

THE THEME OF DEATH IN THE POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON

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Paper Received On: 21 OCT 2021

Peer Reviewed On: 31 OCT 2021

Published On: 1 NOV 2021

Abstract

The modest selection of Dickinson's poems reveals that death is the predominating theme in her poetry and the approach she adopted while dealing with this painful subject is quite idiosyncratic. She was not prepared to accept the old conventional ideas about it. She wanted to know what happens after we die and this is why the subject of resurrection always intrigued her. Though she had heard about this subject from the pulpit, yet she was not ready to put her complete faith in the notion of immortality. Many poems of Emily Dickinson express her doubt about immortality. On the other hand we do have the poems in which she describes her deep faith in immortality. In fact doubt and faith go together in the poetry of Dickinson. We find the lines in her poetry which depict immortality as a "House of Supposition" and heaven as an "uncertain certainty". She preferred the finite life on earth to the infinite life in heaven. But a time came when she started regarding death as 'the gateway to immortality' and she understood the fact that death liberates the human soul. The most important feature of the psyche of Emily Dickinson was that she did not regard death as a bugbear to frighten the humans, but for her it was the final end of the sad existence on this earth and she regarded tomb as a place of permanent rest.

Key words: *Idiosyncratic, incognito, immortality, recluse, preoccupation, morbid, inevitability.*



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The pantheon of great American poets seems to be wanting without the name of Emily Dickinson (1830-1886). She occupies a peculiarly hallowed place in the synagogue of immortal American poets. No other poet in American history has become so popular in death after having been so incognito in life. Roger Lundin has observed:

The woman who was never comfortable in society and who spent the last half of her life within the confines of one relatively secluded house, does not at first appear to be a subject of worth connecting to other things occurring throughout the American nineteenth century in which she lived. (viii)

Howsoever circuitous and complex we may find the poetry of Emily Dickinson, there is no denying the fact that she had impressed the critics as well as the scholars with the kind of potential she possessed as a poet. She was born on

December 10, 1830 in a conservative family of Amherst, Massachusetts. As a small girl, she was sent to attend the South Hadley Female Seminary. The atmosphere of seminary did not suit her temperament and she decided to stand against the hackneyed practices and oppose the academic severity of the institute. She was a girl interested in freedom, not in the absurd discipline prescribed in the seminary. The result was that she returned her home to be lost in her studies. She devoted herself to the avocation of writing poetry. As a young girl, Dickinson was beautiful as well as intelligent. At that time nobody could even think that this young, affectionate and sociable girl would lead the life of a recluse in the time to come. Dickinson's father wanted her to pay regular visits to the church and to read the Bible and other religious books. But the daughter "to the disappointment and dismay of her father was not interested in the religious activities. She was too open-minded to subject herself to what ordinary people of the day were doing." (Gelpi 37)

Dickinson often referred as the 'Myth of Amherst' baffles her biographers as they find inexplicable contradictions in her poetry. Dickinson's life, like that of Mir and Momin in Urdu and Kabir Das in Hindi, has been a topic of great curiosity and interest among the scholars. A large number of poems composed by Dickinson clearly illustrate her individualism as a poet, the individualism which established Walt Whitman as one of the greatest poets in American literature. The poetry of Dickinson is extremely invigorating as it presents before us the outcries of a soul which was pure and sacred. Even today, the poetry of Dickinson needs study and interpretation because she has written in a very distinctive manner. It is realistic for a sober reader. It is also thoughtful like the poetry of W. B. Yeats and this fact is evident from the following lines:

My wheel is in the dark!
I cannot see a spoke
Yet know its dripping feet
Go round and round. (CP 10)

Even a modest selection of Dickinson's poems tells us the fact that death is the predominating theme in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. The theme of death, including her own death, occurs throughout her poems and letters. The Indian saints like Kabir Das were established poets of their time mainly because they always remained conscious of the inevitability of death. After all the only reality of life is death and one who writes about this inevitable hour i.e. death establishes one's position as a poet. Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* is a well known poem on death and this is the poem which has immortalized him in the annals of English literature. Dickinson too has become an immortal poet owing to her original thoughts about the so-called dread of death. These thoughts certainly make her superior to many American and English poets. Whitman, Longfellow, Whittier and Bryant could not write about death like Dickinson did.

Death is the principal subject Dickinson deals with in more than half of her nearly two thousand poems. The study of these poems clearly reveals her idiosyncratic approach to death. We find her death-haunted as many of her poems concentrate on the theme of death. There have been the poets in 19th century like John Keats and Walt Whitman who kept their prime focus on death and immortality, but Thomas H. Johnson points out that “Emily Dickinson did so in hers to an unusual degree” (203). About the prevalent theme of death in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, Richard Chase says that “in the large majority of Emily Dickinson’s poems, from the least impressive to the most, there are intimations of Death” (230). Charles R. Anderson declares that death and immortality are “the two profoundest themes that challenged her poetic powers” (284).

Now the question arises: Why was she so preoccupied with death in her poetry? Some of the critics find this preoccupation morbid, but her mindset was not an unusual one for a time and place where people died of accident or illness more readily and the town she lived in had a very high mortality rate. Nor was it an unusual thing for a young sensitive woman who lived next door to the town cemetery for fifteen years of her youth. So she had an early acquaintance with death. She had witnessed it from the Pleasant Street where she saw the funeral processions of Amherst. Her friend Sophia Holland’s death left her melancholic. She saw the death of old diseased parents. She also witnessed the death of her relatives and friends including Samuel Bowles, Benjamin Newton and Charles Wadsworth. Her nephew Gilbert’s death caused a great grief from which she could not recover for a long time. These frequent deaths made a strong impact on her mind and she developed an idiosyncratic and distinctive approach to death. This pre-occupation with death was also the result of her anguish over the lack of romantic love and her withdrawal from the society.

In some of her poems we notice her fear of death. It was the time when she was attached with so many persons. Attachment is the greatest weakness of human creature. The fear of losing the one we are attached to makes us horrified with death. The same happened with Emily Dickinson too. She was afraid of death as she did not want to lose her dear ones. The poems written on death during this phase are not free from the sense of suffering. In fact suffering plays a significant role in her poems about death and immortality, just as death often appears in the poems which concentrate on suffering. Dickinson did not have firm faith in immortality especially in her early poems. She was doubtful about immortality as she was too independent to accept the opinion of others on this subject. She regarded immortality as a “House of Supposition” and called heaven as an “uncertain certainty”. She preferred the finite life to the life in heaven:

Their	Height	in	Heaven	comforts	not	—
Their	Glory	—	naught	to	me	—
'Twas	best	imperfect	—	as	it	was —
I'm finite	— I can't see —					

The	House	of	Supposition	—
The	Glimmering		Frontier	that
Skirts	the	Acres	of	Perhaps
To	Me	—	shows	insecure
...				
Better	than	larger	values	—
That	show	however	true	—
This	timid	life	of	Evidence

Keeps pleading — "I don't know." (CP 342-343)

Dickinson's other poem beginning with the line "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died" attempts to describe the transition between life and death. It conveys the uncertainty of afterlife or immortality. The poem has been told from the perspective of the speaker who is already dead and it focuses on the actual moment of death. This is why the poem is paradoxical and mysterious as no one has yet been able to convey what he or she feels like at the time of actual death. The speaker's final moments are interrupted by a buzzing fly and there we notice the absence of "the king" undermining any certainties of the afterlife. The annoying buzzing sound of the fly prevents the speaker from attaining the spiritual contemplation which seems more fitting to this occasion. So it can be said that the speaker is distracted by a fly in the most spiritually significant moment in life. The fly can be described as 'a perfect symbol for spiritual doubt':

I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
 The Stillness in the Room
 Was like the Stillness in the Air -
 Between the Heaves of Storm -

...

With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -
 Between the light - and me -
 And then the Windows failed - and then
 I could not see to see – (CP 481)

The subject which had always intrigued Dickinson was resurrection as she wanted to know what happens after we die. She had heard about this subject from the pulpit but she was not ready to put her complete faith in the notion of immortality. Many critics find Dickinson either too stubborn in her approach to religion or too fastidious to find the things to her satisfaction. The ministers of her age had complete faith in the existence of God. They believed in the process of salvation and eternity but Dickinson was not ready to accept what the ministers and their followers held. Why? The reply has been anticipated by Paul J. Ferlazzo:

Her attitude was not the result of her feeling intellectually superior to them; it was rather a matter of her perceiving the limitations of the human mind and of how it works to seek comforting and sometimes illusory assurances. Knowing these characteristics made her, in fact, humble; and, while it prevented her from self-confidently affirming her faith; it also preserved her from complete despair. (32)

Those who are familiar with the problems of an inquisitive mind are sympathetic with Dickinson. They do not find fault in her but make an attempt to understand the limitations of her approach. Ferlazzo has observed:

If she did not know the truth, she did not deny that the truth might exist; and, as a result, it is possible to find in her poetry almost every aspect of doubt and belief about religious subjects. While she desired salvation and immortality, she denied the orthodox view of paradise; she wondered, in fact, if merely oblivion lay beyond the grave. Although she believed in a Creator, she sometimes doubted His benevolence. Sometimes in jest, sometimes in mockery, she denies the Bible, sin and orthodox piety. (32)

In one of her poems, Dickinson calls God “burglar, banker, father”. When the poet sees Almighty in relation to man, she does not approve of many of His actions. She makes fun of God’s desire that Abraham must give the sacrifice of the brother Isaac:

Abraham	to	kill	him
Was	distinctly		told—
Isaac	was	an	Urchin—
Abraham	was		old—
Not	a		hesitation—
Abraham			complied—
Flattered	by		Obeisance
Tyranny demurred—	(CP 571)		

But a time came when she became mature enough to shake off the fear of death. She started regarding death as ‘the gateway to immortality’ and she understood the fact that death liberates the human soul. The most important feature of the psyche of Emily Dickinson was that she did not regard death as a bugbear to terrify human beings but for her it was the final end of the sad existence on this earth and she regarded tomb as a place of permanent rest. In her opinion human life remains safe in tombs as here the temper of nature does not react nor does vengeance exhibit its drama. In this reference, she writes:

'Tis	not	that	Dying	hurts	us	so	—
'Tis	Living	—	hurts	us	more		—
But	Dying	—	is	a	different	way	—
A Kind behind the Door — (CP 158)							

always find God to protect them from all dangers. She was only sixteen when she confided to her friend Abiah Root: “I have perfect confidence in God and His promises and yet I know not why I feel that the world holds a predominant place in my affections.” (Gupta 59)

Her doubts are in fact the doubts of an inquisitive mind and these doubts ultimately result in her faith in immortality. The poems she has written on immortality tell us about the struggle she had to make during her journey from doubts to an ultimate unshaken faith in immortality. Dickinson was the poet who made an endeavour to test immortality in her own life time. She did not want to wait for the state after death. Her faith in immortality got confirmed through the activities of Nature. She watched sunrise and sunset, the blooming of flowers after they faded away in the season of winter, the sprouting of seeds in the ground and various other changes in Nature. All these activities of Nature she found equal to the concept of birth and death and then rebirth. In one of her letters, Dickinson wrote, “Death is perhaps an intimate friend, not an enemy”. (qtd. in Agrawal 54)

In the poem beginning with ‘Because I could not stop for Death’ the speaker’s close encounter with death and immortality has been described with the beautiful use of personification to present death and immortality as real characters. Death comes in the form of a gentleman suitor and picks up the speaker to take her on a ride in a horse drawn carriage. The speaker with Death moves along and the speaker seems quite at ease in the company of the gentleman. They pass through “the school where the children strove”. It gives the speaker a moment to think about her childhood. Then they pass through “gazing grain” which gives the speaker a moment to think about the prime of her life. Lastly they pass the setting sun which is a symbol of the speaker’s death. At the time of evening the speaker gets a little chilly as she is underdressed. She is wearing a thin shawl for a coat. The speaker was quite ignorant about her impromptu date with Death at the time she was getting dressed that morning. Their journey comes to an end at the speaker’s burial ground. Towards the end of the poem, we come to know that the speaker of the poem has died centuries ago and her ride with Death took place a long time ago. But to the speaker it seems just like yesterday when she got the feeling that horse heads pointed towards eternity signaling the passage from life to death and to an afterlife. In this way Dickinson reaches the conclusion that the soul is a part of immortality. The reality of this fact can be realized only in a moment of crisis just as beautiful things on landscape are noticed by us only when lightening shows us their face:

The	Soul's	distinct	connection
With			immortality
Is	best	disclosed	Danger
Or	quick	Calamity	—
As	Lightning	on	a
Exhibits	Sheets	of	Place
			—

Not yet suspected — but for Flash —
And Click — and Suddenness.

Since Dickinson had a firm faith in immortality— death, in her view, provides us with a chance to meet them again whom death has separated from us. How long can we live on this earth? Arjun fought against his own blood relations because he was well aware of the concept of Immortality of the soul which had already been explained to him by Lord Krishna. Socrates embraced death happily because he knew that it was only death which could open the gateway to immortality. Lord Jesus Christ did not oppose and resist the crucifixion because he was certain of his coming back to this world. Emily Dickinson also, after a very long rumination, was happily prepared to die:

So give me back to Death —
The Death I never feared
Except that it deprived of thee — (CP 670)

In a nutshell, it can safely be said that Dickinson's perception or approach towards death is inconstant, fluctuating and idiosyncratic. After critically analyzing the death poems composed by Dickinson, one reaches the conclusion that Dickinson's feeling concerning death is varied and fluctuating. It differs from poem to poem as she tries to portray death from every possible perspective. Sometimes she is overwhelmed with the feeling of uncertainty, fear and grief while sometimes she seeks relief in death considering it an end to the terrifying ordeal of life.

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