



**Research Article**

**‘ASPECTS OF DEATH’ IN EMILY DICKINSON’S POETRY**

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**ABSTRACT**

Since time immemorial, death has been one of the greatest mysteries known to humankind. Through the poetry of Emily Dickinson, death has almost been explained. Dickinson's death-related poetic compositions reflect a metamorphosis of style and thought that distinguish her earlier work from that of her two later periods. Her dynamic utilization of personification, metaphor, and euphemism is a key element in fully comprehending both her maturing poetic influences on the human perception of death, and her fear of relinquishing her life to an unknown eternity. Death becomes, in the words of Henry Wells, her closest and dearest friend (94). Investigation of the theme of death gave her a panoramic view of vital issues such as religion, God, nature, love and immortality. This paper explores the aspect of death which is the principal subject of her poems, but, because the topic is related to many of her other concerns, it is difficult to say how many of her poems concentrate on death. The paper analyzes some poems of this American poetess in complete detail.

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**INTRODUCTION**

**Justification --- Impact of Death**

‘O eloquent, just, and mighty Death! whom none could advise, thou hast persuaded; what none hath dared, thou hast done; and whom all the world hath flattered, thou only hast cast out of the world and despised: thou hast drawn together all the far stretchèd greatness, all the pride, cruelty and ambition of man, and covered it all over with those two narrow words, *Hic jacet!*’. These lines by Sir Walter Raleigh (Historie of the World, book V) echo the sentiments of many people who have given their perspectives on death, one of the greatest mysteries in this world.

Death may refer to the end of life as either an event or condition. In many cultures and in the arts, death is considered a being or otherwise personified, wherein it is usually capitalized as "Death". Men fear death, as children fear to go in the dark; and as that natural fear in children is increased with tales, so is the other. What a power has Death to awe and hush the voices of this earth! How mute we stand when that presence confronts us, and we look upon the silence he has wrought in a human life! We can only gaze, and bow our heads, and creep with our broken, stammering utterances under the shelter of some great word which God has spoken, and in which we see through the history of human sorrow the outstretching and overshadowing of the eternal arms.

Death, to a good man is but passing through a dark entry, out of one little dusky room of his Father's house into another that is fair and large, lightsome and glorious, and divinely entertaining. When you think of your own death, the fact that all the good things in life will come to an end is certainly a reason for regret. But that doesn't seem to be the whole story. Most people want there to be more of what they enjoy in life, but for some people, the prospect of nonexistence is itself frightening, in a way that isn't adequately explained by what has been said so far. The thought that the world will go on without you, that you will become nothing, is very hard to take in.

As Steve Jobs, (Stanford University) said in his commencement address on 12 June 2005, ‘Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything—all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure—these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.’

Almost unknown as a poet in her lifetime, Emily Dickinson is now recognized as one of America's greatest poets and, in the view of some, as one of the greatest lyric poets of all time. The past fifty years or so have seen an outpouring of books and essays attempting to explain her poetry and her life. Writing poetry may have served Dickinson as a way of releasing or escaping from pain—from the deaths of loved ones, from her inability to resolve her doubts about God, from the terrors,

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however faint, which she saw within herself, in others, and in the world outside yet nearby. To say that she may have sublimated her pain into poetry does not invalidate her view of the power of poetry; both may be true and exist at the same time. Perhaps the sublimation of pain, as well as other powerful emotions, into poetry is one source of the power that it has to move readers profoundly. Like Keats, Dickinson was concerned with the transitory and the permanent, with mortality and immortality, though her views and her poetry differ from his. Death, the ultimate experience, is for Dickinson the supreme touchstone. It reveals ultimate truth or reality; it makes clear the true nature of God and the state of the soul. She held the common Puritan belief that the way a person died indicated the state of his/her soul, a peaceful death being a sign of grace and harmony with God. When a much-admired friend died, she wrote to his minister to inquire about his state of mind while dying: "Please Sir, to tell me if he was willing to die, and if you think him at Home, I should love so much to know certainly that he was today in heaven."

Emily Dickinson's unique treatment of death stands remarkable in the history of American poetry and literature. Despite her relatively short span of life, Dickinson is widely considered as one of the best known poets who shed a great deal of light on the theme of death. George and Barbara Perkins write that Dickinson is "incomparable because her originality sets her apart from all others, but her poems shed the unmistakable light of greatness".

Emily Dickinson's selected poems offer a varied repertoire of her apparent contradictory views of death. The clashing interpretations of death are accompanied by an elaborate use of literary techniques. Each poem reflects a different type of journey, and there is an implicit invitation to the reader to choose which definition of death goes better with his/her set of beliefs. This is enough justification to discuss the various aspects of death in her poetry.

### **Introduction**

Even a modest selection of Emily Dickinson's poems reveals that death is her principal subject; in fact, because the topic is related to many of her other concerns, it is difficult to say how many of her poems concentrate on death. But over half of them, at least partly, and about a third centrally, feature it. Most of these poems also touch on the subject of religion, although she did write about religion without mentioning death. For Dickinson, death is the supreme touchstone for life and she lived incessantly in his presence. She was always conscious of its nearness and inevitability. It becomes, in the words of Henry Wells, her closest and dearest friend (94). Investigation of the theme of death gave her a panoramic view of vital issues such as religion, God, nature, love and immortality. Sylvia Plath in her famous poem, "Lady Lazarus" says, "Dying is an art, like everything else." Similarly, this aspect of life that is death which is the end of life seems to attract Emily Dickinson very much. So also, death is the most frequently used themes in her poems. In the poems discussed in this study, death presumes different personalities taken from life surrounding Dickinson. Other nineteenth-century poets, Keats and Whitman are good examples, were also death-haunted, but few as much as Emily Dickinson. Life in a small New England town in Dickinson's time contained a high mortality rate for young people; as a result, there were frequent death-scenes in homes, and this

factor contributed to her preoccupation with death, as well as her withdrawal from the world, her anguish over her lack of romantic love, and her doubts about fulfillment beyond the grave. Years ago, Emily Dickinson's interest in death was often criticized as being morbid, but in our time readers tend to be impressed by her sensitive and imaginative handling of this painful subject. Her poems centering on death and religion can be divided into four categories: those focusing on death as possible extinction, those dramatizing the question of whether the soul survives death, those asserting a firm faith in immortality, and those directly treating God's concern with people's lives and destinies.

### ***Analysis of A Few Poems --- A Different Perspective***

Dickinson depicts death with the endearment of romantic attraction and attributes some mysticism to the end of life. She admires death as a perfect state of calmness of the mind. Her viewing of death is completely different even though the author also touches the idea of suicide. However, suicide for Dickinson is not full of pain and suffering, it is rather "the desire of people to meet with the Death" because it is the end.....

Sky becomes the symbol of death being an elevated state of spirituality. This idea is also traced in the poems of Dickinson. The use of nature in the poem "I Am Vertical" as a setting helps to reinforce the serenity in death. The contrast between a vibrant nature full of life and death is in opposition to traditional view of dying as morbid. Dickinson makes an assumption that we cannot go to death but it is death that comes to us when it desires. In the poems of Dickinson death is personalized and can talk, walk, as if it is an alive creature. "Though I than He -- may longer live, He longer must than I, For I have but the power to kill, Without the power to die." In these lines, the author talks about "death having the power to decide who will die and who will not"

### ***Death---- A Strange Silence In A Storm***

The very popular "I heard a Fly buzz-when I died" (465) is often seen as representative of Emily Dickinson's style and attitudes. The first line is as arresting an opening as one could imagine. By describing the moment of her death, the speaker lets us know that she has already died. In the first stanza, the death-room's stillness contrasts with a fly's buzz that the dying person hears, and the tension pervading the scene is likened to the pauses within a storm. The second stanza focuses on the concerned onlookers, whose strained eyes and gathered breath emphasize their concentration in the face of a sacred event: the arrival of the "King," who is death. In the third stanza, attention shifts back to the speaker, who has been observing her own death with all the strength of her remaining senses. She is getting ready to guide herself towards death. But the buzzing fly intervenes at the last instant; the phrase "and then" indicates that this is a casual event, as if the ordinary course of life were in no way being interrupted by her death. The fly's "blue buzz!" is one of the most famous pieces of synesthesia in Emily Dickinson's poems. This image represents the fusing of color and sound by the dying person's diminishing 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. Her vision of death indicates the process of putrefaction that occurs when one dies (Yan, 2010). She explains that the room gets still when one dies, indicating that she is still conscious about her surroundings. 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.

Critics have disagreed about the symbolic fly, some claiming that it symbolizes the precious world being left behind and others insisting that it stands for the decay and corruption associated with death. Although we favor the first of these, a compromise is possible. The fly may be loathsome, but it can also signify vitality. The synesthetic description of the fly helps depict the messy reality of dying, an event that one might hope to find more uplifting. The poem portrays a typical nineteenth-century death-scene, with the onlookers studying the dying countenance for signs of the soul's fate beyond death, but otherwise the poem seems to avoid the question of immortality.

One of the most captivating aspects about the literature of Emily Dickinson is her ability to present death in varying forms. She describes the different emotional responses that death has on human soul and mind and enables the readers to view death from a different perspective. The ambiguous meaning of death that Dickinson uses gives the audience a choice to have their own interpretations about death. Through the varying descriptions of death, the author explains the many types of death that individuals experience.

#### ***Death ---- A Riddle***

In "This World is not Conclusion" (501), Emily Dickinson dramatizes a conflict between faith in immortality and severe doubt. Her earliest editors omitted the last eight lines of the poem, distorting its meaning and creating a flat conclusion. The complete poem can be divided into two parts: the first twelve lines and the final eight lines. It starts by emphatically affirming that there is a world beyond death which we cannot see but which we still can understand intuitively, as we do music. Lines four through eight introduce conflict. Immortality is attractive but puzzling. Even wise people must pass through the riddle of death without knowing where they are going.

The borderline between Emily Dickinson's treatment of death as having an uncertain outcome and her affirmation of immortality cannot be clearly defined. The epigrammatic "The Bustle in a House" (1078) makes a more definite affirmation of immortality than the poems just discussed, but its tone is still grim. If we wanted to make a narrative sequence of two of Emily Dickinson's poems about death, we could place this one after "The last Night that She lived." "The Bustle in a House" at first appears to be an objective description of a household following the death of a dear person. It is only the morning after, but already there is the bustle of everyday activity. The word "bustle" implies a brisk busyness, a return to the normality and the order shattered by the departure of the dying. Industry is ironically joined to solemnity, but rather than mocking industry, Emily Dickinson shows how such busyness is an attempt to subdue grief.

One of Emily Dickinson's unique contributions to American literature is her poetic treatment of death. She wrote more than five hundred poems on the theme of death. In other words, we can say that her best and most characteristic poems proliferate from centre of energy i.e death. She found the gradual coming of death the most resonant and moving of all possible poetic

themes. Apart from all poetic images, symbols and personifications, death seems to her the underlying principle of the universe. In her universe death all but replaces God.

Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death" is a remarkable masterpiece that exercises thought between the known and the unknown. Critics call Emily Dickinson's poem a masterpiece with strange "haunting power." In Dickinson's poem, "Because I could not stop for Death," there is the use of imagery that exudes creativity. It is Emily Dickinson's most anthologized and discussed poem. It deserves such attention, although it is difficult to know how much its problematic nature contributes to this interest. Some critics believe that the poem shows death escorting the female speaker to an assured paradise. Others believe that death comes in the form of a deceiver, perhaps even a rapist, to carry her off to destruction. Still others think that the poem leaves the question of her destination open. As does "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died," this poem gains initial force by having its protagonist speak from beyond death. Here, however, dying has largely preceded the action, and its physical aspects are only hinted at.

Dickinson's poems deal with death again and again, and it is never quite the same in any poem. In "Because I could not stop for Death-," we see death personified. He is no frightening, or even intimidating, reaper, but rather a courteous and gentle guide, leading her to eternity. The speaker feels no fear when Death picks her up in his carriage, she just sees it as an act of kindness, as she was too busy to find time for him.

It is this kindness, this individual attention to her-it is emphasized in the first stanza that the carriage holds just the two of them, doubly so because of the internal rhyme in "held" and "ourselves"-that leads the speaker to so easily give up on her life and what it contained. This is explicitly stated, as it is "For His Civility" that she puts away her "labor" and her "leisure," which is Dickinson using metonymy to represent another alliterative word-her life. The tone in Dickinson's poem will put its readers' ideas on a unifying track heading towards a bogging atmosphere.

Dickinson's masterpiece lives on complex ideas that are evoked through symbols, which carry her readers through her poem. Besides the literal significance of -the "School," "Gazing Grain," "Setting Sun," and the "Ring"-much is gathered to complete the poem's central idea. Emily brought to light the mysteriousness of life's cycle. Ungraspable to many, the cycle of one's life, as symbolized by Dickinson, has three stages and then a final stage of eternity. These three stages are recognized by Mary N. Shaw as follows: "School, where children strove"(9) may represent childhood; "Fields of Gazing Grain"(11), maturity; and "Setting sun" as the last stage. According to M.N. Shaw, death is seen as a three-step process in this poem through the images of the "School," "Gazing Grain," and "Setting Sun." Shaw believes that the school children "in the Ring" are representative of competition among professionals that occur during one's career. Shaw also believes that the speaker views life with gusto and through great control.

#### ***Death ---An Omnipresent Force***

In 'Behind me....dips Eternity', somewhat unlike many of her other poems dealing with death, Dickinson presents death as so omnipresent a force that it is life that is the rupture in the otherwise continuous, eternal dark immortality. Her life, her

identity, is the only thing that prevents an uninterrupted endlessness, but with the sense she creates of "Eternity" and "Immortality" pressing on her throughout the poem, this feels more and more like a blip, rather than like an important life which has any effect on the world, and her choice of the clinical word "Term" to describe it underscores this. The poem strives for a strong affirmation of immortality, but it reveals more pain than "Those not live yet" and perhaps some doubt. "Eternity" and "Immortality," however, lose their sense in the way that Dickinson presents them, which either weakens them or makes them more menacing than the speaker ostensibly thinks they are. They don't have a beginning or an end ("Dateless") and they are uninterrupted by events ("pauseless"), thus there are no markers by which to comprehend them. They are also yoked together with each other because of the parallel structure of their presentation in the first two lines, thus they lose their distinctions, and their meanings are weakened.

In addition, Dickinson uses repetition to make her descriptions of these things feel less meaningful, for in repetition, words often lose their power. For example, "Midnight" and "Midnight," all the repetitions of "Himself" in the second stanza, and "Miracle" and "Miracle," as well as the constant repetitions of line structure (the first two lines of the first and last stanzas, for example). She also throws doubt on her depiction of "Immortality," first by separating it from herself, and making it a common assumption—"they say"—and by describing Christ with an internal rhyme that emphasizes vacancy—"Son of None."

This doubtful depiction of the afterlife is followed by the line "'Tis Miracle before Me – then –," but the "then" throws this statement into doubt, because what caused it is also doubted. Thus although the speaker in this poem seems sure of her position on the afterlife, and death is presented melodically, with lots of alliteration and rhyming ("Death but the Drift of Eastern Gray, / Dissolving into Dawn away"), the poem itself actually exhibits an anxious doubt about what, if anything, will finally follow death.

## CONCLUSION

The theme of death in the poetry of Dickinson has attracted a large critical attention. Death is not only one of her most frequent themes, but also one that preoccupies her lifelong attention. In treating this subject, Emily Dickinson rarely hints at the causes of suffering, apparently preferring to keep personal motives hidden, and she concentrates on the self-contained nature of the pain. Wendy Martin believes that, "Death was the problem for Dickinson, a riddle she could never solve, but which she always explored". In short, death made claims on Emily Dickinson's entire mental world, a reason for such an immense preoccupation is her involvement with religious and spiritual values, such as time, god, eternity, immortality, nature, and love.

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