



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Death and ‘Unity of Experiences’ in Emily Dickinson’s Poems

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson’s poems capture various emotions related to life that are presented through her poem. Death is perceived as a life giving force in a different metaphysical sense of understanding. Spiritual crisis coupled with a sense of association with material reality forms a sense of conflict in her poems that she attempts to merge together to form a holistic meaning of life, reality and her worldview. In her worldview, death is treated as a being that helps to transcend the material reality and move towards achieving a sense of unity of being in spiritual sense.

Keywords: Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Puritan, Metaphysical, Ecstasy, Embodiment, Existentialist-Crisis.

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) lived an eccentric and isolated life and wrote around 1800 poems, many of them deal with the issue of love, spiritual crisis, female poet, death and immortality. It was a period when dominant Puritanism discouraged imaginative writings and especially poetry writings. The subject matter and her treatment of religious belief system would have encouraged Puritans to associate her with witchcraft and hanged her publically that seems to be the precise reason that most of the poems were published years later her death. Also she was writing at a time when the literary sphere was dominated by male writers like, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, James Russell Lowell, Henry Wadsworth, Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Homes, etc. She is considered as a poet of love, beauty and nature but most of her poems are preoccupied with death, escape from the mortal world, rebellion against the restrictive social and religious structure, and fulfillment of her personal desires. Her unconventional poetry does not fit into any genre as a result some critics regard her as a Romanticist and some as Transcendentalist as most of them analyze her poems within the framework of either of the two. Or they would treat her poems as “the isolated outpourings of a highly individualistic religious thinker.” (Burbick, 62)

She grew up in a rigorous Puritanical atmosphere of Dickinson household that molded her understanding of the religious notions of salvation, suffering, pain, world order and human existence that gets depicted in her poetry in which she is able to blend “clarity and profundity, complexity and accessibility, uniqueness and universality.” (Sahu, 124) Her “poems are the record of an imagination which kept “fundamental” both in substance and technique, recreating experience as it conceived it in terms of multiple connections and infinite semblances, often conveying its highly personal and analytic vision in the arresting manner of the metaphysical.” (Banzer, 417-418)

Exclusion, retraction and renunciation are central to her poem where she presents a process of disassociation from physical world in pursuit of union with metaphysical being. In her poem, *A Wounded Dear- Leaps Higher*, she

centralizes the issue of earthly body and spiritual emancipation through a defeated and wounded figure. She presents death as an experience outside the physical domain, an ‘ecstasy’, where the death would free the Dear from its physical associations. She writes,

“A wounded Dear- leaps higher
I’ve heard the hunter tell
‘Tis but the ecstasy of death
And then the brake is still”

She gives prominence to the defeated than the winner, as it is only the defeated who could understand the pain and suffering. The wound here refers to the existential and spiritual crisis in religious dominated space where individual understanding of religion or God seems to be not encouraged. Rather a set-pattern functions as accepted norm through which salvation and union with the Supreme Being is defined and understood. Dickinson presents a complicated human desires and a tension between body and soul and, death and earthly associations. These images of wounded body and a lifeless being are a way to construct a metaphysical discourse through which the “eternal is argued from the transient, the foreign explained by the familiar, and fact illumined by mystery.”(Banzar, 417) Simultaneously there seems to be a split in Dickinson’s approach that produces tension in her poems. She attempts to capture this tension between body and soul in her approach towards life. The split can be categorized as between external and internal reality, mundane world and spiritual struggle, “interiorization of her everyday life and exteriorization of her inner life.” (Baldi, 444) Synchronizing and blending them together brings forth the beauty of Dickinson’s poetry where the sublime and the ordinary experiences are fused together to create plethora of images. Also what she explores in her poetry is a sense of unity of being. She infuses heterogeneous images together to reveal the complex spiritual feelings of her life as a result, in her poems one could find yoking of disparate elements together to form a larger vision united in metaphysical sense as “for Dickinson, Death is the absence of personal contact. It means not seeing or hearing from someone,The implication is that sorrow comes from the illusion that someone has completely vanished from one’s acquaintance.” (Lambert, 10)

This poem portrays the Dear/poetess’ experience of pain and on the other hand, the temporariness of the pain where the tension gets dissipated when both these images/experiences collide and the dear/poetess feels relieved. It could also be seen as social constraints compelling her to shift her thoughts, about the satisfaction of love, away from this physical world to a world beyond any restriction of society or religion. It is the delight of death that is being expressed in most intimate terms/manner. The feeling of ‘ecstasy’ transforms the physical death into insignificant activity in front of eternal. For her, death is mean of a “change, the transformation of an identity, or the initiation of a newer, broader awareness.” (Lambert, 8)

Poem no. 712 reveals poetess’ projection of Death as an intimate being, presenting it binary opposite to life that seems to be not that intimate and close as Death is. It shows her inability to stop death as it approaches her naturally as if a lover approaches his beloved. She says,

“Because I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And immortality.” (Poem 712)

Death is identified as a lover who serves the purpose towards immortality. Here the representation of death reveals a sense of intimacy with her. She personifies death as a driver who brings the news of end of life in general parlance but in the case of Dickinson, she finds immortality in death. Her quest for permanence, towards the God, forms the generative impulse of her poetry and her attitude towards God can be seen as ambivalent as one who is central to her attack as well as embrace. She explains the mystery by drawing connections with both the world where the poetess is personally conscious about the comparison being drawn. This forms her “metaphysical awareness of unity of experiences.” (Judith Banzer, 417)

Death serves the purpose of immortality in her personal notion of domestic heaven where the individual salvation is reflected through expressions like, “He kindly stopped for me.” Death here is euphemism of immortality as in her poem, loss becomes the precondition of gaining something new. The images of Death and Carriage inextricably present the central idea and both images associate and compensate the meaning of other images that present a movement from earthly connections to heavenly associations. She continues,

“We slowly drove- He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility.”

Unlike the strict disciplinarity and belief system of Puritans, the anthropomorphic nature of her God serves the purpose of fulfilling the subjective desires of the poetess. Immortality gained would enable, not a meeting of disembodied beings forever spiritualized and abidingly discrete, but a happy union of two lovers, physically and sensually joined together for last and eternity. A process that gets completed after meeting death that would lead towards immortality. Dickinson follows a spiritual process from Love to death and finally attaining immortality where in the certitude of immortality the death loses its terrorizing effects as Baldi states that “love and death are for her simply two experiences of the spirit, each of which annuls the past tract of life but opens another, and better one in the future.” (438)

Later in the poem she brings back the binary between body and soul. She writes,

“We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground-
The Root was scarcely visible-
The Cornice – in the Ground.”

The house symbolizes body and earthly presence of the poetess which has its “Root” but now in the process of detachment the house “was scarcely visible.” The poem presents a process of detachment from earthly associations and a move towards transcendence. Embodiment is central to Dickinson’s work where the House as a symbol of body and temporal embodiment functions “more constraining than protecting, more imprisoning than liberating” (Barker, 77), and a detachment from imprisoning factors become essential to attain immortality. The ‘pause’ becomes a self-reflective movement of futility of earthly associations that obstructs the way to salvation, and also a sense of unity with nature and surrounding from which she draws images to present her move towards spiritual attainment.

In poem 258 (*There’s a Certain Slant of Light*), she brings back the issue of split between body and soul and the spiritual crisis, that it gives birth to, is presented through the psychological pain that the poetess goes through. She writes,

“Heavenly hurt, it gives us-
 We can find no scar,
 But internal difference-
 Where the Meanings, are-”

She presents images of psychological effects and trauma that one experiences in the case of existential crisis, especially in the domain of spiritual crisis. The “internal difference” here refers to isolation that she goes through due to ‘heavenly hurt.’ Her psyche concentrates on those things that is out of reach of Dickinson or denied to her. This also refers to a sense of loss as she feels separated from something with which she identified earlier. She feels a sense of alienation and meaninglessness due to this ‘difference’ where ‘meaning’ resided. It shows a movement from embodiment to disembodiment that is presented through this sense of loss. This sense of loss can be further elaborated by following Emerson’s theory of Compensation that sees reality as a great balance sheet where every gain involves a corresponding loss and vice-versa. (Quote Corn, 18)

Hence this sense of disembodiment is compensated by spiritual gain where a sense of unity is being achieved through association with Death who is personified as a driver and whose movement terrifies everything in nature. She says

“When it comes, the landscape listens,
 Shadows hold their breath;
 When it goes, ‘its like the distance
 On the look of death.”

Death is presented as mammoth and terrifying figure and the entire universe gets affected when it arrives. Both Donne and Dickinson’s disbelief provided aesthetic stimulus to their imagination that they drew on pages in lyrical form. For her, death signifies changes in perspective and internal experiences that she experienced in her life. This becomes evident when she distances herself from the world and withdrew into seclusion during the course of her life. During this period of self-imposed exclusion the subjects of her poems becomes the subject of her life, experiences, perspectives and the poems became her soul, her internal being. In this poem, to render the complicated feeling of the poet, Dickinson uses paradoxical images to describe the feelings. Her intimacy with death and nature are same as for the New England Puritanism. For her, death wears the mask and approaches her that can terrify everyone but not her.

She continues this terrific image of Death in *I Never Lost as Much as Twice* and presents another side of that image that is accommodating and approachable. This poem is about loss that she perceives as eternal. She lost loved ones and felt suffocated by the Puritanism that was prevalent in New England when she writing. As a result, her God becomes an anthropomorphic god, like Greek Gods and Goddess’. He is both, one who terrifies her and also talks to her as a God of flowers, as she pleads to him,

“I never lost as much as twice
 And that was in the sod.
 Twice have I stood as beggar
 Before the door of god!”

It shows that she is unable to reconcile with either form of the God but her imagination gets enchanted by this hybrid form of God in which she believes. The 'I' with which the poem begins and ends can be a subjective autobiographical experience that states of her losing two friends or it can be seen as an artistic construction where the poetess represent general emotions at the moment of loss and remember God to provide salvation. The images presented can also be seen as having Upanisadic and Oriental strain where the devotee stands at the door of God, begging and sharing the grief with God.

This process of losing through which something invaluable is gained brings back the Emersonian Compensation theory. Hence the physical losing signifies spiritual gaining. Continues pain enlightens her spiritual sense. She searches self-sufficiency in isolation and attempts transcendentalism of the mind to transcend the material aspect of life by drawing inspiration and knowledge from losing. She shares the continuous process of enlightenment and crisis when she writes;

“Angles, twice descending,

Reimbursed my store.

Burglar, banker, father

I am poor once more.” (Poem 49)

Twice losing becomes a process through which she gains something that is going to stay with her eternally hence the loss signifies gain by losing something old and gaining new. The spiritual need to fulfill/complete the existential crisis gets fulfilled by losing. Her philosophy of life leans towards gaining positive experiences of growth that is the implicit meaning/structure of her poems. She gains the spiritual knowledge through 'Angles' who 'reimbursed my store' that became empty hence enlightenment is a process, not a state, that needs to be continued. She starts the poem with loss and ends with loss and leaves the reader to identify with the sense of loss that the poetess was going through when she wrote this poem.

In her poems she describes her relationship and problem with of faith. She exists like a figure who is forsaken by the God and stands close to Christ figure who laments over his forsakenness by God. She holds fast to truth and beauty and shows a quick sensibility to world around her that she deploys in her poems strategically. Her poems show an existentialist motivation where death is treated either as fear or a companion that helps her to transcend the material world and integrates her dimensions of existence. Her sense of identity is presented as continuum and in perpetual crisis that she successfully manifests through her poems. The space that the readers get in her poems appears as spiritualized and internalized spaces that presents the vastness of her spiritual experiences. She believes in oneness of being and counters spiritual vacuum through individual salvation and consummation of love.

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