

## Emily Dickinson's concept of Death: A note of paradox

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### Abstract

She perceives death from different angles in different modes, and tries to capture the abstract feelings and emotions in palatable term. Her views of death transcend the common limitations of human experiences. The discussion and analysis of her poems that follows will show how she plays endless variations on the theme of death to explore its manifold aspects which can be felt by intuition and not by reason. Her vision of death as reflected in her letters as well as poems is paradoxical. She considers death both as a friend and a foe. She fears as well as welcomes it.

**Keywords:** death, immortality, friend, lover, foe, funeral, fear etc

### Introduction

Death, the theme of about six hundred poems is so dominant in the poetry of Emily Dickinson that she seems to be preoccupied with it. Her vision of death as reflected in her letters as well as poems is paradoxical. She considers death both as a friend and a foe. She fears as well as welcomes it. It was dreadful for her to imagine "with the farthest stretch of my imagination my own death scene." Dying, she felt, "is a wild night and a new read." Death is a "Balmless Wound" and for that even immortality is a slow solace." She wrote to Mrs. Joseph A Sweetser, "Death is perhaps an intimate friend, not an enemy"

Emily Dickinson defines death in paradoxical terms. Death, she said, is "the hinge to life" and the first form of life which we have had the power to contemplate." And again she observes. "A breathless death is not so cold as a death that breathes." She remarks, "Sharper than dying is the death for the drying's sake." She makes death a means of her search for meaning of life here and in the love after and these experience the totality of the unity of life and death. However her perception of death is imaginative rather than philosophical. She perceives death from different angles and different moods and tries to capture the abstract feelings and emotions. Death she says, is migration to a place of repose or returning to the native town (Poem-107). It is a sleep –"A long –long sleep famous sleep that makes no show for morn." Death is perceived as a suitor lover or bridegroom driving away with his beloved or bride. From the very beginning of her poetic career the mystery of death attracted her and she considered it her poetic mission to probe into it.

The stimulus, beyond the grave  
 His countenance to see.  
 Supports me like imperial Drama  
 Afforded day by day. (Poem-1001)

To her death is "an unfrequented road" (Poem-10) "everlasting snow" (Poem-158) "Wilderness" (Poem-890) "escapeless sea"(Poem-1264) "sweet darkness" (Poem-1493) the Rumor's Gate (Poem-1588) report less grave" (Poem-1633) Drowsy Route (Poem-1662). Death she says, is migration to a place of repose or returning to the native town (Poem-107). It is a sleep

–"A long –long sleep famous sleep that makes no show for morn."

She transcended the traditional concept of death and regarded it as a friend, not a foe. Consoling Mrs. Joseph A. Sweetser she wrote, ".... Death is perhaps an intimate friend, not an enemy" (Letters,567) She thought of it as a necessary prelude to immortality, 'a preface to supreme things as she wrote in a letter. This conception helped her not only to rise above the common feelings of fear but also to focus her attention on the subject of death with a superb detachment to find out its meaning and analyze its bewildering mystery that defies human understanding. Both British and American poets before her had dealt with the theme of death but remained confined to the emotions roused by death, mainly of fear and grief, as we find in the famous elegies of the nineteenth century. With the exception of Shelley's Adonais, little attempt was made in probing the haunting mystery of death.

But Emily's death poetry presents a strikingly distinct attitude towards the subject of perennial interest. In her confrontation with death, her highly original angle of vision imparted startling colour to what she perceived. She wrote to a friend:

I suppose, there are depths in every consciousness,  
 From which we cannot "rescue ourselves- to- which  
 None can go with us- which represents to us  
 mortality-' the adventure of Death- How  
 Unspeakably sweet and solemn- that whatever  
 Await us of Doom or Home- we are mentally  
 Permanent. (Letters, 612)

Her survey of death, the "trackless waste" presented a constant endeavour to discover the unknown and untold mystery that the dying leave behind. Occasionally she slipped into the traditional love echoing the graveyard school of poetry and at times she was assailed. by the fear of death but such occasions are rare and the major portion of her death poetry presents an unconventional attitude and her transcendental experiences.

Johnson feels that "other poets of comparable stature have made the theme of death central in much of their writing" but "Emily Dickinson did so in hers to an unusual degree (Johnson,203) One of the reasons of her apparent obsession with death was

that from her fifteenth to twenty-fifth year, during which period her family lived in the Pleasant Street, she watched the frequent funeral processions that wended their way to the adjacent cemetery. These early impressions are depicted in her poems on death wherein she frequently uses the imagery of the funeral to express the pervasive idea of death.

Emily had her first confrontation with the fact of death at the age of thirteen when her friend Sophia Halland died leaving her in a "fixed melancholy" (Letters, 32). As Johnson and Theodora Ward put it, "she was so deeply affected that her parents sent her to visit Mrs. Dickinson's sister Lavinia (Mrs. Loring Norcross) in Boston." (Letters, 33) Two years after the event she recorded her sense of bereavement in a letter which also depicts her minute observation of a death-bed scene:-

She was too lovely for earth and was transplanted  
From earth to heaven. I visited her often in sickness  
And watched over her bed but at length reason  
Fled. It seemed to me I should die too if I could  
Not be permitted to watch over her. At length the  
Doctor said she must die and allowed me to look  
At her a moment through the open door.... There  
She lay mild and beautiful- as in health and  
Her pale features lit up with an unearthly smile.  
After she was laid in coffin and I felt I could not  
Call her back again, I gave' way to a fixed melancholy....  
(Letters, 33)

Ever since this early experience Emily remained keenly conscious of the awesome fact of death which became a more frequent visitor in her later years. The irreparable loss of her father who was her main source of strength and of her invalid mother, along with the deaths of several persons with whom she had forged strong emotional bonds, such as J.G. Holland, Samuel Bowles, Rev. Charles Wadsworth and O.P. Lord had stunned her. But the severest shock came when her Nephew Gilbert died at the tender age of eight. She uttered her sense of anguish almost like a cry or unbearable pain:

Open the door, open the door, they are waiting  
For me was Gilbert's sweet command in delirium  
Who were waiting for him, all we possess we would  
Give to know. Anguish at last opened it and he  
Ran to the little grave at his Grandparent's feet-  
All this and more, though is' there more? More  
Than Love and' Death? Then tell me its name. (Letters, 802)

Whatever may be the reasons for her preoccupation with death but in order to understand her poetry on death "it is necessary to disentangle it from the incidents of biography" (Sherwood, 35) because "her best poems on death were not inspired personal experience?" (There are, not doubt, many poems, especially elegies and memorial verses, 'which reflect her personal experience, but generally death in her poetry is an assumed attitude. As an idea "death becomes for Emily the. Mountain of vision" that "commands the panorama of the whole."<sup>11</sup> In her own words:

'Tis Compound Vision  
Light- enabling Light  
The Finite- furnished  
With the Infinite-  
Convex-. And Concave Witness

Back-toward Time-  
And forward-  
Toward the God of Him- (Poem 906)

She makes death a means of her search for meaning- the meaning of life here and hereafter, and thus "experiences the totality of the unity of life-and-death." (Kher, 182) As Johnson puts it, her poems on death were "the medium through which she adjusted herself to the necessity and the pleasure of living and being richly alive" (Johnson, 205) However, her perception of death is imaginative rather than philosophical. Death becomes a springboard for her imagination and a challenge to her language. She perceives death from different angles in different modes, and tries to capture. The abstract feelings and emotions in pal able terms. And in the radiance of her brilliant language even her conventional attitudes appear fresh and original. For her as Porter very rightly observes, "death was the occasion for style. She sent language to tempt it, disarm it, domesticate it, and extract thrills from it" (Porter, 158) her views of death transcend the common limitations of human experiences. The discussion and analysis of her poems that follows will show how she plays endless variations on the theme of death to explore its manifold aspects which can be felt by intuition and not by reason.

In 1858 when she began her poetic career, the mystery of death attracted her and she considered it her poetic mission to probe into it:

Whether my bark went down at sea  
Whether she met with gales-  
Whether to isles enchanted  
She bent her docile sails-  
But what mystic mooring  
She is held today-  
This is the errand of the eye  
Out upon the Bay. (Poem 52)

In 1865, by which year she had already composed about one thousand poems, she again wrote how the mystery of death attracted her:

The stimulus, beyond the Grave  
His Countenance to see  
Supports me like imperial Drama  
Afforded Day by Day. (Poem 1001)

"Life-is what we make it -I Death- we do not know," she observes in Poem 698. To her death is "an unfrequented road" (Poem 12), "escapeless sea" (Poem 1264) "sweet Darkness" (Poem 1493), "the Rumor's Gate " (Poem 1588) "report less Grave", "reckless sea"(Poem 1633), "drowsy Route" (Poem 1662), and "the surmising Inn" (Poem 1662).

Emily Dickinson perceived death in various ways and employed different images, symbols and metaphors to transform her perception into words which give a sense of transcendence. Death, she says, is migration to a ~lace of repose or returning to the native town (Poems 27 and 45). Death is the sinking of a boat in the sea (Poem 107). It is a sleep- "A long-long sleep- A famous-Sleep/that makes no show for Morn" (Poem 654). Death is a secret "You cannot find out all about" (Poem 153),

But the most fascinating aspect of her death poetry is the presentation of death as a character. Her poems personify it as a cultured gentleman who appears as a cavalier suitor to take her on a joy ride. The conception of death as a suitor suggests her strategy to conquer the traditional fear associated with it. Death is perceived as a suitor, lover or bridegroom driving away with his beloved or bride. As a gentleman lover, death first woos her by a 'dim approach' but finally wins her and carries her away to the unknown world:

Death is- the supple Suitor  
That wins at last—  
It is a stealthy Wooing  
Conducted first  
By pallid innuendoes  
And dim approach  
But brave at last with Bugles  
And a bisected Coach  
It bears away in triumph  
To Troth unknown  
And kindred as responsive  
As Porcelain. (Poem 1445)

In such poems as this one is reminded of the devotional songs of Indian poets like Kabir, Tagore and others who also figured death as a lover long awaited and imagined the last journey of life as the going of the bride to her husband's house. In one of his devotional songs Tagore calls. Death as the last fulfillment of life for whom' he has waited all his life:

The flowers have been woven and the garland is  
Ready for the bridegroom. After the wedding, the  
Bride shall leave her home and meet her lord  
Alone in the solitude of night.... (Tagore, song no. 94)

The bride faces agonized parting from her parental home but she is also thrilled at the product of meeting her love. As the poet Tagore said in another song-

At this hour of parting, wish me good luck, my  
Friends. The sky is flushed with the dawn and  
My path lies beautiful.. I start my journey with  
Empty hand and expectant heart.... I shall put  
On my wedding garland- mine is not the red-brown  
Dress of the traveller... (Tagore. song no.94)

Emily Dickinson in much similar way describes the last journey of life as one leading her soul to the heavenly altar where it will be merged with God in eternal marriage. In such poems death assumes the role of a surrogate bridegroom who escorts her to heaven. Thus the final procession becomes a love Journey as the journey of bride to her new home. The, idea has been rendered most strikingly in the following well known poem:

Because I could not stop for Death  
He kindly stopped for me –  
The carriage held but just ourselves  
And Immortality.

We slowly drove- He knew no haste  
And I had put away  
My labor and my leisure too!  
For His *civility*-

We passed the School, where Children strove  
At Recess- in the Ring-  
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-

We paused before a house that seemed  
A Swelling of the Ground-  
The Roof was scarcely visible-  
The Cornice- in the Ground-

Since then- 'tis centuries - and yet  
Feels shorter than the Day  
I first surmised the Horses' Heads  
Were toward Eternity— (Poem 712)

The traditional idea of death as a rude, sudden and impersonal figure has been replaced by a gentleman lover who kindly stops at her door to take her on a joy ride in his carriage. To respond to his courtesy she puts her labor and leisure aside and accepts his offer. Their carriage then proceeds towards eternity. In the way they pass by the school-house with children playing at recess, the outlying fields of the village and finally reach the remote burying ground. (The journey also suggests the span of mortal life with its three stages of youth, maturity and old age). The carriage then stops at the threshold of her new house-which appears just a swelling of the ground with its roof scarcely visible and its cornice in the ground. Since her arrival at the new house, she lost sense of time and even if centuries might have passed, it seems shorter than the day when she had started her journey and had noticed that the carriage was leading her towards eternity. This gentleman lover in this poem is not the true bridegroom but an envoy taking her to the altar of heaven where she (the soul) will be united with God who is the real and ultimate lover. Once wedded to Him, she would become a part of Him and that of Eternity

Emily Dickinson perceives death as a release from sufferings or as a redemption from sins. Like a thoughtful and tender nurse death provides shelter to those who are "too fragile for winter winds" (Poem 141). In poem 499 the poet surmises that the dead live "in places perfecter/Inheriting Delight". They are "Blesseder- than we" because they know what we only pray for. Moreover, they are aware of their blessedness because they think that they are living at home while we are living in exile:

Esteeming us- as Exile  
Them self- admitted Home  
Through easy Miracle of Death  
The Way our self, must come- (Poem 499)

Death, she says, is a boon to us- "there is no Gratitude/ Like the Grace- of Death" (Poem 614). Death is something solemn because in dying we part with a world that "We have understood for betel/still to be explained" (Poem 934). Death is an acquaintance, of pain, and so like a sincere friend "tenderly assists Him (Poem'1049). Death puts an end to all the "bleating" and "wandering" of life and provides eternal place and safety:

Let down the Bars, Oh Death  
The tired Flocks come in  
Whose bleating ceases to repeat?  
Whose Wandering is done-?

Thine LS the stillest night  
Thine the securest fold  
Too near Thou art for seeking Thee  
Too tender, to be told. Poem (1065)

In many poems Emily Dickinson perceives death as a way to heaven or immortality. Death, she says, is "Our rapt attention/ To Immortality dawn" (Poem 87). As she cannot find her dead friend "upon the mortal sides", she thinks that he must have gone to heaven (Poem 150). The "Majesty of Death" invests the dead with "Everlasting Robert" (poem 171)

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