

## **The Portrayal of Suffering In Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson**

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### **Abstract**

This research deals with the portrayal of the suffering in selected poems of Emily Dickinson who is a nineteenth century American female poet. The research will try to trace how Emily portrayed suffering and what methods she used in sketching it. In addition and throughout the research, I will try to depict the various types of suffering, pain, and anguish she portrayed in the poems under discussion, and whether this pain was psychological, physical, spiritual or both. In addition, I will try to depict the reasons Emily gave for suffering and consequences or aftermath of it. The research ends with a conclusion that sums up the major finding of the research which I came up with.

**Emily Dickinson's poem often treats subjects like art, imagination, nature, and human relationships and when she talks about them, she shows a tone of joy while talking about them, but at the same time her poetic world is also permeated with suffering and the struggle to face, evade, overcome and wrest meaning from it. Thus we can see that many of her poems, as well, treats the theme of suffering. To Dickinson, suffering is involved in the creative process, it is central idea connected with the theme of unfulfilled love, and it is part of her ambivalent response to the mysteries of time and nature.**

**In addition, this theme plays a major role in Dickinson's poems about death and immortality because suffering goes hand in hand with**

the idea of losing someone in death and the process of sadness which comes with it.

When Emily poems focus on the fact of and the progress if suffering, she rarely describes its causes. For example, in Emily's love poem "I Cannot Live With You", there are passages about specific suffering, but this is not their central subject.

And were you lost, I would  
 Through my name  
 Rang loudest  
 On the heavenly fame –  
 And where you – saved –  
 And I – condemned to be  
 Where you were not –  
 That self – were hell to me.

(11.38-45)<sup>1</sup>

The same thing could be seen, I mean, describing a process of suffering without mentioning its causes, in another poem by Dickinson entitled "She dealt her pretty words like blades"<sup>2</sup>:

She dealt her pretty words like Blades—  
 How glittering they shone—  
 And every One unbared a Nerve  
 Or wantoned with a Bone—  
 She never deemed—she hurt—  
 That—is not Steel's Affair—  
 A vulgar grimace in the Flesh—  
 How ill the Creatures bear—

(11.1-8)<sup>3</sup>

However, the evidence that she experienced love – deprivation suggests that it lies behind many of her poems about suffering<sup>4</sup>. For example, in her poem entitled “Renunciation – is A Piercing Virtue”, Emily seems to be writing about abandoning the hope of possessing a beloved person. However, she is more abstract here than in her poems where a lover is visible, and she is not, as well, clear, about the final meaning of her painful experience<sup>5</sup>.

The first four lines of “Renunciation” presents renunciation as both deviating and agonizing. The speaker hopes that her renunciation will be rewarded and the use of “Not now”, for “but not now” emphasizes her effort:

Renunciation — is a piercing Virtue —  
 The letting go  
 A Presence — for an Expectation —  
 Not now —

(11.1-4)<sup>6</sup>

The important word, in the previous lines, is piercing. Here it is used to refer to something painful, because the force of piercing carries over to the description of eyes being put out and suggests a blinding not so much of the beloved person as of the speaker<sup>7</sup>.

Here she claims that she is drawing back from the sacrilege of valuing something more than she values God, a person who is like the sunrise. On the other hand, when we come to the last seven lines, the speaker is struggling to develop and express her ideas. Thus she chooses something which she doesn't want in order to justify herself not to others

such as God, but to herself. “Now this striving for justification is done less for the present moment than for some future time”:<sup>8</sup>

Renunciation – is the choosing  
 Against itself –  
 Itself to justify  
 Unto itself –  
 When larger function –  
 Make that appear –  
 Smaller – that covered vision – here –

(11.10-16)<sup>9</sup>

“Larger function”, in the previous lines, means “a clear scheme or idea about existence”<sup>10</sup>, one which explains the meaning of mortality in which her present, selfish desires will appear small<sup>11</sup>. And when she is dead, she will finally understand the limitation of her present vision. At the conclusion of the poem, she is still staggering in pain, and the whole poem shows that she has only partial faith in the piercing virtue of renunciation, and her whole suffering remains a mystery.

There are some poems, which Dickinson wrote, in which she talks about childhood deprivation. Here she is explicit about the source of suffering. For example, in her poem “It Would Have Starved A Gnat”, Emily seems to be “charging that when she was a child, her family denied her spiritual nourishment and recognition”<sup>12</sup>. In order to elaborate this idea, Emily used a metaphor of a starving insect in addition to her use of repetition and parallelism which, as well, gives a special force to the poem. Something as tiny as a gnat would have starved emotional sustenance:

It would have starved a gnat –  
 To live so small as I –  
 And yet I was a living child –  
 With food's necessity

(11.1-4)<sup>13</sup>

The phrase “live so small” converts the idea of spiritual nourishment into the idea of a self compelled to remain unobtrusive, undemanding, and unindividual. On the other hand, the image of hunger as a claw shows the natural strength of the child's needs, and “the analogy to a leech and a dragon, using Emily's typical yoking of the large and small, dramatized the painful tenacity of hunger”<sup>14</sup>.

Upon me – lie a claw  
 I could no more remove  
 Than I could coax a leech away –  
 Or make a dragon – move –

(11.5-8)<sup>15</sup>

In addition, in the same previous stanza, the speaker is explicit about the denial of individuality, and she adds a twist to the gnat comparison by showing that the tiny insect's freedom gives it a strength which is denied to her<sup>16</sup>. The envy of the gnat's self-destructiveness, as it beats out its trapped life against the windowpane, suggests a suicidal urge in the speaker and the poem ends on an unfortunate note of self pity:

Not like the Gnat — had I —  
 The privilege to fly  
 And seek a Dinner for myself —  
 How mightier He — than I —

Nor like Himself — the Art  
 Upon the Window Pane  
 To gad my little Being out —  
 And not begin — again —

(11.10-18)<sup>17</sup>

Emily Dickinson, as well, wrote poems in which she expressed a deep sense of deprivation and alienation, but this time in a gentle way. For example, there is her poem “A Loss of Something Ever Felt I” in which she recalls a childhood feeling that she had lost something precious and undefinable, and that no one knew of her loss. In fact, she lived very much apart even as she communicated with people around her:

A loss of something ever felt I —  
 The first that I could recollect  
 Bereft I was — of what I knew not  
 Too young that any should suspect

(11.1-4)<sup>18</sup>

Here in the last two stanzas, Emily changes her tone and describes her situation with a tender and accepting sadness that implies a forgiveness for those who have hurt her. In addition and within the same stanza she gives a hint about love relationships which she never found, but her calling them, rather than herself, “delinquent suggests that they and not she are responsible for this failure”<sup>19</sup>. In addition, the speculation in the last stanza is a further clue to an understanding of her deprivation. Thus, if she is searching for the kingdom of heaven, she wants something that was never available to her in a childhood or adulthood. But this contradicts her implied accusation against others and indicates both that

she forgives those who hurt her and recognizes that her expectations were impossibly high:

Elder, Today, a session wiser  
 And fainter, too, as Wiseness is —  
 I find myself still softly searching  
 For my Delinquent Palaces —  
 And a Suspicion, like a Finger  
 Touches my Forehead now and then  
 That I am looking oppositely  
 For the site of the Kingdom of Heaven —

(11.8-15)<sup>20</sup>

As I have already mentioned, Emily Dickinson rarely mentions the causes of her suffering and prefers, instead, to keep personal motives hidden, in addition to concentrating on itself – contained nature of the pain. However, close examination sometimes reveals possible causes of the suffering. For example, her poem “Pain – has an Element of Blank” deals with a kind of suffering that is timeless, mental rather than physical. Here Emily personifies pain in order to make it identical with the sufferer’s life.

Pain — has an Element of Blank —  
 It cannot recollect  
 When it begun — or if there were  
 A time when it was not —

(11.1-4)<sup>21</sup>

In the first line, the word blank is used for specific purpose. The blank quality serves to blot out the origin of the pain and the

complications that pain brings. Here Emily shows that such suffering is aware only of its continuation. Thus as the sufferer's life has become pain, so time has become pain. "Its present is an infinity which remains exactly like the past and this infinity, and the past which it reaches back to, are aware only of an indefinite future of suffering. That's why the description of the suffering as being enlightened is ironic because although the enlightenment is the only light in the darkness, it is still characterized by suffering:

It has no Future — but itself —  
 Its Infinite realms contain  
 Its Past — enlightened to perceive  
 New Periods — of Pain.

(11.5-8)<sup>22</sup>

As it has been already mentioned, this research deals with the various types of suffering which Dickinson treated in selected poems of hers. Now, due to this variation, Emily, in other poems, did talk about pain and suffering, but at the same time she mentioned a desire to relief from it. For example, her poem "The Heart Asks Pleasure – first" deals with pain and the desire to relief from it:

The heart asks pleasure first,  
 And then, excuse from pain ;  
 And then, those little anodynes  
 That deaden suffering ;

(11.1-4)<sup>23</sup>

The above lines deals with the desire for pleasure, but the remaining lines treat pain and desire for its relief. This proportion may at



first suggests that pleasure is being sought as a relief from pain, but this is unlikely. “The rapid shift from a desire for pleasure to a pursuit of relief combines with the slightly childlike voice of the poem to show that the hope for pleasure in life quickly yields to the universal fact of pain, after which a pursuit of relief becomes life’s centre. Such relief is pursued in four stages. First is to ask for an excuse from pain and this means either to dismiss it or to leave it behind, like a child asking to be excused from a duty. “Anodynes, which have medicines that relieve pain is a metaphor for activities that lessen suffering”<sup>24</sup>. Here “the hesitant slowness of the phrase” “deaden suffering” conveys the cramped nature of such case. The cumulative “and then” is a phrase used to imitate a child’s recital of a series of desire thing and here it is used for a specific purpose by the female – poet<sup>25</sup>. The child has doubts about the procedure being described and the adult speaker knows that it will fail. The hope that sleep will relieve pain resembles an advice given to unhappy children. The Inquisitor, on the other hand, stands for God who creates a world of suffering but won’t allow us to die and be relieved of the troubles of life until He Himself summons us to death. Thus, God here is compared to the tortures of the medieval Inquisition, I mean, “medieval inquisitors who use to torture and burn whoever being accused for heresy”<sup>26</sup>. But at the same time the word Inquisitor might represent a sense of guilt on the part of the speaker:

And then, to go to sleep;  
And then, if it should be  
The will of its Inquisitor  
The liberty to die

(11.5-8)<sup>27</sup>

In general, “The Heart Asks Pleasure First” takes a passive stand towards feelings with a slight hope that someday there would be a relief from pain, in addition to a criticism of a world that makes people suffer. Such an attitude are shown in other poem, but in a more subtle way. An example is her poem “After Great pain, A Formal Feeling Comes”. “This poem, like many other poems, is told in the third person, but it seems very personal”<sup>28</sup>. The speaker watches her suffering protagonist from a distance and uses symbols to intensify the psychic splitting through the images of nerves, heart, and feet:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –  
 The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –  
 The stiff Heart questions ‘was it He, that bore,’  
 And ‘Yesterday, or Centuries before’?

(11.1-4)<sup>29</sup>

The pain must be psychological for there is no real damage to the body and no pursuit of healing. “The formal feelings” suggests the protagonist’s withdrawal from the world, a withdrawal which implies a criticism of those who have made her suffer. A funeral goes on inside her with the nerves acting both as mourners and tombstone. The reference to the stiff heart, whose sense of time has been destroyed, implies the feeling of arrest. Now since Emily Dickinson capitalizes words almost arbitrarily, one cannot know for certain if “He” refers to Christ. But it would be more suitable of it refers to the heart because if it refers to the heart the meaning would be like this: The heart feels so dead and alienated from itself that it asks if it is really the one that suffered, and also if the

crushing blow came recently or centuries earlier. Time feels dissolved as if the sufferer has always been just as she is now.

In the second stanza, the protagonist is sufficiently alive and desirous of relief to walk around. Here she walks in a circle which is an expression used to show her frustration and to show that she has nowhere to go, but while she is doing that, her feet are unfeeling. Her path, and her feet as well, are like wood. In other words, they are insensitive to what is beneath and around them:

The Feet, mechanical, go round –  
A Wooden way  
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –  
Regardless grown,  
A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

(11.5-9)<sup>30</sup>

Almost from its beginning, the poem has been dramatizing a state of emotional shock that serves as a protection against pain. As the second stanza ends, the other becomes explicit. The feet and walking now are standing, now, for the whole suffering self which grows contended with its hardened condition. “A Quartz contentment” is one of Emily Dickinson’s brilliant metaphors which contains heaviness, density, and earthiness with the idea of contentment, which is usually thought to be mellow and soft<sup>31</sup>. In addition, Emily used another metaphor to reinforce her speech and her description of pain, which is “honor of lead”. Here she use it to show how can time, scene, and body fuse into something heavy, dull, immovable. As does “A Quartz contentment”, the phrase “hour of lead” implies that such protection requires a terrible sacrifice. Here the last lines of the poem suggest that such suffering may prove fatal, but if it

does not, it will be remembered in the same way in which people who are freezing to death remember the painful process leading to their final moment. In reality, however, they could not remember the moment of letting go which precedes death unless they were rescued soon after they slipped into unconsciousness<sup>32</sup>. Perhaps Emily is depicting the feeling that rescue, for her, is unlikely or she may be voicing a call for rescue. But a sense of terrible alienation from the human world, analogous to the loneliness of people freezing to death, pervades the poem. The last line is particularly effective in the combining of shock, growing insensitivity, and final relief, which parallels the overall structure of the poem. In addition, the varied line lengths, the frequent heavy pauses within the lines, and the mixture of slant and full rhymes all contribute to the poem's formal slowness<sup>33</sup>. The laboured movement of the lines reinforces the thematic movement of the poem from pain to a final, dull resignation.

Although there are critics who describe "I felt A Funeral in My Brain" as a poem about death, but still it can also be described as "dramatization of mental anguish leading to psychic disintegration and a final sinking into a protective numbness like that portrayed in "After Great pain"<sup>34</sup>.

In "I felt A Funeral in My Brain", the whole psychological drama is described as if it were a funeral. This funeral is "a symbol of an intense suffering that threatens to destroy the speaker's life, but at last destroys only her present, unbearable consciousness"<sup>35</sup>:

I felt a funeral, in my brain,  
And mourners to and fro  
Kept treading – treading – till it seemed

That sense was breaking through

(11.1-4)<sup>36</sup>

Now the fourth line in particular needs a delicate analysis. This line contain the phrase “breaking through” which, in regard to mental phenomena, usually refers to something becoming clear”<sup>37</sup>, which is an interpretation which does not fir the rest of the poem. If “sense” is taken as paralleling the “plank in reason” which later breaks, then “breaking through” can mean to collapse or shatter. The formal and treading mourners represent self-accusations strong enough to drive the speakers towards madness. But she is slow in getting there. The service continues, the coffin-like box symbolizing the death of the accused self that can no longer endure torment:

And when they all were seated,  
A service, like a drum –  
Kept beating-beating- till I thought  
My mind was going numb

(11.5-8)<sup>38</sup>

Now the whole universe is like a church, with its heavens a bell. Unable to escape from her terrifying consciousness, she feels as if only she and the universe exist. All sounds pour into her silence. “This is a condition close to madness, a loss of self that comes when one’s relationship to people and nature feels broken, and individuality becomes a burden”<sup>39</sup>. At last, the desired numbness arrives. Reasons, the ability to think and know, break down, and she plunges into an abyss. “The worlds she strikes as se descends are her past experiences, both those she would want to hold onto and those that burden her with pain”<sup>40</sup>. Then she loses

consciousness and is presumably at some kind of peace. The poem's regular rhymes work well with their insistent ritual, and the "repeated trochaic words "treading – treading" and "beating – beating" oppose the iambic meter in order to add a rocking quality"<sup>41</sup>.

Some of Emily Dickinson's poems treat the subject of suffering as a stimulus to growth. For example, her poem, "My Cocoon Tightens – Colour Tease" is "a treatment of the pursuit of growth"<sup>42</sup>. Its metaphor of the self as a butterfly, desiring both power and freedom, is a hint about the struggle for personal growth<sup>43</sup>. That's why in the first stanza, the speaker seems restricted, but at the same time is faintly hopeful, and she contrasts her present limitations with her inner capacity:

My cocoon tightens – colour teas –  
 I'm feeling for the air  
 A dim capacity for wings  
 Demeans the dress I wear –

(11.1-4)<sup>44</sup>

In the second stanza, "she is expressing a yearning for a freedom and for the power to survey nature and feel at home with it"<sup>45</sup>. These personal qualities and this symbolic landscape represent life and its experiences as much, or more, than the achieving of paradise:

A power of butterfly must be –  
 The aptitude to fly  
 Meadows of majesty implies  
 And easy sweeps of sky –

(11.5-8)<sup>46</sup>

This poem offers variation in tone rendering from yearning to hope to an incapability of finding a formula which will allow her to make the right transformation, and this appears in the last stanza:

So I must baffle at the hint  
And cipher at the sign  
And make much blunder, if at least  
I take the clue divine –

(11.9-12)<sup>47</sup>

### Conclusion

Emily Dickinson was skillful and variable in portraying suffering. In other words, through this variation, she was able to form her own special method in sketching this theme. Through this research, I was able to point out the way she used in portraying suffering, anguish and connect them with other things in life.

In talking about suffering, Emily, in some poems, tried to give causes or reasons for suffering. For example, in her poem “Renunciation-is A Piercing Virtue”, she mentions that love-deprivation might be a cause of suffering. But at times, she lessens this deep sense of suffering or anguish by mentioning a desire to pleasure or set self free of sadness just as she did in her poem “The Heart Asks Pleasure First”. On the other hand, there are poems which give specific reasons and justifications for suffering. An example is her poems “After Great Pain, A Formal Feeling Comes”, in which Emily mentions that pain or suffering might be based on a psychological founding. However, in other poems, Emily rarely mentions a reason for suffering, but the only thing that matters to her is

how to portray it, give it a colour, taste and touch which have a clear and obvious influence on the protagonist mentioned in the poem as if the only thing that matters to Emily is the way she is able to show this suffering in the clearest way possible.

In order to portray suffering, pain and their reasons and impact on the self, Emily, as usual of her used images taken from nature and religion, two factors which had their significant influences on her as a person and as a female poet. Clearly, she is purely subjective in her analysis and portraying of suffering. The only person involved in any process of suffering is her soul. That's why she is explicit in her description of why, and who is responsible for her agony in most cases.

### Notes

- 1 Alexander W. Alison, Herbert Barrows, Ceasar R. Blake, Arther J. Car, Arthur M. Eastman, Hurbert M. English, JR. The Northon Anthology of Poetry, 3rded. (New York: W.W. Northon Company, 1983), p. 811. Some quotations of Emily Dickinson's Poems, in this research, are taken from this edition.
- 1 Donald Enlert, Emily Dickinson's Process of Growth (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p.28.
- 1 The Northon Anthology, p. 811.
- 1 Danid R. Barnes, Emily Dickinson: Devotional Poetry (New York: Horizon Press, 1979), p.31.
- 1 Ibid, p.32.
- 1 Michelle Kohler, Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson (AMS Press, Inc., 1993), p.16. Some quotations of Emily Dickinson's Poems, in this research, are taken from this edition.
- 1 Emily Dickinson's Process of Growth, p.40.
- 1 Nadean Bishop, Queen of Calvary: Spirituality in Emily Dickinson (London: Penguins, 1987), p.20.
- 1 Selected poems of Emily Dickinson, p.16.
- 1 David Lloyd, The Shaping Vision of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 80.
- 1 Ibid, 81
- 1 Shira Wolosky, The Adult Voice in Dickinson's Child Poems (Detroit: Gale Group, 2006), p.50.
- 1 Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson, p.20.
- 1 The Adult Voice in Dickinson's Child Poems, p.52
- 1 Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 16.
- 1 Roxanne Harde, Emily Dickinson's Spirituality (Oneona, N.Y.: The State University of New York College at Oneota, 1999), p. 80.
- 1 Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson, p.17.
- 1 Ibid, p. 30.
- 1 Emily Dickinson's Spirituality, p.70.



- 1 Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 30  
 1 Ibid, p. 50.  
 1 Ibid, p. 50.  
 1 The Northon Anthology of Poetry, p. 811.  
 1 Shira Wolosky, *Women's Bibles: Biblical Interpretations in Nineteenth Century American Women's Poetry* (Barkely: University of California Press, 2007), p. 60.  
 1 James Mathew Wilson, *Representing the Limits of Judgment: Your Winters, Emily Dickinson, and Religious Experience* (Detroit: St. James Press, 2007), p. 50  
 1 Desmond Powell, *Emily Dickinson* (Detroit: Gale Group, 2006), p. 90.  
 1 The Northon Anthology of Poetry, p. 811.  
 1 Daniel R, Barnes, *Emily Dickinson: Devotional Poetry* (New York: Horizon Press, 1979), p.75.  
 1 The Northon Anthology of Poetry, p. 808.  
 1 Ibid, p. 808.  
 1 Emily Dickinson: Devotional Poetry, p.81.  
 1 John Crow Ransman, *Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored*, in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Richard Sewell (Printice-Hal, 1963), p. 30.  
 1 Elizabeth Sheplay Sergeant, *Emily Dickinson: An Early Imagist* (Boston Mass: G.K. Hall and Co., 1990), p. 40.  
 1 Daniel J. Orsini, *Emily Dickinson and Romantic Use of Science* (Chicaap: Ican R. Dee, 1998), p. 67.  
 1 Paul W. Anderson, *The Metaphysical Mirth of Emily Dickinson* (New Haven: Conn: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 87.  
 1 The Northon Anthology of Poetry, p. 806.  
 1 Ruth Miller, *Emily (Elizabeth) Dicjinson* (New York: Horizon Press, 1977).  
 1 The Northon Anthology of Poetry, p. 806.  
 1 Paula Herdrickson, *Dickinson and the Process of Death* (Detroit: Gale Group, 1999), p. 70.  
 1 Albert Gelpi, *Emily Dickinson and the Deerslayer: the Dilemma of the Woman Poet in America* (Berkely: University of California Press, 1977), p. 33.  
 1 Francis H. Stoddard, *Techniques in Emily Dickinson's Poems* (London: Evans Brothers, 1980), p. 76.  
 1 H. Jordan Landry, *Narratives in Emily Dickinson* (New York: American Book Company, 2004), p. 84.  
 1 Ibid, p. 84.  
 1 Selected Poems of Emily Dickinsons, p. 28.  
 1 Evan Carton, *Dickinson and Divine* (New Havem, Conn: Xale University Press, 1978), p. 90.  
 1 Selected Poems of Emily Dickinsons, p. 28.  
 1 Ibid, p. 28

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- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Adult Voice in Dickinson's Child Poems*. Detroit: Gale Group, 2006.

## تصوير المعاناة في قصائد مختارة من شعر املي ديكنسون

انغام علي فالح

الجامعة المستنصرية / كلية الاداب - قسم اللغة الانكليزية

يتناول هذا البحث تصوير المعاناة في قصائد مختارة من شعر إميلي ديكسون وهي شاعرة أمريكية من القرن التاسع عشر. يحاول البحث تقصي الطريقة التي رسمت بها إميلي المعاناة في القصائد المتناولة والوسائل التي استخدمتها لعمل ذلك. بالإضافة إلى هذا سأحاول ذكر أنواع المعاناة التي رسمتها في قصائدها قيد التحليل وفيما إذا كانت هذه المعاناة نفسية أو روحية أو جسدية. بالإضافة إلى توضيح أسباب ونتائج هذه المعاناة. ينتهي البحث بإستنتاج يلخص أبرز النتائج التي توصلت إليها خلال بحثي



