

# Emily Dickinson's Obsession with Death in Her Poetry

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## Abstracts:

Emily Dickinson's insight into the portrait of death can be considered as one of the major contribution to American literature. Her most of poems have theme of death which shows her deep obsession with death. Those disturbing events she witnessed in her early life are portrayed in her most of poems with theme of death. Her obsession with death is justified when we go through all those funeral accident which took place in her earlier life. As Dickinson lost few close people at the early stage of her life, she turned melancholic and obsessed with death. After losing some dearest people, she alienated herself from the world and spent her whole life being closed in the room and writing poetry. She always dressed herself in white clothes. She was highly introverted in nature. Emily considered death as a supreme touchstone for life. Dickinson's unique treatment of death stands remarkable in the history of American literature. Death haunted Dickinson during her whole life which she always tried to overcome. She studied death in every conceivable way; she could not forget easily any death or funeral happened in her life. She personified death by different symbols throughout her poems. Her poems personifying death mainly through the symbol of "Him" to have as many contradictions as the universe, and as many complexities. He is timid and bold. He is a lover, a murderer, a brigand, a thoughtful coachman, a democrat, a despot, a wild beast. She has no final view of death personified. He remains the great unknown, the great mystery. Her vision of death as reflected in her letters as well as poems is paradoxical. She considers death both friend and a foe. She fears as well as she welcomes it.

**Keywords:** Death, Obsession, Melancholic, Impact, Funeral, Theme, Personified, Paradoxical

## Introduction:

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was an American poet, born in US. She was prolific private poet. She wrote lot of poems but never published while she was alive. After Dickinson's death in 1886, her younger sister Lavinia found out her manuscripts of poems and became apparent to the public. Her first collection of poetry was published in 1890. Though Lavinia discovered Dickinson's works, she kept her sister's promise and burned most of the private correspondence. Dickinson was buried, laid in a white coffin with - Vanilla -

scented heliotrope, a lady's slipper orchid and a "knot of blue field violets", placed about it. At Emily's request, her "coffin was not driven but carried through fields of butter cups."

In her poems treating the physical aspects of death she makes certain observation from the viewpoint of sensations, finding the most persistent qualities of the dead to be coldness, immobility, weight and silence.

Emily Dickinson's poetry also served as a substitute for religion. The religious nature of her environment focused her attention on death. The town in which she lived was attached to Puritan traditions. Though her father did not join the church until rather late in life, he was from the old school of Puritanism, and there is no question but that his daughter was reared in an atmosphere of earnest Christian thinking. From all sides she felt pressure to experience conversion. Emily Dickinson's inability to experience a personal conversion resulted in doubt and apprehension. We can see this effect in her poetry and letters too. Very definitely wanting to have a firm religious belief, she could not honestly accept the religion of her time. After their father's death she wrote her Norcross cousin in January, 1863: "Let Emily sing for you because she cannot pray". Here is a distinct indication that she wrote poetry, that she "sang" because she could not pray in the conventional manner to a God whose grace she had not received.

Her attitude towards death influenced Emily Dickinson's technique - the actual combination of words as they appear in the poems. Her basic metrical pattern was that of the hymn books, but with variations. Even here, one can see the influence of her inner conflicts over death. In one sense at least, her poetry was a great effort to understand death, God, and immortality - a great prayer for the resolution of her doubts.

Emily Dickinson was ever conscious of "Death's tremendous nearness". The sound of death was rarely beyond hearing distance. Though she never resolved her conflicts, in a sense she triumphed over death by transmuting the uncertainties of her experience into the art of her poetry.

### **Dickinson's Obsession with Death:**

As we know that Dickinson was much attached with death, we find theme of death in her most of the poems. Here I'm going to justify her obsession with death through her well known poems and some of letters:

Dickinson had special definitions for poetry, she wrote to Thomas W. Higginson that,

*"If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?"*

## Death in Her Letters:

The thought of death was her constant preoccupation. As early as 1852 she wrote to Jane Humphrey - "... I think of the grave very often, and how much it has got of mine, and whether I can ever stop it from carrying off what I love; that makes me sometimes speak of it when I don't intend."

A sermon on death terrified her as she wrote to Dr. and Mrs. J. G. Holland - "The minister to - day preached about death and judgment... and somehow the sermon scared me."

Consoling Mrs. Joseph A. Sweeter she wrote, "... Death is perhaps an intimate friend, not an enemy."

Another thing that haunted her mind was the mystery of death. Time and again she enquired from the relatives of the dead about feelings, thoughts and even behaviour of the dead just before dying. "Could the dying confide Death, there would be no Dead," she wrote to Susan Gilbert Dickinson.

Asking about the last moments of her first friend and preceptor Benjamin Newton she requested Edward Everett Hale, "Please, Sir, to tell me if he was willing to die."

On the death of the Dr. J. G. Holland she asked his wife, "I am yearning to know if he knew he was feeling - if he spoke to you. Dare I ask if he suffered." She made similar inquiry from Charles H. Clark on the death of his brother, "I am eager to know all you may tell me of those final days."

When her close friend Helen Hunt Jackson died, she asked her husband "if she will tell me a very little of her life's close? She was curious to know about her friend's last moments that she later on requested another friend Forrest F. Emerson to collect this information from a friend of Helen Hunt Jackson and pass it to her - "Should she know any circumstances of her life's close, would she perhaps lend it to you, that you might lend it to me?"

In one of her letters to Mrs. Holland she refers to the death of a neighbor as:

*"A woman died last week, young and in hope but a little while at the end of our garden."*

She was troubled from young age by death especially by the death of those who were close to her. After two years later Emily wrote about the death of her cousin that -

*"It seemed to me I should die too, if I could not be permitted to watch or even look at her face"*

Dickinson had late life romance with judge Otis Phillips Lord. After death of his wife they both developed their friendship into romance, they both used to write each other on Sunday. But when Lord proposed her for marriage she refused by saying that:

*"Don't you know that you are happiest while I withhold and not confer?"*

It shows Dickinson's melancholic nature.

After two years death of Amherst Academy principal Leonard Humphrey, she revealed to one of her friends extent of her depression:

*"Some of my friends are gone, and some of  
My friends are sleeping -*

*Sleeping the churchyard sleep - the hour of evening is sad - it was once my study hour - my master has gone to rest, and the open leaf of the book, and the Scholar at the tears alone, make the tears come, and I cannot brush them away; I would not if I could, for they are the only tribute I can pay the departed Humphrey."*

### **Death in Her Poetry:**

She perceived death in various ways, and employed different images, symbols and metaphors to transform her perception into words.

In her poem "Because I Could Not Stop For Death" she reflects her mentality about death, in which she portrays the process of dying. In this poem initially speaker has no fear of death as she rides in the carriage with death and personified death as a gentleman but at the end of the poem she turns against death and considers death as a cheater and cruel. In this poem death is shown through three steps process or symbols: 1. "School" which stands for Childhood, 2. "Grazing Grain" stands for Youth, and 3. "Setting Sun" which represents Old Age.

*"We passed the school, where children strove*

*At Recess - in the Ring -*

*we passed the fields of Grazing Grain -*

*we passed the Setting Sun - ( from p. 712)*

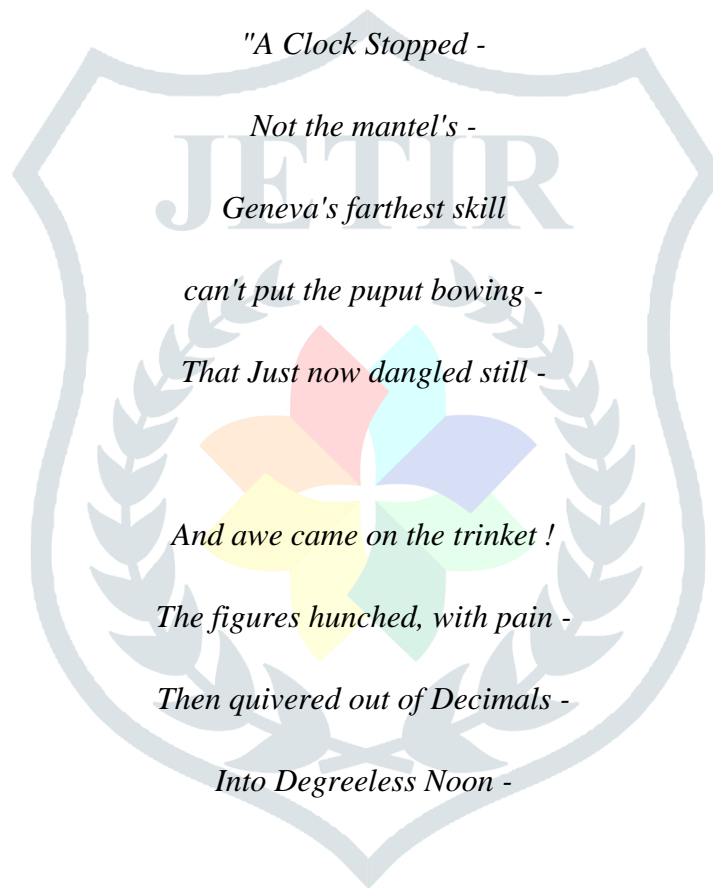
In "The Only Ghost I Ever Saw" she personified death as:

*"The only Ghost I ever Saw*

*was dressed in Mechlin - so -*  
*He wore no sandal on his foot -*  
*And stepped like flakes of snow -*

Here death is personified as a barefoot ghost whose gaits are soundless albeit rapid. Death also personified as a crafty lover who makes an interview with the poet.

In "A Clock Stopped", the poet perceives death in terms of the stopping of clock :



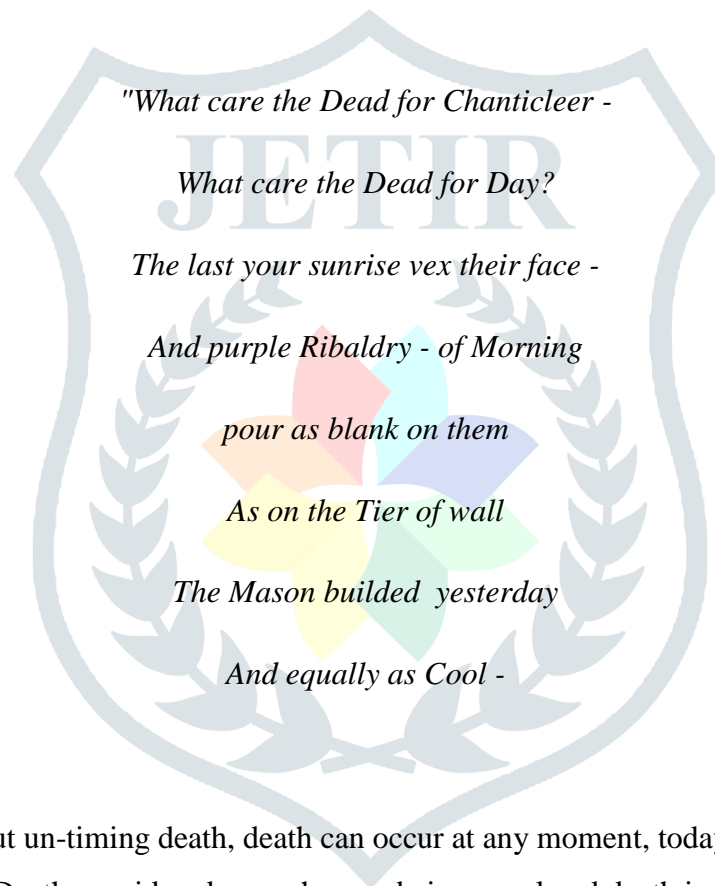
*It will not stir for Doctor's -*  
*This Pendulum of snow -*  
*The Shopman importunes it -*

*While cool - concernless No - (from p. 287)*

In clock - an instrument for measuring time, she finds an appropriate prieve metaphor for life which is only a fragment of time. When the clock of life stops, even the "Geneva's farthest skill" cannot make it again. But

paradoxically life stops only to move into timelessness - "out of Decimals - /Into Degreeless Noon." Death, however, puts on thus transmits his attributes to the corpse that he has claimed. The "Trinket" feels awe at his arrival and the "Figures" haunch with pain and quiver with fear. The "Pendulum" has become so lifeless, still, and cold that it seems to be made of snow; it "will not stir for Doctor's." Assuming death's callous indifference to life it pays no heed to the solicitations of the shop man.

In "What Care the Dead, For Chanticleer" Dickinson portrayed death as God's vehicle which came to bring all human lives to heaven:



Here Dickinson talks about un-timing death, death can occur at any moment, today or tomorrow, day or night, summer or winter. Death considered every human being equal and death is final destination for all.

Death is perceived as a suitor, lover or bridegroom driving away with his beloved or bride. For example, death is described in terms of a marriage in Poem 649:

*Her Sweet turn to leave the Homestead*

*Came the Darker Way -*

*Carriage - Be sure - and Guests - True -*

*But for Holiday*

*'Twas more pitiful Endeavor*

*Than did Loaded Sea*

*O'er the Curls attempt to caper*

*It had cast away -*

*Never Bride had such Assembling -*

*Never kinsmen kneeled*

*To salute so fair a Forhead -*

*Garland be indeed -*

*Fitter Feet - of Her before us -*

*Than whatever Brow*

*Art of snow - or Trick of Lily*

*Possibly bestow (from p. 649)*

The girl has to leave her homestead as if she were going to her bridegroom's house but ironically here is the "darker way." There are carriage and guests, but in place of being for her marriage they are for her funeral. Instead of having the pleasure of honeymoon ("Holiday") she will have "more pitiful Endeavor" of facing the rowdy Death, and her task will be more unpleasant than that of waves in facing the thrust of the "Loaded Sea." The terms like "Loaded", "Curls", and "Caper" lend an erotic note to the expression. The dual image of marriage and funeral is sustained throughout. The kinsmen assemble but it is a different sort of assembling. In place of kissing her forehead, they have to kneel to salute her as a mark of paying their last homage. They have the garland indeed but it is fitter for her feet than for her "Brow" that now looks like "Art of snow - or Trick of Lily." The impression created in the poem is that of a forced marriage which death actually is.

**Death is visualized in the form of a dialogue between the soul and the body:**

*Death is a Dialogue between*

*The Spirit and the Dust,*

*"Dissolve" says Death - The Spirit "Sir*

*I have another Trust ( " ) -*

*Death doubts it - Argues from the Ground -*

*The Spirit turns away*

*Just laying off for evidence*

*An Overcoat of Clay. (p. 976)*

Death is point where the unified entity of the soul and the body is divided into two separate identities. In the pre - play dialogue the Dust asks the Spirit to dissolve, but the Spirit turns down the suggestion. At this point death himself appears on the scene and orders the Spirit to dissolve, but the Spirit boldly though politely refuse to obey him. In contrast to it is Spirit finds her point so strong that she thinks it better to place the evidence in her support than to argue. She, therefore, turns away from Death in contempt, providing that she is beyond his control. What he controls is the Dust - "An overcoat of Clay -" that the Spirit leaves behind for evidence.

In the poem "I Hurd A Fly Buzz When I Died", she portrayed the feeling of a mortal person awaiting death to reach at the point of immortality. Dickinson shows here physical and mental state of victim about death:

*I heard a Fly buzz - when I died --*

*The Stillness in the Room*

*Was like the Stillness in the Air --*

*Between the Heaves of Strom--*



*The Eyes around - had wrung them dry -*

*And Breaths were gathering firm*

*For that last Onset - when the King*

*Be witnessed - in the Room -*

*I willed my Keepsakes - Sighed away*

*What portion of me be*

*Assignable - and then it Was*

*There interposed a Fly -*

*With Blue - uncertain stumbling Buzz -*

*Between the light - and me -*

*And then the Window failed - and then*

*I could not see to see - (p. 465)*

Here again the persona reflects on her own death, and gives graphic details of what happened to her during her last moment. The fly, a detested insect, is here symbolic of death, and hearing it's buzz implies that the persona had an institution of death. The fly's buzz thus assumes the significance of a signal of death to the dying persona. In order to be quickly ready to meet God the persona makes her will and signs away her belongings. But instead of God, a fly interposes between her and the light symbolizing her vision. The "uncertain stumbling buzz" signifies the failing vision of the persona.

In her poem "After Great Pain a Formal Feeling Comes", she does not talk about only death but also the pain which a person experiences few moments before death.

*"After great pain, a formal feeling comes -*

*The nerves sit ceremonious, like - Tombs -*

*The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,*

*And Yesterday, or Centuries before?*

*The persona dramatizes her own death in Poem 470 in which she perceives death in terms of life :*

*I am alive - I guess -*

*The Branches on my Hand*

*Are full of Morning Glory -*

*And at my finger's end -*

*The Carmine - tingles warm -*

*And if I hold a Glass*

*Across my Mouth - it blurs it -*

*Physician's - proof of Breath -*

*I am alive - because*

*I am not in a Room -*

*The Parlor - Commonly - it is -*

*So Visitors may come - (p. 943, stanzas 1, 2, 3)*

The persona is dead, and her corpse covered with flowers is lying in the parlor for the visitors to have their last glimpse of it; as death has enabled her to meet her loved one, she feels to be alive in her death. In her ecstatic pleasure she cannot entertain the idea of death at all, and therefore, tries to convince her "thee" that she is still alive but ironically she proves beyond doubt that she is alive no more in physical terms. The irony reaches its climax when she refers to her second birth which in worldly sense is nothing other than death. The poet has cleverly avoided using any word denoting death directly.

In some poems Emily Dickinson treats the theme of death - in - life. The sunset in winter symbolizes death - in - life :

*It cant be "Summer" !*

*That - got through ;*

*It's early - yet for "Spring" !*

*There's that long town of White - to - cross -*

*Before the Blackbirds sing !*

*It cant be "Dying" !*

*It's too Rouge -*

*The Dead shall go in White -*

*So Sunset shuts my question down*

*With Cuffs of Chrysolite ! (p. 221)*

Here both the sunset and the winter arouse the paradoxical feeling of death - in - life. In winter there is lack of life - activity outside while life goes on as usual within the house. The sunset marks the death of the day but "it is too Rouge" to suggest death. Structurally the poem has two parts, each consisting of five lines. In the first five lines the poet perceives death in Winter. In the next five lines the poet further looks for death in the sunset but this time she perceives a tings of life in the reddish glow of the setting sun.

' The Saddest Noise, The Sweetest Noise" -

In this poem she attributed season for death which shows that how much she was obsessed with death

### **Conclusion:**

Death is portrayed through some of common symbols in Dickinson's poetry. As T. W. Ford says in his "The Role Of Death In Emily Dickinson's Poetry":

"Death as an awesome force in the universe, thoughts not subject to the test of observation and experience she views existentially through the concrete and homely images of the house, freckled pane, cobweb, buzzing fly, indolent housewife sweeping, early task, bustle in the house, spools of thread, busy needles, starring house."

Emily Dickinson displays varied moods reflecting her moods of experience in her poems on death. However, the moods of sorrow, pain, fear, shock and bafflement dominate. We thus observe that the poet brings various modes of perception and experience to bear upon the theme of death. The contradictory moods of joy and sorrow, fear and playfulness show that the poet did not have any fixed attitude to death. She viewed death from different angles and in different moods.

Dickinson shows her escaping attitude from the problems of life in few poems and other side being hopeful towards life in some poems. In her poems sometimes have theme of immortality but theme of death seems more than others.

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