

Reflection on Death in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson

Dr. Rashed Ahmad Daghamin

Assistant Professor
Department of English
Faculty of Arts
Ha'il University
Ha'il, K.S.A

Abstract

Death is Emily Dickinson's main theme which left its impact on all her thinking and gave its tint to the majority of her poems. For Dickinson, death is the supreme touchstone for life. She lived incessantly in his presence. She was always conscious of its nearness and inevitability. It becomes, in the words of Henry Wells, her closest and dearest friend (94). Investigation of the theme of death gave her a panoramic view of vital issues such as religion, God, nature, love and immortality. In the poems discussed in this study, death presumes different personalities taken from life surrounding Dickinson. The main features of death which are implied in her death poems reveal the very contradictions, absurdities and complexities of our life. Death may be a refined and respected coachman, a cruel victimizer and a personal enemy, a leveler, an elusive lover, a suitor, an assassin, and a democrat. The poet uses these concrete images to portray death, which is an abstract force, in an attempt to come to terms with it as well as to fathom it. She gave death human and nonhuman characteristics as part of her inexorable quest to comprehend it. In her death poems, she did not offer a final view of death because death for her remains the great unknown mystery. This paper, however, is an attempt to meticulously examine and critically analyze these images of death in selected poems of Emily Dickinson in order to gain a better understanding of her perception of death as well as to understand the western philosophy of death.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson, Poetry, Death, Images, Personal Enemy, Leveler, Courtier, Determiner, Supple Suitor, Immortality.

Justification

Death triggers our fear and curiosity because it advances suddenly without any preparations and expectations. Death is a mysterious and sheer truth which nobody likes; it is a naturally occurring phenomenon of the human life cycle. Death seems callous to most of us although we all know that it is unavoidable, predetermined and inevitable. We fear death as it strips us from our beloved ones; our parents, friends, siblings, and so on. Death has been continually questioned not only in literature, but also in philosophy and religions. Frank and Judith McMahon stated that:

We may have seen death, read about death, or even come close to death, but we may have never died. Thus we face the ultimate unknown, and the fact that our society refuses to admit that death is a natural process. (413)

People have different standpoints concerning death; some perceive it as a savior who redeems us from the pangs of life, trials and travails, pains and suffering. However, some look upon it as a bad omen which snatches away from us our close relatives and intimate friends.

The topic of death has long been portrayed in literary works and religious Holy Scriptures. Death has been reflected on not only in novels, short stories, and drams, but it was also intensively discussed in poetry. Poets use few words to express their views regarding death, while readers use their personal perceptions and experiences to appreciate and understand it. Emily Dickinson's unique treatment of death stands remarkable in the history of American poetry and literature. Despite her relatively short span of life, Dickinson is widely considered as one of the best known poets who shed a great deal of light on the theme of death. George and Barbara Perkins write that Dickinson is "incomparable because her originality sets her apart from all others, but her poems shed the unmistakable light of greatness" (972).

Introduction

Emily Dickinson was one of the most influential and eminent American intellectuals of the nineteenth century. She was born in 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts and died in 1886 in her house. Following her bereavement, her sister, Lavinia, discovered her collection of 1800 poems and published them in 1890. In the modern poetic world of America, Emily Dickinson plays a significant and multifarious role that makes her different from contemporary American poets. Emily's original and powerful mind as well as her mystic imagery made her an icon in the realm of American literature. She wrote poetry of great power questioning the nature of death, immortality, trinity, religion, nature, love, God and so on. However, Dickinson is renowned for her morbid sensibilities and her preoccupation with the theme of death.

Following the declaration of independence of the United States of America from Great Britain in 1776, the age of Dickinson had become a complex one, burdened by conflicts between tradition and progress. Dickinson's poetry best defines the distinctive qualities of American experience; an emanation of liberal independent soul against the religious restrictions and the dogmatic thought of religious dependence of Calvinism, her work was much like a revolt against tradition and some religious dogmas. Her poetry was different from any other models of her era. She kept herself in isolation from society and created a small mysterious world through her poems. She just had a little contact with other poets and writers of her age. Nonetheless, her poetry was influenced by the poems of Emerson and Hawthorne.

Poetry for Dickinson had special definition. She wrote to Thomas W Higginson that:

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way? (Johnson, 472-474)

She wrote her poems without any limitations, and nothing could curb her. The most frequent themes in her poems are the teaching of Jesus Christ, nature, love, God, Religious pain, identity, immortality, separation, the inner world of a person, pain and suffering, and obviously Death. As a young woman and on spiritual values, Dickinson inculcated her religious beliefs, rather her rejection of established religion, her deep love of God, and hope in the after-life.

While recognizing that many poets have made death central in much of their poetry, Thomas H. Johnson argues that "Emily Dickinson did so in hers to an unusual degree" (203). Death is a prevalent theme in Emily Dickinson's poetry. Her death poems are scattered through the two volumes which contain her poetic works. It has been said that at least a quarter of all her works deals chiefly with this theme (Henry W, 94). Critics of Emily Dickinson have observed the prominence of the theme of death in her poetry. George Frisbie Whicher, for example, states that Dickinson "recurred to it more frequently than to any other" (298). Richard Chase declares that "in the large majority of Emily Dickinson's poems, from the least impressive to the most, there are intimations of Death" (230). According to Charles R. Anderson, death and immortality were "the two profoundest themes that challenged her poetic powers" (284). A thorough analysis of Dickinson's poetry dealing with death reveals that there are four major categories: poems dealing with death and immortality, poems dealing with the physical aspects of death, poems that personify death, and elegiac poems. However, as far as this study is concerned, I am going to take into consideration the poems which personify death.

Dickinson was preoccupied with the theme of death throughout her life. As her niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi noted, Emily Dickinson was "eternally preoccupied with death" (83). Her letters also contain many references to death, confirming the fact that her preoccupation with the theme of death was a lifelong. In a letter to T. W. Higginson dated 1863, she referred to her early awareness of death: "Perhaps Death gave me awe for friends-striking sharp and early, for I held them since in a brittle love, of more alarm, than peace" (423). Her attachment to death continued all over her life. One month before her death she wrote "There is no Trumpet like the Tomb" (Johnson 904). This preoccupation with death may be attributed to her involvement with religious and spiritual values such as God, Time, Resurrection, Immortality, Infinity, etc. Emily Dickinson's treatment of the theme of death in her poetry may be regarded as one of her outstanding contributions to American literature. She wrote more than five hundred poems on the subject of death. These poems offer a sincere attempt to understand the true nature of death. Death in these poems takes various contradictory images and personalities such as a coachman, a cunning courtier, a king, a democrat, a lover, a murderer, a wild beast, a frost, a brutal killer, etc.

Discussion

In many of her poems, Dickinson personifies death in various characters. For example, in “The only Ghost I ever saw”, she personifies Death as:

The only Ghost I ever saw
Was dressed in Mechlin – so –
He wore no sandal on his foot –
And stepped like flakes of snow –

Death here is portrayed as a barefooted ghost whose gaits are soundless albeit rapid. Death is also personified as an elusive and crafty lover who makes an interview with the poet for a while. Death in this poem is an intangible lover and a quiet intelligent courter whose main features are shyness, agility, cleverness and subtlety.

The concept of death as something to be embraced finds best expression in “Because I could not stop for Death”, where Dickinson actually personifies Death as a gentleman who kindly stops to collect the speaker in his carriage. Here, however, dying has largely preceded the action, and its physical aspects are only hinted at.

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

James Reeves comments on this poem:

This is one of the best of those poems in which Emily triumphs over death by accepting calmly, civilly, as befits a gentlewoman receiving the attentions of a gentleman. It is an essay in death-in-life. (20)

Jane Crosthwaite suggests that the poem is not a projection of the poet’s death but a record of her encounter with the fact or inevitability of death and the consequences of that discovery on the life remaining (90). This poem has elements of all of Emily’s diverse mystical preoccupations with death and immortality. It presents death as an objective fact. It reveals the morbidly fanciful attempt to think of her in the present as also, into that future objective condition. Death is here also experienced subjectively as deprivation and less possibility and symbolized by objective death, the grave.

In some poems, Emily Dickinson portrays death as a cruel personal enemy and as a brutal killer who attacks his victims without any mercy or permission. In “A Clock stopped”, the poet shows how her subject suffers in the dying moments. Death in this poem is a powerful enemy which attacks the debilitated victim and brings her severe pain.

A clock stopped -- not the mantel's

Geneva's farthest skill
Can't put the puppet bowing
That just now dangled still.
An awe came on the trinket!
The figures hunched with pain,
Then quivered out of decimals
Into degreeless noon.

The dead clock is compared to heart that has stopped beating. The poet uses the clock and its second hand to represent the heart. To use the dead clock representing the heart enables the readers to perceive a clear picture of when the heart has stopped beating and death has occurred. This death image is repulsive because it gradually tortures the vanishing person from a low to higher degrees of pain. The poem tries to determine the philosophical and religious meanings in death. In this poem, life is compared with a timepiece. Again, Dickinson depicts the dying moment of a person by using the metaphor of a clock as a heart of a human which is stopped. Death is considered as a powerful enemy which causes someone to die, by its attack on them; and this death causes severe pain for others. The hands of the clock stop moving any more just like the heart which stops beating. In this moment, death occurs and even a skillful clock maker cannot make the clock to work again - just as the dead person whom the doctor tries to revive, but it cannot be done.

Both the doctor and the clock maker attempt revival but in vain. The moment which Dickinson visualizes in “A Clock Stopped” is the last moment of life of a human that no one can pause or postpone.

In “What care the Dead, for Chanticleer”, Dickinson portrays death as a leveler i.e. there is no exception for death. She uses death as God’s vehicle to bring all human lives to heaven.

What care the Dead, for Chanticleer—
What care the Dead for Day?
'Tis late your Sunrise vex their face—
And Purple Ribaldry—of Morning
Pour as blank on them
As on the Tier of Wall
The Mason builded, yesterday,
And equally as cool—

The poem implies that death can occur at any moment, today or tomorrow, summer or winter, day or night. Dickinson here portrays death as a determiner which sets everything in the same level and position. Death is a determiner to make every human being equal no matter who they are. Death is the final destination for them all. The fear of death makes people realize more and more about their lives’ duties and obligations.

In “Color- Caste-Denomination” and “Not any higher stands the Grave”, Dickinson personifies death as a democrat, the great equalizer or the force which claims without discrimination men and women. In “Color- Caste-Denomination”, death discards all differences which exist among the living:

Color-Caste-Denomination-
These-are Time’s Affair-
Death’s diviner Classifying
Does not know they are
As in sleep-All Hue forgotten-
Tenets-put behind-
Death’s large-Democratic fingers
Rub away the Brand-
People, whether they are white, black, or blonde are all subject to death:
If Circassian-He is careless-
If He put away
Chrysalis of Blonde-or Umber-
Equal Butterfly-

The image of death as a democrat is found again in “Not any higher stands the Grave”. All people, young and old, poor and rich will inevitably face death.

Not any higher stands the Grave
For Heroes than for Men-
Not any nearer for the Child
Than numb Three scores and Ten-
This latest Leisure equal lulls
The Beggar and his Queen
Propitiate this Democrat
A Summer’s Afternoon.

In “Death is the Supple Suitor”, death assumes the character of a skillful lover wooing a lady:

Death is the supple Suitor
That wins at last-
He moves slowly with craft aiming not to offend by being too bold:
It is a stealthy Wooing
Conducted first
By pallid innuendoes

And dim approach

Achieving success in his wooing, he comes with bugles and a coach and:
It bears away in triumph
To Troth unknown.

Some of Dickinson's poems present death as a reward in the hereafter for the deceased people because they exist in such a peaceful place in the afterlife while some poems show death as a punishment because dying people experience boredom or damnation after death. There is a spiritual world in the life after death which is another level of existence after death where the dead reside together to wait for the judgment day.

In "All but Death can be Adjusted", the poet portrays death as predetermined and fixed end, something which is fixed for all human beings. Death is the fate that nobody can change except God. In "They dropped like Flakes"; death is portrayed in a positive way. It is viewed as ordinary matter but still it is under the control of God.

THEY dropped like flakes, they dropped like stars,

Like petals from a rose,

When suddenly across the June

A wind with fingers goes.

They perished in the seamless grass,—

No eye could find the place;

But God on his repealless list

Can summon every face.

The poem explains a character of death that changes like the flakes, the stars, and the petals. All these natural material are presented to signify the delicate and fragile lives of human beings. The poet uses these natural elements to emphasize that death is naturally common and an acceptable matter. The grass and the daisy are used as similes of death. The employment of these two plants can help to enable the readers to view death positively because their color invites a peaceful feeling while their appearances make the matter of death ordinary and beautiful. These plants are the two natural sources that make the images of death in this poem common and understandable.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, death has its own claims on Emily Dickinson. Wendy Martin believes that, "Death was the problem for Dickinson, a riddle she could never solve, but which she always explored" (5). Death that Dickinson almost faced everyday is a central problem of her life; she saw it all around herself in her family, friends, love, life and convictions. The theme of death in the poetry of Dickinson has attracted a large critical attention. Death is not only one of her most frequent themes, but also one that preoccupies her lifelong attention. Dickinson was preoccupied with death throughout her life; a reason for such an immense preoccupation is her involvement with religious and spiritual values, such as time, god, eternity, immortality, nature, and love.

The following death poems have been selected and briefly and critically analyzed to examine and reach out a thorough understanding of the multiple images of death which the poet personifies in the selected poems:

- 1-The only Ghost I ever saw
- 2-Because I could not stop for Death
- 3-A Clock stopped
- 4-What care the Dead, for Chanticleer
- 5-Color- Caste-Denomination
- 6-Not any higher stands the Grave
- 7-Not any higher stands the Grave
- 8-All but Death can be adjusted
- 9-death is the Supple Suitor
- 10-They dropped like Flakes

The located images which the poet personifies in the aforementioned poems include: the image of death as a supple suitor, an elusive lover, a decent gentleman, a cruel personal enemy and a brutal killer, a democrat and determiner, a leveler, death as a reward or punishment on the day of judgment, and finally death as a predetermined and fixed end. In the end, it can be concluded that Dickinson's perception and approach towards death is inconstant and fluctuating. By critically analyzing the death poems of Dickinson, one feels that the feelings of the poet concerning death is varied and fluctuating; sometimes the poet is overwhelmed with sorrow, grief, pain, suffering, and depression, however, in some parts of her poems one feels that a sense of joy and hope overwhelms her.

Works Cited

- Ahmadi, Zahra and Zohreh Tayari. "Thematic Study of Death in Emily Dickinson's Selected Poems." *Language in India*. 14.3 (2014):130-136. Print.
- Ali, Nabil Mohammed. "Images of Death in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson." Baghdad University.
- Anderson, Charles R. *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1960.
- Antony, Omana and Suchi Dewan. "Emily Dickinson's Perspectives on Death: An Interpretation of Dickinson's Poems on Death." *Lapis Lazuli-An International Literary Journal (LLILJ)*. 2.2 (2012): 1-12. Print.
- Bianchi, Martha Dickinson. *The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1924.
- Chase, Richard , *Emily Dickinson*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press,1973.
- Crosthwaite, Jane. *American Literary Scholarship: An Annual*. Ed. James Wooderss. Duke University Press: Durham, North Carolina, 1983.
- Ford, Thomas W., *Heaven Beguiles the Tired: Death in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson*. Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1966.
- Johnson, Thomas H. and Ward, Theodora (eds.) *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*.3 Vols. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University.
- Johnson, Thomas, *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretative Biography*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1955.
- Khaangku, Piyakun. "The Image of Death in Emily Dickinson's Poetry." *M.A. Thesis*. Bangkok: Graduate School. Srinakharinwirot University, 2011.
- Martin, Windy. *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson, A Riddle at Last Death and Immortality*, Cambridge University Press. 2002.
- McMahon, Frank, and Judith McMahon. *Psychology: The Hybrid Science*. 5th ed. Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1986. Print.
- Perkins, George, and Barbara Perkins. *The American Tradition in Literature*. Boston: McGraw, 1999. Print.
- Ravees, James. *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Richard Sewall. Prentice: Hall, 1963.
- Reeves, James. *Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson* .London: Heinemann, 1976.
- Tate, Allen. *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936.
- Well, Henry W. *Introduction to Emily Dickinson*. New York: Hendricks House, 1959.
- Whicher,George Frisbie. *This was a Poet*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938.
- Winters, Yvor. "Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Judgment", in *Defense of Reason*,3ed.(Denver: Alan Swallow,1947.