



On The Subject of Death: An Analysis of Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath on the Fascination and Elusiveness of Death.

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Mortals are forever in the quest to defy mortality. This also is the major preoccupation of the writers, poets and thinkers since time immemorial. Literature even when it does not explicitly mention about the theme of death, writing it is itself a process to defy mortality, to live in the memory of the coming generations and thus keep the story, emotions and the writer's contribution alive.

Conventionally death is feared, afterlife is questioned and curiosity of the unknown is mixed with bereavement and a sense of loss. In short death is connoted as something negative and cruel. It is seen as a usurper, a force that neither seeks nor respects the choices of its victim and people are filled with a sense of loss and pain.

Poetry or the power of the pen was seen as one such method to defy mortality and achieve immortality. We see varied reactions and treatments on the subject of death by poets when they face an impending death, go through ill health either in their own lives or lives of loved ones. Death however comes at last.

Death poems are quite popular in literature and the treatment of the subject is deeply varied. It could be written on the subject of death, written as a statement, a personal recollection or a personal account. It could also be written as an elegy or eulogy. The mention of the subject itself makes the poem sensitive and requires closer analysis to get to the meaning of the text and the truth the poet wants to express.

We also have writers who see death as a passageway to eternity, another realm where it loses 'its sting' and 'its power' as stated by the wordings in the Holy Bible. This idea is propounded by Donne in his metaphysical poems as well. Power of death ceases the moment a person dies for he enters a realm where there is neither decay nor destruction.

John Donne reflects the same in his holy sonnet- 'death be not proud.' its last line states 'and death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.'

We see a very different reaction with respect to Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson. If we look at their lives a little closer we would be able to understand the

inspiration behind their writings and knowledge about their biographical elements would help in better understanding of their works.

Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson might have lived in different eras, had circumstances that made them look at life differently but they had a very different perspective on death. This is not just different but unique. There are several similarities to these two poets. For this article we are going to stick strictly to two poems, 'Because I could not stop for death' by Emily Dickinson and 'Lady Lazarus' by Sylvia Plath.

When we look in Dickinson's body of work we are evidently able to understand her fascination with death was a lifelong preoccupation. Though born into a puritan and an extremely religious family and being isolated from the rest of the world both by choice and continuous illness that she had to suffer till her death, Emily Dickinson does not portray subjects in a conventional manner, she shows remarkable alacrity and deep clarity that one is able to make out the rebellious streak in her thoughts. The fact that she kept most of her poems to herself and did not share it with the world at large is understandable only when we try to understand the context and the general atmosphere of her immediate surroundings. She did not feel she would be able to make much of her writings or her ideas or works would gain acceptance in a world dominated by men. First because her ideas and concepts were revolutionary or rebellious at the least and

second because of the gender she was born into. Her defiance of the conventional was an inert exercise. Whilst she was alive, she did not actively participate in publishing her works or show desires on having a readership.

Sylvia Plath on several occasions has also written about the feeling of being victimized first by her father, then her husband and the world at large. The world that represents and only gives prominence to men reduces the women to a mere object just as in Nazi Germany, Jews were seen not as humans but objects. In the poem Lady Lazarus we see this reflection when a Jew is reduced to the importance of char that they could get after gassing them or the gold teeth. Patriarchy and its ideals too had reduced her to just that, an object to pacify and please the man and to be of use to him.

'A cake of soap,

A wedding ring,

A gold filling.'

That is what she feels reduced to as they 'poke and stir.' Even after annihilating her, she is of only concern to them if she can be turned to some object they can use or sell.

Plath places herself as a victim of the Nazis though Hitler has physically no power over her. It is the patriarchy and the male figures in her life that exercise such

control and power and just like the German doctors who performed cruel and lethal experiments on Jews during holocaust she feels like a prey that has been treated unjustly and cruelly by these figures.

In the final verse,

‘And I eat men like air.’

She sets out to challenge the patriarchal absoluteness. Here we find a rebellious streak albeit an overt one.

Death as cruel, inhuman or lonely. Her idea of death is a bit conventional. Death is negative and cruel yet we find that Sylvia Plath violently heads towards it. Death as a desired destination is still distant and elusive for her. This is seen in the poem ‘Lady Lazarus’ where she states that

‘And like the cat I have nine times to die.’

This also denotes her failed attempts at killing herself and finding that death which is so cruel is actually what she wishes upon herself.

The poem ‘Lady Lazarus’ begins with

‘I have done it again.

One year in every ten

I manage it- ‘

Denoting all the decades that she has annihilated with each decade and knows that she is a sort of 'walking miracle' as she herself puts in the poem along with other holocaust images that bring out not just the elusiveness and unfairness of death but also that of life.

In death, man finds comfort in near oblivion and the only thing that befuddles him is the unknown. If death is like perfect sleep, oblivion or if it would wake a soul to a world where they didn't want to reach. It is the questions, mostly unanswered and unproved that weighs the soul.

Sylvia Plath acknowledges that she has a fine affinity for death. It is almost like her talent or her calling.

'Dying
Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well.'

But the crucial thing to remember while we read her poem is that her many attempts at death is possible only because she has failed in her previous attempts.

Death is cruel to her not because cruelty is his attribute but because it is so easy for the holocaust victims and difficult for the poetess. Even though Sylvia Plath relates herself with the persecuted Jews, it has more to do with the terror,

unfairness of life, unfaithfulness of her husband and the suppression she suffered under patriarchy. She might not be able to share the cause of terror but both are terrified, one at being gassed to death without consent and the other with living without consent. The same terror is brought out in the lines,

'I do it so it feels like hell.

I do it so it feels real.

I guess you could say I've a call. '

The very title of the poem 'Lady Lazarus' alludes to the biblical character Lazarus whom Lord Jesus brought to life. And here is Sylvia Plath who fails in her every attempt and feels as if she is like the cat with nine lives the only difference is she is not grateful for the 'miracle' as she has utterly failed in her attempt.

Emily Dickinson has a far more modified version of death. It is almost as if she is being wooed by death. To her death is gentle, civilized, caring, patient, kind and the experience with him is slow and serene. Death to her is like a perfect gentleman who is treating her with utmost respect. This is reflected in her poem,

'Because I could not stop for death'

'Because I could not stop for Death-

He kindly stopped for me-'

This is also the beginning sentence of the poem. We see that death is not haste here, it is not snatching anything away but going at the pace of the poetess so much so that she shares a level of geniality with him.

Emily Dickinson's life was preoccupied with death due to two reasons, one was her persistent illness and second was her religiosity. Due to Christian concepts that she had learned so early in life we see that she was able to imagine death and immortality alike and something that was inseparable.

It is reflected in the following sentences,

'The carriage held just ourselves

And immortality.'

Death for her is not an event that is sudden, fearful or abrupt but a person with whom she can share a comfortable space. Death has a capital D that further adds to the personification.

To her it was possible to have death and immortality in the same page or carriage as put in the poem where it is carrying the occupants to the desired place. We see a gentle treatment of death or we can also put it as the gentle treatment of the poetess by death.

Whilst reading the poem we can sense that she is writing beyond the grave that is as if she is already dead and she has gone through a journey and recounting the same through the poems.

We see that death does not create an atmosphere of fear but we see that Emily Dickinson does accompany death and is ready to drop everything her work, her leisure time, her comfort etc. to be with him. She does not hesitate one bit to choose this mode of action as they move along to eternity in a slow and comfortable pace and travel along all the familiar sites of life and have a pleasant experience of it all. She seems wooed into the peace and familiarity of it all as she reaches to her new house, the mound of earth in the graveyard. Death is slow here, though it is in complete control, it does not take her completely as conventionally. We see that death is patient and it is this patient that makes it more elusive and distant yet Emily Dickinson is not offering any resistance through her illness and her expression of the same. Having said that she is not heading towards it violently, she is as patient as he is. This is seen in the lines from 'Because I could not stop for Death'

'...-he knew no haste

And I had put away

My labour and my leisure too,

For his civility-'

The kindness of death here is met with non-resistance by the poetess.

Though the two poets do have different approaches but the destination is the same. The treatment by death is the same. Though one heads violently albeit horrifically towards it we also see the gentle patience of another. If one is being wooed by death then the other is busy knocking down doors to brutally catch its attention.

A closer analysis does bring out its sets of similarities and dissimilarities but there is more of the former than the latter.

