

Emily Dickinson's Poetry and the Idea of Death



Priyanka Roy
MPhil Scholar
Department of English
Gauhati University
Guwahati, Assam

Abstract:

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) remains one of the primary poets of nineteenth century America, to be studied till date. One of the aspects that is often seen to overshadow her poems is the idea of death. This preoccupation with death accounts to the environment she was located in. Personal and social occurring both contributed to the idea of death in Dickinson that gets reflected in her poems. Her letters can be used as evidence to support this statement. The pain and loss associated with death in her poetry is linked to the idea of a hopeful and evergreen afterlife. The colour white that is often associated with her and her idea of the 'circumference' can also be read in association with the ideas of death and the afterlife. The paper attempts to read this idea of death and the idea of the afterlife in Dickinson's works through the study of some of her poems.

Keywords: Death, afterlife, poetry, the colour white, circumference.

Emily Dickinson's Poetry and the Idea of Death**Priyanka Roy**
MPhil Scholar
Department of English
Gauhati University
Guwahati, Assam

Death is a recurring theme in Emily Dickinson's poetry. And to this idea of death is linked, the idea of an afterlife. Dickinson seems to consider death as a medium of entering into the other world that is characterised by hope and fulfilment, a world that is infinite yet is capable of instigating the hope of reunion with one's lost loved ones and the fulfilment of a desire for eternal companionship. However, uncertainty, fear and awe remain inherent to the idea of death. Nevertheless, death tends to take an optimistic bend, as death does not become a full-stop to the journey of the soul but rather serves as both medium and event that transports the soul into another existence. This creation of an afterlife, as in the larger nineteenth century context, becomes an attempt to provide consolation in Dickinson's case too; aimed at overcoming the pain of loss and frustration caused by the isolation created by such loss. Though Dickinson characterises the unknown afterlife as a better place filled with possibilities and happiness, yet she does not deny the pain and suffering related to death. Thus death- as a medium and event- becomes a distasteful occurrence that inflicts loss, separation and pain, but is necessary for the transference to the eternal afterlife. This paper attempts to study the idea of death in Dickinson's poetry as the medium for entering into a better and everlasting existence, in the context of some of her poems.

Of Death I try to think like this-
The Well in which they lay us
Is but the Likeness of the Brook
That menaced not to slay us,
But to invite by that Dismay
Which is the Zest of sweetness
To the same Flower Hesperian,
Decoying but to greet us-

I do remember when a Child
With bolder Playmates straying
To where a Brook that seemed a Sea
Withheld us by its roaring
From just a Purple Flower beyond
Until constrained to clutch it
If Doom itself were the result,
The boldest leaped, and clutched it- (Johnson 648)

In this poem “Of Death I try to think like this”, grave, that is likened to “The Well” becomes symbolic of death “the Brook”. Death does not “slay us”, would mean that death does not completely destroy “us” but the word “menace” indicates the discomfort and chaos created by “the Brook”. “The Zest for sweetness” can be interpreted as the hope for the sweet life that awaits after the invitation by “that Dismay” which is the painful and dismal event of death. The next stanza contains a similar reflection. Here, “a Purple Flower” becomes the image of the afterlife, from which the poet persona, representative of the human soul is separated by the “Brook that seemed a Sea”. Death here becomes an object that evokes fear and the sense of separation. However the word “Brook” suggests that death is not as fearful as it appears. It can be crossed in order to attain the “Purple Flower” that lies beyond. The crossing of the “Brook” definitely involves discomfort. And finally risking “Doom itself” the “boldest” leaps and attains the flower. Though the uncertainty about the afterlife remains, yet there is an equally strong desire to explore the possibility of the afterlife. The positive qualities of the expected afterlife become evident in the use of the flower images. This difficulty related with death also repeats in the poem “Dying! Dying in the night!”

Dying! Dying in the night!
Won't somebody bring the light
So I can see which way to go
Into the everlasting snow? (Johnson 74)

“Night” becomes symbolic of the pain and difficulty that death is associated with. And the sense of confusion that is created by the “night” can be analogised with the panic that the event of death creates. The passage to the “everlasting snow” therefore is not a smooth one.

Exultation is the going
Of an island soul to sea,
Past the houses- past the head lands-
Into deep Eternity-

Bred as we, among the mountains,
Can the sailor understand
The divine intoxication
Of the first league out from land? (Johnson 39)

The “island soul”, that is the individual soul, is not familiar with the experience “out from land”. This extra-terrestrial journey may be considered symbolic of the journey of the soul through the sea of death “into deep Eternity”. The ‘island soul’ despite the loss it is to experience in leaving behind everything –“Past the houses- past the head lands-” – is still filled with “exultation” about the “divine intoxication” that awaits. Hardships as integral to sea voyages also get echoed in this journey of the soul through the sea of death. The afterlife is therefore associated with the experiences and existences that are superior to the earthly ones which follow after the pain and loss associated with death.

Dickinson’s use of the colour white in relation to death can be added in support of this

idea. The colour white has been used symbolically to represent light, peace, purity and even freedom. By associating the colour white to death, Dickinson emphasizes on the relation of the positive features attributed to the colour with the journey that death leads to, rather than with the event of death itself. Wheatcroft notes in this context, that: Snow and frost are two of the most commonly used figures for death in the body of Dickinson's poetry (Wheatcroft 136). The following extract of the poem will help understand this context.

Dying! Dying in the night!
Won't somebody bring the light
So I can see which way to go
Into the everlasting snow? (Johnson 74)

The colour white of the "snow" is indicative of a positive aura related to the afterlife that death leads to, while the coldness associated with the imagery may be read as the gloominess associated with the event of death itself. Dickinson's adoption of the white robe, in this context can be considered to be a reflection of her inner desire for immortality - that afterlife, which contains the possibility of reunion with lost friends whom the life on earth cannot provide her back. Thus, death in Dickinson is almost always associated with immortality. This immortality that makes reappearances in her poetry can be achieved only through death that would make the soul free from the limitations of mortality and though painful, the soul through death would then enter into another existence, which is everlasting and has prospects of reunion and so of happiness.

In a letter to Higginson, dated 1862, Dickinson writes: My business is circumference (Todd 257). The idea of death also gets included in her desire for exploration of this circumference. Dickinson's "conception of circumference is boundless...a limitless expansion away"(Gillespie 256). Circumference demands expansion. The idea of death becomes the medium that facilitates this movement outward, in her exploration of the unknown existence beyond this life. Discoveries of new understandings would certainly involve hardships. So, death is characterised by a sort of pain. A pain, that serves in crossing the limits of this life and to keep the exploration of her circumference continuing in a new dimension.

Emerson states, defining his concept of the Over-soul: that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other (Emerson 138-139). A certain kind of unity becomes evident in Dickinson too - the unity that she feels with her loved ones and her fellow creatures. She extends this bond of unity even to her idea of the afterlife.

My only sketch, profile, of Heaven is a large, blue sky, bluer and larger than the biggest I have seen in June, and in it are my friends- all of them- every one of them- those who are with me now, and those who were 'parted' as we walked, and 'snatched up to Heaven'. (Todd 141)

While Emerson's unity gives precedence to a vertical connection, that is, the souls being connected to the Over-soul, along with being connected with each other, Dickinson's unity is rather of a more horizontal nature. The supreme being or God in Dickinson is rather a

separate entity. The following lines of the poem “Dying! Dying in the night!” can be read in this light.

And ‘Jesus’! Where is Jesus gone?
They said that Jesus – always came-
Perhaps he doesn’t know the House-
This way, Jesus, Let him pass!

Somebody run to the great gate
And see if Dollie’s coming! Wait!
I hear her feet upon the stair!
Death won’t hurt- now Dollie’s here! (Johnson 74)

Here, at the crucial moment of the painful event of death, “Dollie” becomes the saviour rather than “Jesus”. The quotation marks over Jesus, further separates Him from the community of humans. A greater compassion and unity is thus seen among the fellow creatures. This attitude can be seen also in a letter to Maria Whitney where Dickinson expresses her dissatisfaction at not receiving a reply from Miss Whitney: You are like God. We pray to Him, and He answers ‘No’. Then we pray to Him to rescind the ‘no’, and He don’t answer at all, yet ‘Seek and ye shall find’ is the boon of faith (Todd 289).

Gillespie cites Yvor Winters: to approach nature is to depart from the fullness of human life, and to join nature is to leave human life. Nature thus becomes a symbol of death... (Gillespie 266). In this context, Dickinson’s nature poems such as “In Winter in my Room” (Johnson 682), where she attempts to get into the selves of the other beings of nature, in order to attain their perspectives, her own human self undergoes a kind of death to facilitate newer understandings. This attempt at transformation of self definitely involves a certain amount of difficulty and pain. And once this pain necessary for the death of her human self is endured and overcome, an entry becomes possible to explore the circumference of the worlds of the other beings of nature.

Emily Dickinson’s poetry can be said to reflect her inner thoughts and attitude towards life. The preoccupation with the idea of death and a life after death that appears in her poetry, occurs in her letters too. The following letters will serve as justification to the above. In an 1854 letter to the Hollands, she writes:

Thank God there is a world, and that the friends we love dwell forever and ever in a house above. I fear I grow incongruous, but to meet my friends does delight me so that I quite forget time and space and so forth. (Todd 137)

She writes to Higginson in 1874: I am glad there is Immortality (Todd 267). Again, in a letter to Higginson, she writes in 1863: Perhaps death gave me awe for friends, striking sharp and early, for I held them since in a brittle love, of more alarm than peace (Todd 260). Thus, her letters throw light to the fact that she was personally affected by death, and this in turn gets reflected in her poems.

Dickinson’s preoccupation with the themes of death and immortality that recur

throughout the body of her poems, itself indicates clearly the impact of death on her. The major and most evident reason for her obsession with death is the number of deaths of close ones that she had to encounter, right from her adolescence and throughout her life. This led to her isolation and seclusion. Emily was introduced to the depressing effect of death and loss with the death of Sophia Holland that she experienced at the age of fourteen. Her father's death in 1874 affected her greatly and she became a total recluse thereafter. Along with these personal experiences, the happenings of her surroundings also contributed as sources for her reflections on death and immortality. The nineteenth century, to which Dickinson belongs was an age where death was a painful and familiar experience. Emily was well aware of the number of deaths caused by the Civil War. With the Civil War, nineteenth century America saw large number of deaths of young men and old alike. She had daily access to the bulletins, along with the correspondence she had with her friend Higginson, who was related actively with the war. She used to write to him while he was at camp. She wrote to Higginson in the summer of 1863 when he was wounded in war: The only news I know/ Is bulletins all day/ From Immortality (Todd 261). She also wrote to her cousins about the loss and harm that the war had caused to friends:

Mrs. Adams had news of the death of her boy today, from a wound at Annapolis...Another one died in October- from fever caught in the camp. Mrs. Adams herself has not risen from bed since then...Dead! Both her boys! One of them shot by the sea in the East, and one of them shot in the West by the sea... . (Todd 202)

Even under normal circumstances, mortality rate remained high due to the lack of proper medical facilities. These social conditions along with certain others may also be listed as contributors that caused Dickinson to emphasize on death and frequently reflect on topics of death and immortality. Another interesting social practice to be noted is the elaborate arrangements for the dead which included decoration of the coffin and the carriage carrying the coffin, deathbed behavioural customs and several detailed mourning rituals. Relating to such concerns, Susan Smart presents nineteenth century ideas about death as:

...daily life on earth was merely to be endured in order to prepare for the much more significant eternal life ahead. There was confidence that upon death, loved ones would be reunited in heaven, and dying was a beginning not an end. (Smart 22)

Such positive attitude towards death can be considered as a strategy adopted by the people in order to hold on to the spirit of life amidst the widespread death, loss and pain related to such experiences. These ideas about life being a preparation for death and the existence of a 'heaven' have their origins in religious beliefs. The burial ground described by one of the local ministers as lifeless and gloomy, was visible from their house in North Pleasant Street. Dickinson must have observed death from a close vicinity, which perhaps had led to her further reflections and preoccupations with death, which in turn gave rise to her reflections on immortality and the possible existence of an afterlife.

Dickinson's preoccupation with the ideas of death and immortality that occur in her

poems and letters is because she had experienced the impact of death and the sense of utter loss and isolation that it creates, from close quarters. Her optimistic consideration of death, despite its pains and the repetitions that occur in her writings can be read as a kind of an attempt to overcome the fear of death and the grief and trauma caused by it. This reading can be related to Freud's concept of the repetitive compulsion. Dickinson's desire for thanos or the end of the mortal life is aimed at attaining the equilibrium which she believes exists in the afterlife. Dickinson's idea of the afterlife as a place of reunion with her lost friends and family members, thus, can be considered to be her construct through which she attempts to relive the pleasurable past. Her poems become the platform for expression of her ideas and reflections on death, immortality and the afterlife.

References:

- Gillespie, Robert. "A Circumference of Emily Dickinson." *The New England Quarterly* 40.2 (1973): 250-271. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 October 2013.
- Johnson, Thomas H., ed. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1970. Print.
- Smart, Susan. *A Better Place*. Canada: Library and Archives Canada, 2011. eBook.
- Todd, Mabel Loomis, ed. *Letters of Emily Dickinson*. U.S.A.: Universal Library, 1962. Print.
- Wheatcroft, J. S. "Emily Dickinson's White Robes." 5.2 (1963): 135-147. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 October 2013.

Bibliography:

- Bradbury, Mary. *Representations of Death*. U.S.A.: Routledge, 1999. Print.
- Dauben, Miriam. *Emily Dickinson: The Death Motif in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson*. Germany: GRIN Verlag, 2010. eBook.
- Diehl, Joanne Feit. *Women Poets and the American Sublime*. U.S.A.: Indiana University Press, 1990. Print.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Library of Alexandria, 1906. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press, 1955. Print.
- Gillespie, Robert. "A Circumference of Emily Dickinson." *The New England Quarterly* 40.2 (1973): 250-271. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 October 2013.
- Jalland, Patricia. *Death in the Victorian Family*. New York: OUP, 1996. Print.
- Johnson, Thomas H., ed. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1970. Print.
- Leifer, Sharon. *Critical Companion to Emily Dickinson*. U.S.A.: Facts On File, 2007. eBook.
- Martin, Wendy, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*. U.K.: CUP, 2002. eBook.

- Miller, Cristanne. *Reading in Time: Emily Dickinson in the Nineteenth Century*. U.S.A.: Massachusetts Press, 2012. Print.
- Smart, Susan. *A Better Place*. Canada: Library and Archives Canada, 2011. eBook.
- Todd, Mabel Loomis, ed. *Letters of Emily Dickinson*. U.S.A.: Universal Library, 1962. Print.
- Wheatcroft, J. S. "Emily Dickinson's White Robes." 5.2 (1963): 135-147. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 October 2013.