

Research Paper on ‘The Theme of Death in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson’.

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The poetry of Emily Dickinson has intrigued and enthralled generations ever since her death in 1886. She lived in Amherst, Massachusetts, in a successful family with strong community ties, but leading a mainly reclusive and introverted existence, exploring her own world of emotions and feelings, through her poetry. The poems of Dickinson cover a wide range of topics but she cannot be put into anyone genre. Emily Dickinson is a brilliant extraordinary writer. She talks about mortality and death within her life and on paper in her works. Although she lived a seemingly secluded life, Emily Dickinson's many encounters with death influenced many of her poems and letters. Perhaps one of the most ground breaking and inventive poets in American history, Dickinson has become as well known for her bizarre and eccentric life as for her incredible poems and letters. Her poems highlight the many moments in a 19th century New England woman's life, including the deaths of some of her most beloved friends and family, most of which occurred in a short period of time.

Throughout her poetry there is a recurring theme of death and immortality. The feeling of death is further separated into two major categories including the curiosity of Dickinson held of the process of dying and the feelings accompanied with it and the reaction to the death of a loved one. Two of her many poems on the theme of death include ‘Because I Could Not Stop For Death’ and ‘After Great Pain a Formal Feeling Comes’. In the poem, ‘Because I Could Not Stop For Death’ she explains what it is to go through the actual process of dying. The speaker has no fear as she rides in the carriage of death (Engle). According to M.N. Shaw, death is seen as a three-step process in this poem through the images of the “School,” “Gazing Grain,” and “Setting Sun.” Shaw believes that the school children “in the Ring” are representative of competition among professionals that occur during one’s career. Shaw also believes that the speaker views life with gusto and through great control. The break between stanzas three and four is important. The “reversal” or “uncertainty” in stanza four (“Or rather-He passes us”) has been thought to refer to the sun, implying that the sun has set on the dead speaker. “He” could also be referring to Death and the speaker’s fight with Death. The speaker leaves the carriage of Death shivering aligned with the previous cycle of life. This is when the previous cycle of life takes on eternity. As the speaker stands in the school yard with the children and refers to the “Gazing Grain” and the “Setting Sun,” she is attempting to find her place in the universe and aware of the fact that when she dies a part of her will continue to live (Shaw).

In After great pain, a formal feeling comes —The speaker notes that following great pain, “a formal feeling” often sets in, during which the “Nerves” are solemn and “ceremonious, like Tombs.” The heart questions whether it ever really endured such pain and whether it was really so recent (“The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore, / And Yesterday, or Centuries before?”). The feet continue to plod mechanically, with a wooden way, and the heart feels a stone-like contentment. This, the speaker says, is “the Hour of Lead,” and if the person experiencing it survives this Hour, he or she will remember it in the same way that “Freezing persons” remember the snow: “First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go—.”

Perhaps Emily Dickinson's greatest achievement as a poet is the record she left of her own inwardness; because of her extraordinary powers of self-observation and her extraordinary willingness to map her own feelings as accurately and honestly as she could, Dickinson has bequeathed us a multitude of hard, intense, and subtle poems, detailing complicated feelings rarely described by other poets. And yet, encountering these feelings in the compression chamber of a Dickinson poem, one recognizes them instantly. "After great pain, a formal feeling comes" describes the fragile emotional equilibrium that settles heavily over a survivor of recent trauma or profound grief.

Dickinson's descriptive words lend a funereal feel to the poem: The emotion following pain is "formal," one's nerves feel like "Tombs," one's heart is stiff and disbelieving. The feet's "Wooden way" evokes a wooden casket, and the final "like a stone" recalls a headstone. The speaker emphasizes the fragile state of a person experiencing the "formal feeling" by never referring to such people as whole human beings, detailing their bodies in objectified fragments ("The stiff Heart," "The Feet, mechanical," etc.).

"Emily Dickinson's Poems about death grew out of her reactions to the tragic events in her personal life." In three of her poems, her style of writing reflects her way of life. 'I heard a Fly buzz when I died', 'My life closed twice before its close' and 'I felt a Funeral in my brain' all reflect on Dickinson's feelings and emotions towards death. In 'I felt a funeral in my Brain', Dickinson describes her own funeral in perfect detail. As if she is an observer of the service. As shown in the title of the poem, Dickinson seems to be feeling all of these emotions in her brain or so she states. And when they all were seated, A Service, like a Drum--kept beating-- beating- till I thought My Mind was going Numb --

In another one of Dickinson's poems, 'The Bustle in a House' describes life after death, and what happens to love. In the poem Dickinson describes how the heart is swept up by love and love is put away and not used again until eternity. Funk and Wagnall's dictionary describes eternity as The endless time following death. Dickinson is trying to imply that love should be put away until you see that certain loved one again after death or a state of eternity. In the poem Dickinson states, The Sweeping up the Hear,t And putting Love away, We shall not want to use again, Until Eternity --. This signifies love after death. One feels that the meaning of pain doesn't exist to Dickinson. In other words, pain has an element of blank or no meaning at all. Her focus on the structure of her poems avoids any experience or sensation of pain. She deals with death in a very calmly matter. At times, some of her poems make us wonder about her mental stability, but others make perfect sense in some weird sort of psychotic form. Overall, Dickinson is just trying to portray all of the hardships that she is going through in her life.

While recognizing that many poets have made death central in much of their poetry, Thomas H. Johnson argues that "Emily Dickinson did so in hers to an unusual degree" (203). Death is a prevalent theme in Emily Dickinson's poetry. Her death poems are scattered through the two volumes which contain her poetic works. It has been said that at least a quarter of all her works deal chiefly with this theme (Henry W, 94). Critics of Emily Dickinson have observed the prominence of the theme of death in her poetry. George Frisbie Whicher, for example, states that Dickinson "recurred to it more frequently than to any other" (298). Richard Chase declares that "in the large majority of Emily Dickinson's poems, from the least impressive to the most, there are intimations of Death" (230). According to Charles R. Anderson, death and immortality were "the two profoundest themes that challenged her poetic powers" (284). A thorough analysis of Dickinson's poetry dealing with death reveals that there are four major categories: poems dealing with death and immortality, poems dealing with the physical aspects of death, poems that personify death, and elegiac poems. Dickinson was preoccupied with the theme of death throughout her life. As her niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi noted, Emily Dickinson was "eternally preoccupied with death" (83). Her letters also contain many references to death, confirming the fact that her preoccupation with the theme of death was lifelong. In a letter to T. W. Higginson dated 1863, she referred to her early awareness of death: "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” (423). Her attachment to death continued all over her life. One month before her death she wrote” There is no Trumpet like the Tomb” (Johnson 904). This preoccupation with death may be attributed to her involvement with religious and spiritual values such as God, Time, Resurrection, Immortality, Infinity, etc. Emily Dickinson’s treatment of the theme of death in her poetry may be regarded as one of her outstanding contributions to American literature. She wrote more than five hundred poems on the subject of death. These poems offer a sincere attempt to understand the true nature of death. Death in these poems takes various contradictory images and personalities such as a coachman, a cunning courtier, a king, a democrat, a lover, a murderer, a wild beast, a frost, a brutal killer, etc.

In a nutshell, death has its own claims on Emily Dickinson. Wendy Martin believes that, “Death was the problem for Dickinson, a riddle she could never solve, but which she always explored” (5). Death that Dickinson almost faced everyday is a central problem of her life; she saw it all around herself in her family, friends, love, life and convictions. The theme of death in the poetry of Dickinson has attracted a large critical attention. Death is not only one of her most frequent themes, but also one that preoccupies her lifelong attention. Over all Dickinson's works can be seen as a study into the thoughts and emotions of people, especially in her exploration death. From its inevitable coming to its eternal existence, Dickinson explains her feelings and thoughts toward death in the full, "circumference" of its' philosophy. As she edged towards the end of her life, Dickinson gave the world new poetic perspectives into the human mind and its dealing and avoidance of death (Whicher 30).

References:-

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