



PERSPECTIVES ON DEATH THEME IN THE POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON

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ABSTRACT

This paper throws light on the perspectives of death theme in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. About five hundreds of her poems are devoted to the theme of death. The various subjects which are focussed in her poetry are as – Nature, Love, Death, Frustration, Pain and Suffering, Immortality, God and Christ. In this way the range of her poetry is thus wide. She wrote a series of death poems in which death is the thing that separates people from their beloved. Each theme is dealt in most of her poetry. But, after all, the theme of death in her poetry has attracted largest critical attention. The most gripping of Emily Dickinson's poems are centered around the question of 'what is death? Why is death/ and what is it like to die? . Death is the central and morbid concern of Emily Dickinson's poems. We must recognise, however, that in the poet's mind the idea of death is repeatedly accompanied by the possibility of life after death. Death is the bridge which must be crossed, and in itself, it warrants specific attention. Above all, death is indeed the major theme of Emily Dickinson's poems.

Keywords : *Death, funeral, church, clock stopping, coffin.*

Emily Dickinson, the recluse of Amherst, Massachusetts who is, by common consent, considered a major American poet, and the greatest of all women poets who wrote in English, lived an isolated and obscure life. In other words, she has been pictured as a sensitive poet. She wrote about the tiny ecstasies set in motion by change of seasons, by home and garden incidents. She also wrote about frank insights into her own states of consciousness and of speculations on the timeless mysteries of love and death. Her poetry dealt with a number of themes in her poetry- Nature, love, pain and suffering, death and immortality, God and Christ, poetry as an art, and so on.

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. She



regards death as the great unknown and never ceased to ponder its fascination and mystery. The theme of death has occupied her lifelong attention. She herself was “preoccupied with death” throughout her life. Writing to Higginson, she testified to her early awareness of death; “death gave me awe for friends, striking sharp and early for i held them since in a brittle love, of more alarum than peace”.

At one of the place, Emily Dickinson tells her about the impression of 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:

Death not Eternity appear dreadful to you, I often get thinking of it and it seems so dark to me that I almost wish there was no Eternity. To think that we must forever live and never cease to be.

It seems as if Death which all so dread because it launches us upon as unknown world be a relief to so endless a state of existence. I don't know why it is, but it does not seem to me that I shall ever cease to live on earth- I cannot imagine with the farthest stretch of my imagination my own death scene- It does not seem to me that I shall ever close my eyes in death.

Death is free agent. It is itself beyond beyond the necessity it imposes on human and natural life. Larger than man and nature, it transcends the boundaries to separate them. The gradual encroachment of death upon living beings imposed the only philosophically meaningful relationship between man and nature, the soul and the body:

*Death is a dialogue between
The spirit and the dust.*

Emily Dickinson has devoted about five hundred of her poems to the theme of death . This theme is also linked to the little death of friend's or lover's parting to justice in heaven for separated earthly lovers and to a poet's immortality in her verse. This theme begins early in her poetry and persists late. It varies in tone from elegiac despair or horror at bodily decay to exalt and confident belief, to resignation before an unsolvable mystery. She expressed doubts regarding immortality traditional challenge only, and ultimately ignoring it. This in part again is the purpose of the poem, The Battle fought between the Soul -, where she recounts how Death by far the greater Battle is forgotten once it becomes a deed :

*No news of it is had abroad-
It's bodiless Campaigne-
Establishes, and terminates-
Invisible- Unknown-*



*No History- record it-
As legions of a Night-
The Sunrise scatters- These endure-
Enact- and terminate-*

She accepts death as a physical fact, as a material truth, and though this acceptance lead to philosophical or theological ruminations, her immediate interest in the poems is to dramatize the event to bring out the tension, conflicts or inner drama that such as a catastrophic event will have on the minds of an audience. The result of this in her poetry is a close attention to details of utterance, observation of particulars, and a dynamic and explosive use of the language.

The poem A Clock Stopped is a fuller examination of death. The philosophical and religious implications of death in this poem are deeper. The poetess here uses the superstitions of clock stopping when a person dies, and she uses also the age-old comparison of life to a timepiece. Through these metaphor she portrays death as the sudden breakdown of a carefully constructed Swiss clock. She says that though death ends physical life, it does not cause complete loss, but only a change and separation the baffle the onlookers. She dramatises the horror of death experienced mentally. She doesn't tell us that she is horrified at the very idea of death. She instead dramatises the whole ritual of the arrival of mourners, ringing of death-knell, keeping the dead body in the coffin, and the railing of its lid in the poem I felt a Funeral in my Brain. In Just lost, when I was saved, Death is presented as an objective fact to be explored, described and assessed. However, the poem There came a Day at Summer's full, shows the two lovers who are true to each other through all odds but there couldn't be any permanent union for them in this world. Dickinson's I have Seen a Dying Eye shows the uncertainty and uncontrollability which attributes to death. The observer in this poem is watching a dying person. The eye of a dying person is looking for something, but a fog begins to cloud his eye. With words like "run", a feeling of urgency is created. The dying person has no control over the clouds covering his eyes while he frantically searches through the room, hoping to find what he is looking for before the clouds completely cover him. Likewise, Death is an uncontrollable force. The dying person finally dies, having the observer of the death to question whether the dying person saw anything before his death, and if so whether it was hopeful or not.

The poem Because I could not stop for death has all the elements of Emily Dickinson's preoccupation with death . It presents death as an objective fact. It reveals the morbidity fanciful attempt to think herself, in the present as also, into that future objective condition. Death is here also experienced subjectivity as deprivation and loss of possibility and symbolised by objective death the grave. Death , in this poem may be many things, and possibly many people but he is certainly a bridegroom coming to take his bride to the nuptial chamber, where as queen , she will put on 'immortal' status- in suspended animation, a living

corpse. It is a poem of departure f life ,intensely conscious leave-taking. Allen Tate, a distinguished American poet, and critic called this “An extraordinary poem”. She says”I could not stop for death, he kindly stopped me”, she is not ready to die but accepts the fact that it is a natural thing that happens to all human beings, and comes at its own time, no matter what you are doing or where you are it will come and take you, to which she seems content with. She personifies death as if it was a kind gentleman, or her groom that comes to pick her up and take her away in his carriage on a pleasant ride.

The poem Adrift! A little boat adrift dramatises the coming of death in the opening stanza of the poem :

*Adrift ! A little boat adrift !
And night is coming down !!
Will no one guide a little boat
Unto the nearest town ?*

It ends with an exultant tone with the soul caught in death ultimately transcending it, and reaching a point where its rejuvenation is complete and permanent:

*So angels say- on yesterday-
Just as the dawn was red
One little boat –O’ erspent with gales-
Retrimmed its mast – redecked its saila-
And short exultant on.*

Emily Dickinson frequently personified death. In such a poem as The only ghost I ever saw, he is held delicately half way between a loose association of natural forces and a person. Time is what makes one conscious of the tragic inevitability- death. An awareness of the fleeting movements fills man with the fear of death, of the imminent extinction.

Conclusion

Emily Dickinson is totally a perfect poet who expresses her deepest thoughts under the guise of various themes. But her primary fascination was with death, which she focused an extensively with great insight in exploring the unknown of death. She often placed herself in the position of the person who was dying in an attempt to convey what it may be like to actually live. Her finest poems with the theme of dying emphasises the different aspects of compounding loss, pain, and power of the experience along with the equally as powerful sense of gain. One forth of her poetry is about the theme of death. She sees death in different angles than the other poets. In her views, death is not dead, rather death is beautiful, fantastic and mystical. Death is inevitable for all of us from the moment we come to this world.



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