickinson was a great American Poet who lived in the 17th century. She wrote over eighteen hundred poems but only about a dozen were published throughout her lifetime which was through 1830-1886. She spent much of her life behind locked doors, refusing visitors and producing poem after poem in her room. She was, in fact, primarily a poet of the end of life, whose principal subject was death. At times she played even with death as in "I Heard a Fly buzz-when I died-," where, characteristically the homey (fly) jostles with the cosmic (death) giving the subject a humorous, albeit grotesque, dimension; or in her much anthologized "Because I could not stop for Death-," where she treats death as a lover who comes to court her. Death anxiety seems to be inversely correlated to life satisfaction and the perception of achievement in that life. Any experience of the moment after death is evidently unverifiable by an observer of that death. Therefore, death is the most solitary and private event of all human experience, and no scientific claim of the subjective experience of death is possible.

2. “Death” in her poems

Emily Dickinson's four-line poem "A Death blow is a Life blow to Some" (816), whose concise paradox puzzles some readers. The "death blow" in this poem is not death literally. The first two lines present the basic observation. The second two lines look back at what would have gone on with a living death. Their suffering, therefore, becomes a matter of great good luck. Good and evil are held in balance. A belief in eternal life affects much of Dickinson's

death poetry. In "A Death blow is a life blow to some," Dickinson uses paradox to assert that physical death is the beginning, not the end. She did not come alive as a poet until the relationship had died. If she had lived (the relationship had not died), she would have died to poetry. But the relationship did die, and when it died, Vitality (her life as a poet) began.

“A Death blow is a Life blow to Some
Who till they died, did not alive become —
Who had they lived, had died but when
They died, Vitality begun. “(816)

Dickinson’s poems indicates that the best of her poems revolve round the theme of death. Death is a free agent; it is evergreen and all powerful. All the man-made creations perish with the passage of time. The Dust of Death scorns the Spirit’s ‘Trust’ in immortality by saying that it will soon be under the ground. But the Spirit, by taking off his ‘Overcoat of Clay,’ shows that the buried part of him is only his overcoat. These lines hint at many deceptions happening between the realities of death, nature and the human psyche. From the perspective of Death, which seems to represent human consciousness, the end of a life should have ultimate finality.

“Death is a Dialogue between
The Spirit and the Dust.
"Dissolve" says Death -- The Spirit "Sir
I have another Trust-- "

Death doubts it -- Argues from the Ground--
The Spirit turns away
Just laying off for evidence
An Overcoat of Clay”. (976)

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This insight from a simpler time in America is more than a quaint remnant of a pastoral sensibility of the past. In this poem is one of Dickinson's anticipatory views of eternity. Death is presented as an objective fact to be explored, described and assessed. It is an enquiry in heading towards any definite knowledge of the meaning of death. Emily Dickinson expresses joyful assurance of immortality by dramatizing her regret about a return to life after she — or an imagined speaker — almost died and received many vivid and thrilling hints about a world beyond death. Her real joy lay in her brief contact with eternity. The second stanza reveals her awe of the realm which she skirted, the adventure being represented in metaphors of sailing, sea, and shore.

“Just lost, when I was saved!
Just felt the world go by!
Just girt me for the onset with Eternity
When breath blew back
And on the other side
I heard recede the disappointed tide!

Therefore, as One returned, I feel
Odd secrets of the line to tell!
Some Sailor, skirting foreign shores
Some pale Reporter, from the awful doors
Before the Seal...!

Next time, to tarry
While the Ages steal
Slow tramp the Centuries
And the Cycles wheel!”(160)

This poem, written in several sections, describes the justified dead awaiting resurrection. After Emily Dickinson's sister-in-law, Susan, criticized the second stanza of its first version, Emily Dickinson wrote a different stanza and, later, yet another variant for it. Both 1859 and 1861 versions are printed by Johnson, but Franklin prints only the 1861 version. In this version, The dead in this poem are sleeping in their graves wrapped in their shrouds of Satin, awaiting the second coming of Christ and their resurrection to heaven. in the third stanza years travel in crescents or arcs over the horizon, like a diagram of the constellations. The various planets, or worlds, follow suit. Even the sky is shown in this fashion through the word choice of “firmament,” which is the vault or expanse of the heavens; the sky overhead. The last stanza portrays the "grand" passage of time and the movements of the universe ("world" and "firmaments.")

“Safe in their alabaster chambers,
Untouched by morning and untouched by noon,
Sleep the meek members of the resurrection,
Rafters of satin, and roof of stone.

Light laughs the breeze in her castle of sunshine;
Babbles the bee in a stolid ear;
Pipe the sweet birds in ignorant cadences— ,
Ah, what sagacity perished here!

Grand go the years in the crescent above them;
Worlds scoop their arcs, and firmaments row,
Diadems drop and Doges surrender,
Soundless as dots on a disk of snow.”(216)

The concept of death as something to be embraced finds best expression in poem no. 712, where Dickinson actually personifies Death as a gentleman who kindly stops to collect the speaker in his carriage. Emily Dickinson uses tender diction, and repetition to emphasize the theme of death being a peaceful experience. In the poem, the reader is continuously bombarded with the peaceful

vocabulary. Words such as “kindly,” “slowly,” “civility,” “setting sun” and others are used to make the tone quite mild and smooth. These words provide encouragement to the previously established image in the readers mind. In the second stanza, the reader learns that the journey was leisurely and that the speaker did not mind the interruption from her tasks because Death was courteous.

“Because I could not stop for Death-
He kindly stopped for me-
The Carriage held but just Ourselves-
And Immortality.

We slowly drove - He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility-

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess - in the Ring-
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain-
We passed the Setting Sun-

Or rather - He passed Us-
The Dews drew quivering and Chill-
For only Gossamer, my Gown-
My Tippet - only Tulle —...“(712)

Emily Dickinson describes experience as an experiment in consciousness. Using scientific terms, Dickinson describes Experience, that interval we traverse, as an experiment to test the adequacy of our mind's properties. But unlike science, the results we find may be incommunicable. Science is a community activity – findings must be communicated and accepted to count as discoveries. The findings of an isolated consciousness may be incommunicable, because they result from an adventure purely within ourselves, attended by the “single Hound” of our own identities. For easier understanding of the poem ‘experience’ and ‘between’ should be reversed mentally on line 6, and ‘other’ supplied after ‘none’ at the end of line 11.

“This Consciousness that is aware
Of Neighbors and the Sun
Will be the one aware of Death
And that itself alone

Is traversing the interval
Experience between
And most profound experiment
Appointed unto Men-

How adequate unto itself
Its properties shall be
Itself unto itself and none
Shall make discovery.

Adventure most unto itself
The Soul condemned to be-
Attended by a single Hound
Its own identity.”(822)

3. Conclusion

Despite the accolades of the poets and the probing of biographers, Emily Dickinson remains obscured by many of the same myths and legends that grew up around her while she was alive. Dickinson herself did little to help future investigators separate fact from fiction. Having asked that her personal papers be destroyed after her death, she left only a few traces to mark the path of her

external life. Emily Dickinson's view of death is quite different that of the modern world. The modern world fears death and describes it as dark, scary, and horrible. However, Emily describes it as something that she welcomes and is not to be feared. She knows that once a person dies, he or she begins another life. The Living do not know if anything exists after Death and so, to many, Death is viewed as the boundary of existence, and as an endpoint. In the poems "I've Seen a Dying Eye," "Parting," and "Because I could not stop for Death," Emily Dickinson analyzes Death and attempts to portray it as a stage of existence that acts as a bridge between life and eternity. Dickinson is able to probe the mystery of human death, but manages to remove the fearsomeness from it. By making Death just a single phase for the immortal soul, she is able to view Death and Immortality from a unique perspective, and even with a certain appreciation.

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