

Images of Death in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson

*Nabil Mohammed Ali
College of Mass Communication
Baghdad University*

Death is a theme which has elicited much deep and varied emotions from poets through the ages. Accordingly, they have meditated and emotionally and lyrically responded to it. A memorable example is King Lear lamenting the death of his daughter, Cordelia:

No, no, no life!

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,

And thou no breath at all?Thou' It come no more,

Never, never, never, never, never!(Act V, Scene III)(1)

Thomas H. Johnson, while recognizing that many poets have made death central in much of their poetry, also believes that "Emily Dickinson did so in hers to an unusual degree." (2) Death is a prevalent theme in Emily Dickinson's poetry. Her poems on this theme are scattered through the two volumes which contain her poetic works. It has been mentioned that at least a quarter of all her works deals chiefly with this theme. (3) Her critics have noted the prominence of the theme of death in her poetry. George Frisbie Whicher, for example, states that Dickinson "recurred to it{ the subject of death} more frequently than to any other." (4) Richard Chase mentions that "in the large majority of Emily Dickinson's poems, from the least impressive to the most, there are intimations of Death." (5) Charles R. Anderson points out that death and immortality were "the two profoundest themes that challenged her poetic powers." (6) A thorough analysis of her death poetry reveals that there are four major categories: (1) poems dealing with death and immortality, (2) poems dealing with the physical aspects of death, (3) poems that personify death, and (4) elegiac poems.

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." (7) 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." (8) Her involvement with death continued throughout her life. One month before her death she wrote "There is no Trumpet like the Tomb". (9) This preoccupation with death may be attributed to her involvement with religious and spiritual values such as God, Time, Resurrection, Immortality, Infinity, etc. The very fact, according to Thomas Ford, that she was the only member of her immediate family who was never to join a church is perhaps evidence of the seriousness with which she approached religion. (10) Her poems and letters always refer to the problems of faith, the identity of the soul and the reality of God. With the death of her immediate relatives and friends, she was very anxious to investigate every attitude towards death. She was seeking religious assurance, and asked if immortality was a fact. In a letter to her friend Abiah Root, dated 1850, she associated between death and religion. Expressing grief over the death of Leonard Humphrey, one of her early "preceptors", she wrote:

... there must be much to hope for, but when the unreconciled spirit has nothing left but God, that spirit is lone indeed. I don't think there will be any sunshine, or any singing-birds in the spring that's coming.... I will try not to say any more- my rebellious thoughts are many, and the friend I love and trust in has much now to forgive. (11)

Admitting that her religious thoughts are "rebellious", she insinuated that, if she were a believing Christian, she would accept the death of her friend calmly, receiving consolation from the immortality promised by Christianity. Though the problem of immortality taxed her inquiring mind, Dickinson's letters and poetry show that she believed in immortality. James Reeves argues that the idea of death and of triumph over death through personal immortality was a principal factor in the religious climate in which Emily Dickinson breathed. (12) In a letter dated 1882 she wrote "I believe we shall in some manner be cherished by our Maker" and "that the One who gave us this remarkable earth has the power still farther to surprise that which he has caused. Beyond that all is silence." (13) In "I never saw a moor" (1052) she expresses her conviction of the existence of heaven:

I never spoke with God

Nor visited in Heaven-

Yet certain am I of the spot

As if the Checks were given-(14)

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 etc.... The aim of this study is to investigate Emily's use of these various images of death in her poetry with the aim to show that she had no final view of it because death was for her the one free agent and the great unknown mystery. She used her best poetic energy to fathom this mystery.

Emily Dickinson was so acutely conscious of death that she could sense its presence everywhere. Richard Chase states that death had become a supreme cosmic force, an abstract power affecting all nature. He adds that death for Emily Dickinson was " a protean divinity, a universal power whose insinuating presence is to be felt, seen, heard, touched, and smelled in nature and human life.(15) Her awareness of the reality of death was the main reason for devoting her poetic energies to write about it. The fear of death was a prime motivating force in her creative work. In a letter to T. W. Higginson, she wrote" I sing as the Boy does by the Burying Ground-because I am afraid{afraid ,that is, of death}."(16)She tried in her death poetry to understand this awesome force, omnipotent and universal power. She used concrete and homely images to describe it. In an early poem " Dust is the only Secret"(153) written about 1860 she was speculating the true personality of death in an attempt to uncover its mystery. However, information about it is very scarce:

Dust is the only Secret-

Death, the only One

You cannot find out all about

In his " native town."

Dickinson devoted her best poetic power to get an insight into the nature of death. She was wondering about his personality, asking about his 'friends', tracing his " history" :

Nobody knew " his Father"-

Never was a Boy-

Had'nt any playmates,

Or " Early history"-

Dickinson can only understand the mystery of death and its purpose in life if she could only know " his friends", "his fellow townsmen" or "his history". Her mission is difficult because death is a solitary character preferring to stay aloof and refusing to have "playmates". Although she cannot reveal its mystery, she can know some of its characteristics. He is like a respectable small-town businessman who goes about his business:

Industrious! Lanconic!

Punctual! Sedate!

Bold as a Brigand!

Still than a Fleet!

Emily Dickinson's best personifications of death are those found in her two famous poems, " Because I could not Stop for him"(712) and " Death is the Supple Suitor"(1445). In " Because I Could Not Stop For Death", Dickinson expresses her profound belief that at death the soul journeys to heaven(eternity) and that the soul is immortal. Yvor Winters described the poem's subject as " the daily realization of the imminence of death- it is a poem of departure from life, an intensely conscious leave-taking."(17) Appropriately Dickinson uses the image of the carriage and driver to describe the journey of the soul heading to eternity and also to show its immortality:

Because I could not stop for Death-

He kindly stopped for me-

The Carriage held but just Ourselves-

And Immortality.

In the first two lines, Death is personified as a genteel carriage driver taking a lady out for a drive. Allen Tate regards "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" as one of the perfect poems in English. Tate believes that the terror of death is objectified through the character of the genteel driver who is made ironically to serve the end of immortality.(18) Death "kindly" accompanies the lady in her final journey to eternity. 'Kindly' contradicts the popular image of death as cruel and terrible. Moreover, death here serves ironically the end of immortality; hence, it is not the end of the soul's journey. In the last two lines of this stanza, the carriage has another passenger, Immortality which significantly concludes by itself this stanza. This conclusion indicates the importance given to immortality. In this stanza, Dickinson successfully combined the two abstractions of death and immortality .

The poem's imagery, figures of speech, form, diction and symbolism all help the poet to render her perception of death and immortality easily. Theodore C. Hoepfner points out that the use of the image of the carriage and driver is appropriate in this poem because "at death the soul journeys to heaven(eternity)".(19)Dickinson in stanza Two moves to describe this journey to eternity:

We slowly drove –He knew no haste

And I had put away

My labor and my leisure too,

For His Civility-

The journey to eternity is a quiet one and the "kindliness" of death is reaffirmed here by referring to his "civility". The image of journey is used in most of Dickinson's death poems to depict death as either a comforting or disturbing experience. The passing on from life to death in her poetry takes the form of a journey. In these death

poems, she takes the reader to the brink of death and provides him with glimpses of eternity which are only revealed to the dead. Dickinson used this image of the journey to get a deeper insight into the nature of what lies beyond life and to fathom the mysteries of death and eternity.

Death for Emily Dickinson was "an uncomfortable lacuna which could in no way be bridged, except by transporting it into a more homely metaphor." (20) In "Death is the Supple Suitor" (1445) 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.

In a number of poems, Dickinson personifies death as a democrat, the great equalizer or the force which claims without discrimination men and women. In "Color-Caste-Denomination" (970) 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" (1256). All people, young and old, the poor and the 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 addition to being a carriage driver, suitor, democrat, death is also a king and emperor:

The eyes around had wrung them dry,

And breaths were gathering firm

For that last onset, when the king

Be witnessed in the room.

One of Dickinson's methods of gaining insight into the nature of death in the poems discussed above was to give it certain qualities of human beings. In an other group of poems , death is not given a human analogy .To add mystery to it, she withheld from it the human personality. In " It's coming-the postponeless Creature"(390) Dickinson keeps the horror surrounding death by denying it recognizable human characteristics. Death is referred to as a " Creature":

It's coming –the postponeless Creature-

It gains the Block-and now- it gains the Door-

Chooses it's latch, from all the other fastenings-

Enters- with a " You know me- Sir"?

Death is still a " Creature", and the pronoun it indicates" the separation between death and the world of living men and women."(21)Dickinson finds here a difficulty in deciding whether death is a friend or an enemy:

Simple Salute- and Certain Recognition-

Bold-were it Enemy-Brief- were it friend-

Dressed each House in Crape and Icicle-

And Carries one-out of it-to God-

This uncertainty towards death reflects her suspicion of death's intentions. Death stays only long enough to decorate the house with its favourite colours, then leaves with one of the occupants.

Frost is a recurrent symbol of death in a number of poems. In "A Visitor in Marl" (391) written in 1862 Dickinson personifies death as a frost which takes on life:

A Visitor in Marl-

Who influences Flowers

Till they are orderly as Busts-

And Elegant-as Glass-

Death here is an insidious visitor because its surface appearance seems "orderly" and "elegant". Moreover, death pretends to be a lover who prefers to visit at night:

Who visits in the Night-

And just before the Sun-

Concludes his glistening interview-

Caresses- and is gone-

The final stanza tell us the result of this "interview":

But whom his fingers touched-

And where his feet have run-

And Whatsoever Mouth he kissed-

Is as it had not been-

In "The Frost of Death was on the Pane" (1136) written in 1869 Dickinson portrays death as a beast or monster being hunted by people. She gives him the quality of human speech so he declares his intention:

The Frost of Death was on the Pane –

"Secure your Flower" said he.

People try to hold death back from a dying woman by placing themselves between her and death but they failed:

We pried him back

Ourselves we wedged

Himself and her between ,

Their attempt is useless because death easily wins:

Yet easy as the narrow snake

He forked his way along

Till all her helpless beauty bent

People are frustrated and helpless in their fight against death. They rage against him and decide to hunt him to his den:

And then our wrath begun-

We hunted him to his Ravine

We chased him to his Den-

They realize that their pursuit is futile because they are challenging a powerful force. Dickinson expresses her bewilderment towards death and concludes the poem by indicating her sorrow because man lives in a universe which does not offer him a consolation:

We hated Death and hated Life

And nowhere was to go-

Than Sea and continent there is

A larger- it is Woe.

In a late poem written about 1884 entitled "Apparently with no Surprise" (1624), Dickinson resorts again to the image of death as a frost describing it as a "blonde Assassin". The frost acts as a headsman:

Apparently with no surprise

To any happy Flower

The Frost beheads it at its play-

In accidental power-

The blonde Assassin passes on-

The stanza describes a murder scene; the frost kills a flower in full bloom and then continues in its way. The sun, watching from above, continues in its course uninvolved and uninterested in what is taking place below:

The Sun proceeds unmoved

To measure off another Day

For an Approving God.

Dickinson here contributes the cause of death directly to God.

Conclusion:

Death was Emily Dickinson's main theme which left its impact on all her thinking and gave its tint to the majority of her poems. Death for her was the supreme touchstone for life. She lived continuously in his presence. She was always aware of its nearness. It becomes, in the words of Henry Wells, her closest and dearest friend. (22) Investigation of the theme of death gave her a panoramic view of vital issues such as religion, God and immortality. In the poems discussed in this study death assumes different personalities taken from life surrounding Dickinson. Its main characteristics implied in her death poems reveal the very contradictions and complexities of life. Death may be a genteel coachman, a lover, a suitor, an assassin, a beast or a frost. Dickinson used these concrete images to describe death, which is an abstract force, in attempt to understand it. She gave death human and nonhuman characteristics as part of her unrelenting quest to understand it. In her death poetry, she did not offer a final view of death because death for her remains the great unknown mystery.

Footnotes

- 1- William Shakespeare, King Lear, Ian Pollock(ed.).(New York: Workman Publishing Company,1984).
- 2- Thomas Johnson, Emily Dickinson: An Interpretative Biography.(Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University,1955), P. 203.
- 3- Henry W. Wells, Introduction to Emily Dickinson.(New York: Hendricks House,1959),p. 94.
- 4- George Frisbie Whicher, This was a Poet,(New York: Charles Scribner's Sons,1938), p.298.
- 5- Richard Chase, Emily Dickinson.(Connecticut: Greenwood Press,1973),p.230.
- 6- Charles R. Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise.(New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston,1960),p.284.
- 7- Martha Dickinson Bianchi, The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson.(Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co.,1924),p.83.
- 8- Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward(eds.),The Letters of Emily Dickinson.3 Vols.(Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University.),(II,423).
- 9- Ibid,(III,904).
- 10- Thomas W. Ford, Heaven Beguiles the Tired: Death in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson.(Alabama: University of Alabama Press,1966),p.18.
- 11- The Letters of Emily Dickinson,(I,103).
- 12- James Reeves, Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson.(London: Heinemann,1976),p.XXX.
- 13- The Letters of Emily Dickinson,(111,709).
- 14- Thomas H. Johnson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson.(London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1975). Numbers in parentheses are those of the poems .
- 15- Richard Chase, Emily Dickinson,p.235.
- 16- The Letters of Emily Dickinson,(II,404).
- 17- Yvor Winters," Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Judgement ", in Defense of Reason,3ed..(Denver: alan Swallow,1947),pp.283-299.
- 18- Allen Tate, Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas.(New York: Charles Scribner's Sons,1936),pp. 13-14.
- 19- Theodore C. Hoepfner "Because I Could Not Stop for Death," American Literature,XXIX(March 1957),p.96.
- 20- Ankey Larrabee," Three Studies in Modern Poetry,"Accent,111(Winter,1943),115-117.)

- 21- Paul J. Ferlazzo, Emily Dickinson.(Boston: Twayne Publishers,1976),p.45.
- 22- Henry W. Wells, Introduction to Emily Dickinson ,p.99.

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