

# A Study of Themes of Death and Immortality in the Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson

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## Abstract

The Theme of death is the most popular and prominent theme of Emily Dickinson's poetry. She has treated death "The lonesome glory" on the two levels -on the conceptual and on the level of experience. The first group deals with the meaning of death and tries to define its mystery and the second one describes death as she observed it. This Second group falls into two further divisions of poems where death is described by the external appearance and signs and where she imagines death happening to herself. Both these reveal her deep psychological insights and her uncommon power of observation. On the other hand immortality is one of the cardinal faith in the christianity and in other great religions of the world and belief in immortality presupposes an unquestioning belief in God as well as in the existence of human soul. Like nature, love and death, immortality was one of the major subjects of Emily Dickinson's poetry. Another approach towards immortality is expressed by Emily Dickinson in the poem, "A solemn thing within the soul". Her poems often explore the themes of death and immortality and she had an ambivalent attitude towards both. At the beginning of the poem "Because I could not stop for death". Immortality is personified as a passenger in the chariot driven by death, who is already there before the speaker. According to christian belief , after death, people encounter immortality through existence in the after life. Critics have mentioned various reasons behind Emily Dickinson's interest in death. First it was conventional to deal with the theme. In the nineteenth century American Literature "mortuary writing" was much in vogue. Secondly, the circumstances prevailing in the life of the sixth and seventh decades in New England were peculiar. Modern medical science was a dream.

**Key Words :** Death, Immortality, Theme, Poetry, Level

The theme of death is the most popular and eminent theme of Emily Dickinson's poetry.

This theme has attracted maximum critical attention, and it is not only one of her more

frequent themes, but also one that occupied her life long attention. Her subjects are a few and are constantly repeated- death, frustration, love, loneliness. There are presented completely and with utmost thoroughness. There is full sincerity in the expression of her thoughts about death in her poems. It has been estimated that nearly one-third of the bulk of her poetry concerns the theme of death, and she herself was preoccupied with death throughout her life. Writing to Hinginson, she gave evidence to her early awareness of death. She wrote in these words : Death may be awe for friends, striking sharp and early for I held them since in a brittle love, of more alarum than peace". In the letters she wrote to her friend Abiah, Root, in 1846, Emily tells her about the impression of the death of one sophia Holland had made on her, and gives a large place to the discussion of the subject of death in the bulk of the correspondence.

Immortality like death, is a recurring theme in Dickinson, and therefore, she called it "the flood subject" is one of her letters to Hinginson. The theme of death is further separated into two major categories including the curiosity. Dickinson held of the process of dying and the feelings accompanied with it and the reaction to the death of a loved one.

"Success is Counted Sweetest" is one of the most anthologized of Dickinson's poems, and one that is held to be representative of her attitude and genius. It is based on a contradiction of ideas- two divergent experience of man. A mouthful of water is nothing for those who have ample supply but for that person who has just crossed a desert even that little drought of. Water is like ambrosia, the immortal drink. In this poem Emily Dickinson takes recourse to a metaphorical expression. It is metaphor of war in which there are two opponent parties. One is bound to be victorious and the other defeated. The army, which has kept its

flag upright and which is in the swing of victory, cannot realize the preciousness of success or know the feeling or the meaning of victory.

They cannot define triumph so well as can be done by the wounded soldier of the enemy side, who lies dying and who hears the sound not meant for him - the songs and rejoicings of conquest. Whicher has remarked, "To her deeper scrutiny it appeared that opposites did not destroy each other into being .....All that could be known at all was known by antithesis. Without the eternal interplay of contradiction, there could be no experience.

This Short poem sums up Dickinson's vision of success and failure, through "negative example", and renunciation and deprivation is the real path of ultimate triumph and success. The speaker chooses the language of paradox to drive the point home into the reader's heart. Her suffering is not contrasted with God's benevolence, nor does it any way stand in contrast to Godly achievements, but it is the test of our ability to contribute to immortality or permanence. The precise nature of this contrast is brought about in the following lines:

" To Comprehend a Nectar Requires sorest need".

Not one ..... agonized and clear

In the poem "The Soul Selects Her Society" the poetess Emily Dickinson tells the readers that the soul selects and takes dominion over all other aspects of the man's identity. In this poem ( Miss Dickinson) the soul is metaphorically presented as a queen. This queen selects her own society. In other words, she does not want to mix herself with outside people and keeps herself shut from the rest of the world. The poetess means to say that the soul keeps herself alone from the representatives of the Secular world. The poem shows her love

for seclusion. She wants the company of only of a few chosen people. He may be her chosen lover or God or she may also be muse (Goddess of poetry). In this sense, it means that she is dedicated either to her love or poetry. Then she shuts the door of her heart for the whole world. For the world may distract her attention from her chosen one to some other direction. After selecting the chosen friend, the soul dramatically denies all others as a symbol of the matured life. She has achieved spiritual and emotional maturity and no longer needs to present herself to the world. Dickinson selects a few for her company and then she closes the door of her heart for all. She needs not to present herself to the world for she attained her ideal. After choosing her love or partner, she closes the door of her heart and does not give any importance to any other being, how so ever great he may be. Emily says that she has known her lover from among the multitudes and after making her choice, she is left with no other choice. She, therefore, becomes indifferent and inactive like a stone.

In the poem “ “Because I could not Stop for Death” Miss Dickinson portrays what it is like to go through the process of dying. In this poem, the reader learns what it is like to experience death. In this poem the poetess has not sought death because of her preoccupation with life. On the other hand death has sought her and stopped at her house. Death has not come alone, but with a companion in the form of immortality.

Immortality is death’s fellow passenger. The carriage with death and immortality drive slowly. Death knows no haste. It does not snatch life all at once. In this sense it is kind and considerate. In return to the kindness and civility of death, the poetess has put aside both her labour and her leisure.

The carriage has passed the school where children played during the time of recess. Then the carriage has passed the fields of ripening grains, and friendly the travellers have passed the setting sun. In other words the travellers have reached the evening of their life which is their final destination. Dickinson tells the sun has passed their carriage. The dew-drops are moving gently and tenderly. It is very cold which makes the poet conscious that she is not clothed as her gown is made of thin gossamer and her tippet is made of tulle. The poetess escorted by death stopped for a while before a house that seemed a grave as the ground was slightly higher like a swelling. The roof of the house was hardly visible. The cornice of the house was also in the ground, hence not visible.

Since her arrival at her new house, she has not been conscious of the passage of time. Centuries have passed yet they seem shorter than a day. First she had imagined that her horse heads pointed towards eternity. But her carriage has not reached. This is one of the most important poems of Emily Dickinson’s written on the theme of death.

Death and immortality are major theme of Emily Dickinson. Of all Dickinson’s poems covering the theme of the confrontation of the living with death. “Because I could not stop for Death” is one of the most famous and technically perfect. The poem has narrative structure and involves characters, scene, setting an all compassing theme. In the opening stanza, we are introduced to two characters. Death and immortality, who come in a chariot and stop by the narrator. They have obviously stopped there to carry her away. The carriage image and the epithets used to describe death suggest the situation of a courtly suitor along with a trusted companion going to fetch his love.

The entire poem fields to this description and even the reference to eternity in the last line can be explained as carrying the suitor- lover relationship to the farthest possible end. Hence death and immortality have been treated as deviators for human beings. In her own words : “Emily Dickinson’s aim is to record the passage from life where everything is tangible, and hence, easily apprehended, to the ‘otherness’ of death, a realm in which shapes necessarily become obscure and mysterious and can no longer be readily seen. Partly she manages the transition by shifting from light to darkness from warmth to cold, from motion to rest. In addition to these rather common place techniques, she achieves her effect through juxtaposing a precise and pictorial diction with a language that is left deliberately opaque and fuzzy.”

In the stanza three and four, the initial courtesies of death glaringly change into arrogance, and the women are treated with disrespect and contempt:

“We passed the fields of gazing Grain  
We passed the Setting Sun

Or rather - He passed us

The Dews drew quivering and Chill - For  
Only Gossamer, my Gown -

My tippet - Only Tulle -”

The beloved comes to a place with her lover, but she was confused. The confusion that one faces with, in the approach of the end, the blurred Vision, is portrayed in the following lines :

“We Paused before a house that seemed A  
Swelling of the ground

The roof was scarcely Visible The Cornice -  
but a mound -”

The end of the poem, however , does not give us any definite idea about what has happened ultimately

to that woman. The ‘eternity’ with which the poem ends, is ambiguous in the sense that we do not know whether a woman rapped of life, should be consigned to immortality by death itself; or it is that, after death, the woman had nothing before her except a vast nothingness, a big void. Yvor Winter thinks that “the poem ends in irresolution in the sense that it ends in a statement that is not offered seriously. It is possible to solve any problem of insoluble experience by retreating a step and defining the boundary at which Comprehension ceases, an by then making the necessary moral adjustments to that boundary; this is itself is an experience both final and serious” Griffith counters this criticism by saying that “the irresolution comes about because, When Emily Dickinson thinks of her own death - when she seeks to judge it morally - She cannot honestly make up her mind about what her feelings and attitudes are”.

The poem “I Felt a Funeral in my Brain”, presents a disturbing portrayal of death. The poem is not about the death and funeral of a particular person. The poetess imagines how the person breathing his last feels. The poetess also tells us how people behave at the death of someone. But it is the adroitness of the poetess that the whole description is quite realistic. There is nothing superficial about the poem. One gets the impression that the poetess gives a description of someone close to her.

The poem ‘I Felt a Funeral in my Brain’ deals with the theme of death. The poetess imagines that She is on the edge of death and at any moment her soul may leave her body, which is its temporary abode. She gives us a detailed description of how she or any other dying person feels while he or She is on her death bed and sure to die. With its vivid delineation or a complete funeral as felt through the ebbing sensation of a dead person, this poem borders on the morbid

in depicting the terrible struggle in which the alienation of the body from the soul takes place.

This separation of body from the soul is permanent and there is no hope of resurrection or immortality. There is only a despairing plunge into an eternal abyss. The poetess lays an emphasis on dying sensations and failing powers which suggest death's unpleasant fearful isolation. It also embodies the physical death stand for some terrible emotional loss or pain that cause an overwhelming sense of despair. According to George Monteiro, the poem deals with the direct knowledge of the absolute when the soul attains a temporary insight into the infinite. Death is symbolic of this, Since it is one of the pivotal experience that presents a glimpse of final things.

Emily Dickinson did not agree to the orthodox vision of paradise and even apprehended that eternity would be cosmic annihilation. She had faith in the intensity and significance of human existence and predicted that life continues even after death, she found it hard to prove its reality. The poem is not merely the portrayal of the funeral in any formal sense, it is internationalised interpretation of the vision that would end after death. She shows great concern for the break up of rational powers with the oneset and victory of lunacy. The poetess creates the funeral images and the form of some psychological drama. The gathering of people lamenting the death, the continuous beating of drum felt in the brain on account of the treading of mourners to and from where the body lies exposed, and then, the dead body is placed in the coffin, the heavy pace of all bearers, the solemnity, then the sound of the funeral bell, the sign of cross made across heart, the lifting of the coffin, all these images are produced while senses are gradually in the process of becoming numb. Then the final burial completes the process of total alienation of soul from the body.

The centre where all these actions take place. She hears the clashing sounds of her own mental crack up. But then, the external surrounding keep on pressing as the heavens appear to her to have assumed the shape of a very huge bell, tolling out a single refrain and she is feverishly attuned to the single sound. Her soul feels itself isolated in an alien land. Then, the plank in reason' (the open grave) represents symbolically the soul's only remaining insignificance held in reason. Now it breaks, collapses beneath the combined weight of feet, drum and coffin, which signify her breakdown. Thus it can be safely said that it is a great poem by virtue of its particular quality of symbols. Through the symbols of death and burial, she has bodied forth the sick and scrambled mind, approaching disintegration. Through her description of a landscape gone mad, she has presented us the exact linaments of hysteria. The funeral image reveals to us the divided personality gradually losing grip of its rational self and manifested to us that the funeral service is not merely exploited for sensational effects, rather it has an allegorical. Significance, the Ceasation of spiritual self with a glimpse of an insight into the infinity.

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