

PORTRAYAL OF DEATH IMAGES IN THE POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON

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Abstract

We all are aware of the fact that Death is inevitable and beyond our control. It is an unsolved mystery till now and will remain the same forever. It is the end of our life's journey, but still it seems to be brutal and merciless to us. We fear death since it is the end which separates us from our beloved ones. The topic of death is the subject matter of many literary works that has been included particularly in the poetry for a long time. The poet uses only selected words to portray many of the images where the readers relate the same to their own personal experiences to grasp the meaning. This interpretation is due to the related facts of the human life. Emily Dickinson is widely considered as one of the most original poets of American literature. Her works are unique in content which includes the themes of love, nature, God, death, language, friendship, frustration and immortality. But the theme death is the very subject matter of her almost poems. She personifies death in different forms such as a lord, a monarch or a lover. We all have seen death, read about death and witnessed closeness towards it but never died where it is a natural process which is beyond our capability to escape from the same. The objectives of this research paper is to gain a better understanding of the concepts of death and the images portrayed in the poetry of Emily Dickinson.

Keywords: death – universal fact – inevitable – images – destiny

Introduction

Emily Dickinson is considered as one of the reclusive poets of American Literature. Her poems are the outcome of her personal experiences. Her almost poems carries the subject matter of *Death*. Dickinson's way of depicting the *images of death* differs from other writers. Her witnessing of the American civil war is the only reason behind her choosing of the *death* theme in her poems. She was totally affected by the impacts of the civil war where she lost her loved ones. Every day the name of her own town Amherst and its surroundings appeared in the local newspaper at the time of the Civil war which affected her psyche driving closeness towards the subject matter of *Death*.

She was particularly affected by the death of her 15 year old friend *Sophia Holland* in the Civil war. This cruel death of her close friend not only affected her psychologically but also influenced her to draw different ideas towards death. Conrad Aiken also highlighted through his words about Dickinson's view of life, death and the pre-occupying thoughts through the images in her poems. Conrad Aiken asserts that "Death, and the problem of life after death, obsessed her" – (1924).

George and Barbara Perkins also praised about Dickinson's unique style and originality of her works which is incomparable with any other writers which carries a great quality George and Barbara Perkins appreciated Dickinson by commenting that "she remains incomparable because her originality sets her apart from all others, but her poems shed the unmistakable light of greatness" – (1972).

Death – The Everlasting Theme

The *image of death* is unpleasant. Dickinson's *death* theme is incomparable with any other poets. It stands as a unique form. Her common theme includes the questions of life and death. She used interesting techniques and creative ideas in her poems. Bradley Sculley, cited that "Her ideas were witty, rebellious, and original, yet she confined her materials to the world of her small village, and a few good books" – (150).

George Perkins points out that "Dickinson constructs her own world when she writes she uses her imagination to portray her ideas and thought" – (971). Through his sayings, we can understand that she choose events only from her own world where she presents the same experience to her readers in her poems.

David Lehman praised Dickinson that "From Dickinson's poems, you might almost suppose that she has died and written them posthumously" – (3).

Dickinson is capable of sensing every view of death. For this touching aspect, she is identified and accepted as the person who is able to create the *images* of death. She portrayed the *images of death*, as if it is really experienced by her. She has written the topic of death in every aspect of life that she views. The theme of death in her poem is especially about the pain and suffering of the human body and the moment of dying. Through her personal observations, previous experiences and her belief in religion it is evident that she portrayed the *images of death* as the main theme in her poems.

Most of Dickinson's poems end up with death and eternity. The soul's survival afterlife is another critical question she allocates within her writings. She has also discussed about the existence of God and appreciation of afterlife in her poems.

The Portrayal of Images of Death

Dickinson portrays the 'images of Death' as a personal enemy who aims to torment and execute the victim. In her poems "He fumbles at your souls" and "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –", Dickinson personifies death as a merciless killer with haughty potential which changes the person who is dying without any mercy shown towards him.

In "A clock stopped –" and "There is a Languor of the life", she exhibits the painful cruelty experienced by a person at his dying moment. Here Dickinson, who is the narrator of the poem witnessed the same *dying moment* many a times where the person who dies here is *herself*. The torment suffered by the person who is dying is portrayed with different scenes in the poems mentioned. She also revealed the internal and external fear of human beings about death. Through natural scenario and personal experience she portrays the painful moment of death to her readers.

In "Death is like the insect" – Dickinson describes a natural scene to explain that death is a natural phenomenon which comes on our way naturally.

"Death is like the Insect
Menacing the tree,
Competent to kill it,
But decoyed may be.
Bait it with the balsam,
Seek it with saw,
Baffle, if it cost you
Everything you are".

In this poem *the tree* stands for *life* and the *insect* as a metaphor, for *death*. Here Dickinson compares life with death through the images of tree and the insect where the tree cannot move or fight for life with the insect since it is the image of the destroyer, decaying and damaging the tree. So finally this poem highlights the theme of *image of death* as the enemy of life.

The following lines of the poem "a toad, can die of Light-" represents *death* as the common end for all human beings.

"A Toad, can die of light –
Death is the Common Right
Of Toads and Men
Of Earl and Midge

The Privilege –

Why swagger, then?

The Gnat's supremacy is large as Thin –"

These lines explain that *death* is common for both human beings and animals. Michael Ferber, claims that "toads are distinctively ugly, venomous, and evil" – (82). Through his observation, it is understood that toads are considered as "the symbol of several sins" – (83) in the middle ages. In this poem *the toad* symbolizes both good and bad things attaining the same destination which is *death*. In many other poems we can find the *image of death* presented in the form of reward or punishment. Richard and Janaro consider death as a reward or punishment in the afterlife – (393-396). In this poem

"I heard, as if I had no Ear
Until a Vital Word
Came all the way from Life to me
And that I knew I heard.
I saw, as if my Eye were on
Another, till a Thing
And now I know' twas Light, because
It fitted them, came in".

In these stanzas, the narrator uses the word *light* symbolizing life or the revival of the Soul. The word 'I' represents the person dying and regaining her consciousness where the body is in motion even after the death. She narrates that the *light* symbolizes the soul's departure from the lifeless body and progress with a rebirth for a new life after the death. Death is the final destiny of all human beings which is fatal and unavoidable. We cannot predict our fate because it is inevitable and beyond our control. The poet believes that it is *God*, the Supreme power who controls the birth and death of all human beings in this eternal world.

The following stanza describes the sameness of the human lives with that of the Nature where they grow and die in the same ways. Here the poet Dickinson highlights her acceptance of the fact of death which is common to all human beings, animals, plants and Nature in this earth.

"Growth of man – likes growth of Nature –
Gravitates within –
Atmosphere, and Sun endorse it –
But it stir – alone –".

In the poem "Death is potential to that man" she strongly reveals that death is for all human beings since we all are mortals, and also points out that *God* is the only *Supreme Being* who is immortal.

The following lines show Dickinson's discussion about the friendship of two men who are separated by the cruel death.

"Death is potential to that man
Who dies – and to his friend –
Beyond that – inconspicuous
To Anyone but God –".

God, the Supreme power only knows the fate of man since he is the creator of this world. She also exhibits her view of death is to not be feared since it is the accepted universal truth for all.

Conclusion

Dickinson's focus on the subject matter *Death* in her poems is revealed only after witnessing the death of her close friend in the Civil war. From that time onwards her perception towards death started to undergo changes based on the impacts of the Civil war in and around her surroundings. During the second phase of her writing she revealed the real pain and suffering of a dying person and torments he underwent through its process. Thus, through

the *portrayal of images* she highlighted the subject matter of *death* in various forms.

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