

DICKINSON'S OBSESSION WITH DEATH: AN ANALYSIS OF EMILY DICKINSON'S POEMS WITH REFERENCE TO THE RECURRING THEMES OF DEATH AND LOSS

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Abstract: The name of Emily Dickinson stands aloof from any other American poet who was obsessed with modernity and sought for a refuge in country life. Dickinson was born a Puritan without being much affected by faith. Her strong belief in the Christian laws never restricted her from questioning anything which seemed doubtful to her. Her life along with her faith is full of unpredictable paradoxes. A free thinker, a candid, individualistic being she refused to relate herself to any school of poetry. Though she spent a very normal childhood, but was taken aback by the death of people close to her, and as a result inexplicably retracted to an inner world of virtual strangeness. Slowly, the inevitability of death, the pain of the dying, and the question of immortality seemed to dominate the mind of the young poet. She would question the mysteries of life and afterlife, would find herself answering the call of the soul and was sensitively drawn towards nature to find a relief.

It is difficult to say how many of her poems were dealing with Death as a principle subject, but more than six hundred approximately out of her entire collection of poetry, and the remaining somehow hinted towards it. This clearly depicts how much and to what extent the poet was obsessed and haunted by the idea of Death. Critics have divided Dickinson's Death poems into groups. In some she talked of Death as an eternal occurrent, in some the pain of the one who is dying and in the rest her own experiences of death, where she herself is the victim.

It is evident from her poems that life and death may be a matter of sheer loss for humans but for nature it is as common as a day passing into night. Dickinson's love for nature paradoxically comes in between her sharp criticism of nature's indifference to its own cruelty. Trying to find a meaning in Emily Dickinson's verse, is like desiring to find an oasis in a desert, which is tangible and intangible at the same time. She talks of Nature, and the different levels and stages of pain but each time hinting towards man's helplessness and submission to death. Her style and acute observations of nature brings her close to the 'Romantic Tradition'. But the spontaneity, with which she transforms a beautiful daily object into an object and remainder of death and plight, is commendable. She was a poet, no else could be like. A thinker, an individual beyond pre suppositions and a believer who refused to believe.

Introduction: Emily Dickinson's pre eminent place in American poetry does not completely depend on the bulk of her work but on its profundity and thematic concerns. Though born in a Puritan family, her strong belief in the Christian laws never restricted her from questioning anything which seemed doubtful. Her life along with her faith was full of unpredictable paradoxes. A free thinker, a candid, individualistic being she refused to relate herself to any school of poetry. Though she spent a very normal childhood, but was taken aback by the death of people close to her, and as a result, inexplicably retracted to an inner world of virtual strangeness. Slowly, the inevitability of death, the pain of the dying, and the question of immortality seemed to dominate the mind of the young poet. She would question the mysteries of life and afterlife, would find herself, answering the call of the soul and was sensitively drawn towards nature to find a relief.

It is difficult to say how many of her poems dealt with death, as a principle subject, but more than six hundred approximately out of her entire collection of poetry, and the remaining somehow hinted towards it. This clearly depicts how much and to what extent the poet was obsessed and haunted by the idea of death. Critics have divided Dickinson's death poems into groups. In some she talked of death as an eternal occurrent, in some she talked of the pain of the dying and in the rest her own experiences of death, where she herself is the victim. Though it dealt with 'pains' of different kinds, but was more prominently concerned with the quality of pain, the experiences of dying. Wendy Martin asserts that, "Because Dickinson's poetry is dedicated to recording the subtle emotions of the moment; her attitude toward death is not consistent from poem to poem. At times, her poems seem to embrace the possibility, even probability, of immortality and an

afterlife. Other poems are more depressed and despairing, while still others suggest the poet's resigned acceptance of uncertainty."¹

Nature to her was the only remaining site of beauty which she loved visiting time and again.

She would observe little buds laden with frost, the birds who are misled by the 'Indian Summer', and the sudden change of seasons. In the poem "There is a certain slant of light in winter afternoons" (320) she talks about a very similar winter day. But the 'slant of light' is different from any other light which comes and goes in afternoons, unnoticed and uncared.

This "slant" had some pensiveness in it, something which only a devoid soul could feel, and something which the poet could not ignore. It became for her, a remainder that the light would soon pass into a dark night, and one could never stand against the certainty of death likewise.

Dickinson's poetry reveals her obsession with the inevitability of death. Losing people close to her at an early age compelled her to imagine a refuge from this temporary existence of being. Her poems about death, revealed her desire to assert the fact that there is life after death. Though she would often brood over the fact that, 'where the dead go after death?' but still believed that there was a surely a place where they went. Jane Donahue writes, "Even while questioning, Emily Dickinson continued to hope for immortality, especially as death's depredations struck closer and closer. Though she could not know for sure where the dead went, she still trusted in their journey"². Moreover this 'journey' was not easy for them. In "Because I could not stop for death" (479) she clearly depicts man's unwillingness to submit to an end, to the fanciful life of temporariness. It creates a sense of separation between the living and the dead. Children are busy with their games, which are now irrelevant to the dead. The vitality of nature which is embodied in the sun is also irrelevant to its state. Suddenly she realizes that the sun is passing them rather, they the sun, suggesting that she has lost the power of independent movement, and that time is leaving her behind. The chilled evening, symbolizes the cold nature of death. Some critics believe that she wears the white robes of the bride of Christ and is headed towards a celestial marriage. In the fifth stanza, the body is placed in the grave, whose representation as a swelling in the ground portends its sinking. The flatness of its roof reinforces the atmosphere of dissolution and may symbolize the swiftness with which the dead are forgotten. The poem beautifully captures time in its utmost poetic earnestness and exerts man's helplessness, yet mocks at time's diminishing importance for the dead.

Since then - 'tis Centuries - and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity -³

(712)

In poems like "I heard a Fly buzz" (591) and "I felt a funeral in my brain" (340) she lays bare the pathetic plight of a person who is at the verge of dying. The sound made by the 'Fly' stands in sharp contrast to the stillness of the room. It appeared like the stillness before the storm, the awaiting death. This image represents the fusion of colour and sound, by the dying person's exhausting senses. The uncertainty of the fly's darting motions parallels her state of mind. Flying between the light and her, it seems to both signal the moment of death and represent the world that she is leaving behind. The last two lines show the speaker's confusion of her eyes and the windows of the room — a psychologically acute observation because the windows' failure is the failure of her own eyes, that she does not want to admit. She is both distancing fear and revealing her detachment from life.

This obsession with 'Death' not only forms an integral part of her work, but an inseparable aspect of her temperament. In poem number 372, she writes, "after great pain a formal feeling comes", where "nerves sit ceremonious like the tomb". She describes the moment of death for those who are left behind, by their close ones.

This is the Hour of Lead -
Remembered, if outlived,
As freezing persons, recollect the Snow -
First - Chill - then Stupor - then the letting go-⁴

(341)

Pain comes and goes in many forms. It governs the very innate layers of the poet's conscious and unconscious state of being. It seems that she desires to convey her sense of loss, sharing her grief with the unknown readers of her verse. In "The Last Night She lived" (1100) she beautifully portrays the emotions of those people who are envious of the dying, since they do not know until when they will be forced to bear the burden of their existence. She writes,

That Others could exist
While She must finish quite
A Jealousy for Her arose
So nearly infinite
We waited while She passed⁵

(1100)

This is again a very distinct feeling of pathetic crisis where one's death becomes a sense of jealousy for the ones who are living, which arose from the very fact that the dead will be liberated by the chained existence of life and death. It however gives no suggestion of immortality or life after death.

She favoured concrete facts because they satisfied her desire for certainties. Like Whitman, she believed that death is not the ultimate end of life. Instead it becomes for one, a gateway towards an eternal existence. Death marks an end to this temporary state of being, and finally the soul passes from the time to the timeless. The journey by the chariot, the games played by children, are all poetic means of representing the dying man's emotional recollection of his past. Thus, Dickinson's flood subjects include every human perception which is some way related to pain and suffering of man. Critics claim her unintentional pre occupation with death, but it becomes for her a process to celebrate eternity.

Writing the Foreword for Sharon Leiter's Critical Companion, Gregory Orr says, "Emily Dickinson has so much to share with us, most of us need help in making the leap from our own modest passions, thoughts, and sensations to Dickinson's more intense and eccentric ones"⁶. Trying to find a meaning in her poems is desiring to find an oasis in a desert, which is tangible and intangible at the same time. She talks of Nature, and the different levels and stages of pain but each time hinting towards man's helplessness and submission to death. Her style and acute observations of nature brings her close to the 'Romantic Tradition'. But the spontaneity with which she transforms a beautiful daily object into an object and remainder of death and is commendable. She was a poet, no else could be like. A thinker, an individual beyond pre suppositions and a believer who refused to believe.

Because that you are going
And never coming back
And I, however absolute,
May overlook your track-
Because that Death is final,
However first it be,
This instant be suspended
Above Mortality-⁷

(1260)

References:

1. Wendy Martin, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*, p97, Cambridge University Press, 2007
2. Jane Donahue Eberwein, *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson*, "Is Immortality True?" ed. Vivian.R.Pollak, p96, Oxford University Press, 2004
3. Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas.H.Johnson, poem 712, Little Brown and Company, Boston, 1890
4. Ibid, Poem 341
5. Ibid, Poem 1100
6. Sharon Leiter, *Critical Companion to Emily Dickinson*, p8 Infobase Publishing, 2007
7. Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas.H.Johnson, poem 1260, Little Brown and Company, Boston, 1890
