

**The Ecstasy of Death in Emily Dickinson's
*Because I Could Not Stop For Death***

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"I think of the grave very often" ⁽¹⁾ *Emily Dickinson*

Abstract

Death is used to be known as the tragic end of life for many people; it is the point when a person is forced to give up, admit defeat, and bow down to the inevitable. As depressing as this view of death may seem, Dickinson submitted death in a quite different vision by focusing on the immortality and the afterlife aspects of death. This paper will show the ecstasy of death in Dickinson's poem "Because I could not stop for death". In this poem, Dickinson was optimistic and saw death in a friendly light rather than as a horrible end. Dickinson succeeded in showing her pleasant attitude towards death. In this poem death is portrayed as a gentleman who takes a woman on an enjoyable journey to the grave, and then to the beautiful everlasting life, the life after death. Dickinson wanted to explore a very strange but a rather pleasant image about death. Marrying death would in many ways take her away from everything she severed in life, enter her into a life of immortality.

Key Words: Critical Explication, American Poetry, Emily Dicknson

المستخلص

اعتدنا إن نعرف بان الموت هو النهاية المأساوية لحياة الكثير من الناس. ويكون ذلك عندما يضطر الشخص للاستسلام، الاعتراف بالهزيمة، والرضا بمرارة هذا المصير المحتوم. وعلى الرغم من الصورة الكئيبة التي ربما تبدو لنا عن الموت، إلا أن ديكنسون أظهرت الموت برؤية مختلفة تماما من خلال التركيز على الخلود وجوانب الحياة الآخرة بعد الموت. سوف يظهر هذا البحث نشوة الموت في قصيدة ديكنسون " لأنني لم استطع التوقف للموت ". في هذه القصيدة، كانت ديكنسون متفائلة ورأت الموت بصورة الصداقة المشرقة بدلا من أن تكون نهاية مروعة. وقد نجحت ديكنسون في أن تظهر موقفها المشرق نحو الموت. صور الموت في هذه القصيدة على أنه الرجل الوسيم الذي يأخذ امرأة في رحلة ممتعة إلى القبر، ثم إلى الحياة الأبدية الجميلة، الحياة بعد الموت. أرادت ديكنسون أن تستكشف صورة غريبة جدا ولكن ممتعة عن الموت. أن الزواج من الموت في نواح كثيرة يأخذها بعيدا عن كل شيء عانته في الحياة، ويدخلها في حياة الخلود.

الكلمات الرئيسية: تحليل المعنى النصي ، الشعر الاميريكي ، اميلي دكنسو

Introduction

Not all the ideas and concepts of the world will stay as they are known. One may astonish to see and hear something which is out of the human mind to bear. But this is true with Emily Dickinson who striking the world and turns the accepted ideas upside down. Emily Dickinson was born on December 10, 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts, to a young lawyer named Edward and his wife, Emily.⁽²⁾ Her life is as much a mystery as her motivation. A strong myth surrounds her eccentric tendencies; she is considered to be phobic, extreme radical feminist intellect for her time period. She lived a mostly introverted and reclusive life due to a personal choice, to avoid a patriarchal society where she had no voice, and due to psychological breakdown, because of her domineering father. She did not leave her home unless it was absolutely necessary. She began to talk to visitors from behind the other side of a door rather than speaking to them face to face.

She composed nearly eighteen hundred poems, all of which are eclectic, intricate, sometimes with dense themes, sometimes obsessed with death and the afterlife. She appears to be obsessed with the condition of the body at rest and more poems in her collected work exist concerning death rather than God. And the most surprising fact is that Dickinson's one surviving article of clothing was a white cotton dress, as if she is wearing coffin all the time. ⁽³⁾

She was born before the Civil War, at that time common diseases were not treated effectively and could bring death in a matter of a few weeks; even pregnancy or childbirth very hazardous. The modern hospital was not in existence until after the Civil War. Women were thrown into the role of care-givers, midwives, or nurses until a doctor could arrive, as a portion of daily domestic duties. All these reasons caused her common themes which include lifelong fascination with illness, dying, death, drowning or premature burial. ⁽⁴⁾

The Ecstasy of Death

The concept of death is not new to us, but Dickinson was skillful in handling this concept in a rather new way by having death take the form of a gentleman who is welcomed by all. In her poem *Because I could not stop for death*, Dickinson portrays death as the kind of man who would hold the door open for his date and offer her beloved his coat on a chilly night. Dickinson uses the character of Death as an extended metaphor to show the reader what real death might be like. ⁽⁵⁾

Some critics like to point out, he is a figure that should be welcomed rather than feared; a point of much speculation, for instance:

James Reeves comments on this poem:- "This is one of the best of those poems in which Emily triumphs over death by accepting calmly, civilly, as befits a gentlewoman receiving the attentions of a gentleman. It is an essay in death-in-life." (6)

Jane Crosthwaite suggests that "the poem is not a projection of the poet's death but a record of her encounter with the fact or inevitability of death and the consequences of that discovery on the life remaining." (7)

Margarita Ardanaz points up "the positive aspects of death found in this poem". As Ardanaz states, death is a path in itself, a path to be discovered. It is a controversial point if we consider this poem suggesting death as a path toward salvation. This poem makes difficult to regard E. Dickinson as an agnostic person. (8)

Camille Paglia takes a totally different translation of the work. She views it with a more Gothic spin, that the narrator is courted, kidnapped, and murdered by a smooth-talking gentleman caller. Paglia asserts that the protagonist herself transforms in the piece from a state of naive innocence into a form of disillusioned experience, a transformation to an unhappy resolution. (9)

In her poem *Because I could not stop for death*, death appears as a being which has the power of taking people away. It is not the speaker who stops and dies but it is death who can stop for her, she is busy and death has to stop for her. Death is personalized in "He" and the speaker shares many things with him. The poem may be understood in various ways: they are in a journey towards death or they are in a journey through death since it can be understood that the person is already dead. (10)

Because I could not stop for Death,

He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality. (Lines 1-4)

Death is introduced right away as the leading character and focus of the poem, performing a human action - stopping for someone on his way. If this were a play he'd be cast as the leading male role who gets a lot of lines. Substitute Death for any guy's name: "Because I could not stop for Tom - / He kindly stopped for me." Now, the beginning of this poem seems like the first meeting of two lovers. This personification of death as a male suitor gives a sense that death is seen from an optimistic way. Just the speaker, Death, and Immortality are getting on this carriage, this image indicates the softness of death that the poet taste and feel. Also indicates that death is the outlet from this life to the other life in which one can feel comfortable and rest in peace.

We slowly drove, he knew no haste,
And I had put away
My labour, and my leisure too,
For his civility. (Lines 5-8)

Death is seen as a human character. In this stanza we see that the character Death is driving along slowly. This gives an impression that death may be like a wise man, he is keen in all of his actions. This feature makes the speaker feel comfortable that death will never comes to a hasty action and will take her soul in time and this is what she wait to get rid from the current temporary miserable life to the new beautiful everlasting one. In the last line of this stanza we see further character development which shows us that Death is polite and courteous. So if we were going to continue to relate this to the real thing, we'd probably come to the

conclusion that this end wasn't too painful, and that the speaker (the one dying) didn't put up any struggle.

This poem has elements of all of Emily's diverse mystical preoccupations with death and immortality. It presents death as an objective fact. It reveals the morbidly fanciful attempt to think of her in the present as also, into that future objective condition. Death is here also experienced subjectively as deprivation and less possibility and symbolized by objective death, the grave. ⁽¹¹⁾

We paused before a house that seemed
A swelling of the ground;
The roof was scarcely visible,
The cornice but a mound. (Lines 17-20)

This marks the end of their journey, where Death has brought her home. This might, in more literal terms, mean that the speaker is no longer dying but is in fact dead, and laid to rest in her grave. Her description of the grave as her "house" indicates how comfortable she feels about death. The description of the house "A Swelling of the Ground" makes it clear that this is no cottage, but instead a grave. Yet they only "pause" at this house, because although it is ostensibly her home, it is really only a resting place as she travels to eternity.

Death is not to be feared since it is a natural part of the endless cycle of nature. Her view of death may also reflect her personality and religious beliefs. On the one hand, as a spinster, she was somewhat reclusive and introspective, tending to dwell on loneliness and death. On the other hand, as a Christian and a Bible reader, she was optimistic about her ultimate fate and appeared to see death as a friend. ⁽¹²⁾

We passed the school where children played,
Their lessons scarcely done;
We passed the fields of gazing grain,
We passed the setting sun. (Lines 9-12)

The speaker appears to review the stages of her life: childhood (the school where children played), maturity (the ripe, hence, "gazing" grain), and the descent into death (the setting sun)-as she passes to the other side.

Since then 'tis centuries; but each
Feels shorter than the day
I first surmised the horses' heads
Were toward eternity. (Lines 21-24)

There, after centuries pass, so pleasant is her new life that time seems to stand still, feeling "shorter than a Day." It is a glimpse of immortality, although it has been centuries since she has died, it feels no longer than a day. It is not just any day that she compares it to, however – it is the very day of her death, when she saw "the Horses' Heads" that were pulling her towards this eternity.

Emily attempts an imaginative constructive of her own death: tries, in effect to catch herself at the very centre of the act of dying. Her ability to find images, actions and personifications that would transfix death at the very point of striking; this seems an ability that was entirely unique with Emily. The poem masterfully handles the effect of death's unexpected visit upon the victim, viewing her progression from flustered self-pleasure and comfortable anticipation to gradual fear and doubt into a full realization of

death's deception and terrifying purpose throughout death is seen from various perspective; as a welcome relief from life's tensions; as a force which heightens one's satisfaction with life; as a lover gently conveying one to hidden pleasures; as a cynical caller, who poses beneath a cordial exterior and finally as a solemn guide leading one to the threshold of immortality. ⁽¹³⁾

Conclusion

To sum up, it can be said that Emily Dickinson talks about death from an objective viewpoint. Death is seen positively, as a part of the cycle of nature where we are the continuum between life and death. Dickinson is dramatizing death by crossing the frontier to tell what she finds there. It can be understood as a way of exploring the unknown and the hidden part of the mind. It is a way of exceeding the limits of the human consciousness. She attempts to describe death positively, by representing it as a kind gentleman caller; a suitor; a figure who calls upon her with a carriage – as if on a date. Indeed, Dickinson's concept on death contains ripe views about the purpose of this life. So, Dickinson shows the ecstasy of death in this poem because she believes in the deathlessness of the death, so that for her, death is the start of the life not the end.

Notes

¹ Wendy Martin. *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*, Cambridge University Press. New York, 2007, p98

² Poetry for Students, Volume 28 ed. by Ira Mark Milne, Gale Cengage Learning, New York, 2008 p 173

³ Hiltner Ken (2001). *Because I, Persephone, Could Not Stop for Death: Emily Dickinson and the Goddess*. The Emily Dickinson Journal. Vol. (10). Iraqi Virtual Science Library. Retrieved in February 15, 2015 www.ivsl.org. p14

⁴ D. Glen Smith, instructor. *American Literature I*. English 2327: revised: 05.05.12 pp 2-5

⁵ Database on-line Accessed on 13th December 2014: Available from <http://www.shmoop.com/because-i-could-not-stop-for-death/death-symbol.html>

⁶ James Reeves, *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of critical Essays*, ed. by Richard Sewall, Prentice- Hall, 1963.

⁷ American Literary Scholarship: An Annual / 1981 ed. James Woodress Duke University Press, Durham North, Carolina, 1983, p-90.

⁸ Margarita Ardanaz. *Emily Dickinson, Poemas*. Cátedra. 1992.

⁹ Camille Paglia. *"Because I Did not Stop for Death."* *Break, Blow, Burn*. London: Vintage Books Print, 2005.

¹⁰ M^a Teresa Galarza Ballester, *'I died for Beauty': The importance of exploring the Frontier*. pp 6-7

¹¹ Omana Antony and Suchi Dewan *Emily Dickinson's Perspectives on Death: An Interpretation of Dickinson's Poems on Death*. Lapis Lazuli An International Literary Journal (LLIJ) p 8-9

¹² Database on-line Accessed on 19th November 2014: Available from <http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides2/Dickinson.html> Study Guide Prepare by Michael J. Cummings...© 2003 Revised in 2011...©

¹³ *Love and Death in Emily Dickinson's poetry*. Paripex - Indian Journal of Research, Volume : 1 | Issue : 10 | October 2012 p 109

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