

The Theme of Death And Time in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson was a poet of seclusion and solitariness. She preferred to remain in her own world with her typical choices. She wrote almost 1800 poems, but most of them remained unpublished during her lifetime. The theme of death and time are two most discussed issues in Dickinson's poetry. Interest about Dickinson still remains in critical world for her choice of words, thematic movement of the poem and expression of innermost feelings in simple language. Her poems on death and time not only attract the general readers but also they have become issues of critical research throughout the world. The poems of Dickinson are an expression of her own world, lived within the space of her own. The voice of this poet echoes great poets like Shakespeare and Metaphysical poets in her depiction of the themes of time and death.

Keywords

Death, Time, Seclusion, Confessional

Introduction

Virtually unknown and unrecognized as a poet in her lifetime, Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) is acknowledged as one of our greatest poets, and according to some, one of the greatest lyric poets of all times. Indeed, the last fifty years or so have witnessed an outpouring of books and essays that attempt to explain her poetry and her life. Written as the expression of some repressed feelings of her heart, Dickinson's poetry is confessional and attracts the critical attention like the poetry of Metaphysical poets or Shakespearean sonnets. The theme of time and death always holds a special place in the realm of literature throughout the world. American poetry has received this poetic flavour through Emily Dickinson.

The Theme of Death

Death is not like an ordinary theme of Dickinson's poetry, it occupied her lifelong attention. Death has been mentioned frequently in her poems together with frustration, suffering, pain, sorrow, grief and loneliness. Critics have pointed out that nearly one third of her poetry is concerned with the theme of death. This preoccupation with death made Dickinson a poet of darkness. Death is portrayed by her from every possible aspect – as the courtly lover, the dreadful assassin, the physical corruptor and also as a free agent in nature. She was obsessed with the problem of death and subsequent life after death. She died all her life; she experienced death daily in her life. Death with its horrible uncertainties, doubts about immortality – all these things have produced the sharp and intellectual works of Dickinson.

A reason for Dickinson's preoccupation with death may be her involvement with religiosity. Her notions about God, Eternity, Time, Immortality, Infinity etc. are responsible for her growing interest in death. Immortality to her was a problem to be faced as death indeed was, but it was not an extension or a retreat. She accepts death as a physical fact and as a material truth. Her immediate interest in the death poems is to dramatise the event of death, to bring out the tension or conflict that such a particular event will have on the minds of human beings. Dickinson's obsession with death may also be traced to her Puritan surroundings. For the Puritan, death is the climax of living, and it must be accepted in a solemn way. Her rebellion against the doctrine of Puritanism taught her that death could not be a compensation for this life. Though she was a poet obsessed with death thought, she never became a champion of death. Glorification of death was far from her motives.

In her poems on death, Miss Dickinson gives us a variety of experience on the subject. She closely examines the sensations of the dying, the response of the onlookers, the terrible struggle

of the body of her life, the adjustments in a house after death, the arranging of the body for the funeral, the church services and even the thoughts of the dead person. She had a strange fascination for death and imagined herself dead with mourners walking past her or lying in order to punish different friends. Dickinson's death poems deal with an intellectual point of view. She sees death as a culmination of human experience. She wrote a series of death poems in which death is the thing that separates people from their beloveds. In the poem *I Died for Beauty*, the poet searches for the beauty all her life and dies in the search. Here she familiarizes the experiences of death as a sort of extension of experiences of this world. The idea is quite macabre and grotesque, but presented so naturally! She tries to understand this experience as another form of human experience.

In some of her poems Emily Dickinson has contrasted the expectations of death with its realistic occurrence. *I Heard A Fly Buzz When I Died* is such an example. With a strong sense of scepticism she questions the medieval fundamental beliefs of society. The poem is an ironic reversal of the conventional attitudes towards the moments of death. Here she says:

..... When the king
Be witnessed in the room

The king remains an open question – is it God or Death itself? The ending of the poem, however, does not suggest that it is God:

With blue, uncertain stumbling buzz
Between the light and me;
And then the windows failed; and then
I could not see to see.

[<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/i-heard-a-fly-buzz-when-i-died/>]

The dramatic sensation and experience during the soul's departure from the body is described through the lyric. Here Dickinson is giving us no hint of living hereafter. Rather, we have a clear idea that instead of having a glimpse of heavenly light, the dying person only feels the familiar world around her fading away and slipping. She is not speaking about death as a positive moment, a gateway to a richer, fuller life – experience, death is a loss. The poem satirizes the traditional view of death as a peaceful release from life's pressures and glorious entry into immortality. Life in a small New England town in Dickinson's time contained a high mortality rate. Subsequently, she received the shock of death of her intimate associates. Leonard Humphrey died in 1850, Benjamin Newtoun in 1853, her father, Edward Dickinson in 1874, her mother, Emily in 1882 which was shortly followed by the death of young Gilbert

Dickinson in 1883. It was a terrible blow to Dickinson. That is why her former approach changed when she realized that death also meant separation. She narrates the events after death minutely – the stillness of the room; the visitors came to pay regard and even the dying man’s actions:

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away

What portion of me be

Assignable – and then it was

There interposed a Fly–

[<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/i-heard-a-fly-buzz-when-i-died/>]

The last stanza of the poem depicts the dying man’s ultimate effort to live on this earth. But he could not “see to see”, his eyesight fails him, a curtain or barrier comes in front of his wish to continue living. This desperation on the part of the human being and their ultimate but inevitable surrender to the death of lap is presented in this poem at its best.

Infact, a number of poems by Miss. Dickinson have the funeral ceremony as their theme. *Because I could not stop for Death* is her finest poem in that category. On the surface, this poem seems like just another version of a procession to the grave, but here it is also a metaphor that can be of a different sort. In the poem, death is viewed and presented from various perspectives. It brings a welcome relief from life’s tensions. It is a force that heightens a person’s satisfaction with life. Death and immortality may be viewed in two different ways in the poem. Death may be looked at as the gallant lover and immortality as a protector. Then dying represents a benefit. Death may also be viewed as a seducer and Immortality as his partner in the crime. In between these two alternatives, Dickinson leaves open and unresolved, the question of which set is really the more applicable to the poem. The irresolution comes about because she cannot honestly make up her mind about her feelings and attitudes are towards her own death. The poet records the passage from life whose everything is tangible to the ‘otherness’ of death, a realm in which shapes necessarily become ambiguous and baffling. Regardless of the varieties of interpretation of the poem, the journey itself arrests attention. With the expedition of death, the poet leaves her life; the life disappears behind her like a receding landscape. The sun imagery in the poem indicates light in the poem. The children and the fields of gazing grain suggest warmth and vitality. In the latter part of the poem, ‘darkness’ is emphasized by the expression “the sun is gone”; ‘cold’ by “the dews drew quivering and chill”. The tone of the poem gradually changes towards vagueness.

The poem has a narrative structure and involves characters, scenes, setting and an all – encompassing theme. The entire poem yields to the description of the appearance of ‘Death’ and ‘Immortality’ and their intention to carry the narrator away with them. The reference to Eternity in the last line can be explained as an attempt to carry the relationship between the suitors and the narrator till the farthest possible end.

In the poem *Safe in their Alabaster Chamber* she speaks with her tongue in her cheek. She writes:

Untouched by morning
And touched by noon,
Sleep the meek members of the resurrection-

[<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174988>]

It has a double edge. Infact, this is death, this is no meekness. That is why it cuts. This is an attack on the conventional belief that death is the gateway to Resurrection. Life holds more for us than death. The theme of the poem is the relation of death and immortality, one of the major Dickinsonian themes. The lyrical quality of the poem attracts the readers the most. It is a journey from the world of darkness to that of light, from death to resurrection, from isolation to hope, and from transience to permanence.

The Theme of Time

A poet with an obsession for death and consciousness of immortality and mutability, Dickinson also had a special attraction for time. Though the popular attitude teaches to look into time as a healer, she was far from such thoughts. She was living in a world that was fast changing. She accepted such motion, but desired stability. She was really afraid of change and therefore chose seclusion as a remedy.

Time was quite opposite to immortality to her. When immortality and eternity are changeless, time is a constant flux. Time brings all the evils which man encounters in this universe. She questions this temporary existence of human being and its relevance. When eternity is the only bliss, this existence is nothing but an interruption by time:

On this wondrous sea,
Sailing silently,
Knowest thou the shore
Ho! Pilot, ho!

.....

Their anchors fast;

Thither I pilot thee, -

Land, ho! Eternity!

Ashore at last!

[<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/on-this-wondrous-sea/>]

But, she does not run away from time because she knows that an escape from time is impossible. She senses the presence of God behind time.

Dickinson blames time with the charge that it creates a distance between man and nature. The communion between man and nature is destroyed by time. It does not allow man to comprehend the world around him. As Dickinson is opposed to change and time is nothing but an agent of change, it is criticized by her. Time does not allow her to feel at home in this universe and she remains an eternal outsider.

She found no coherence of system in life except the autonomy of time and change. They were disturbing factors to her that put a barrier in human life. She found herself surrounded by motion, which she dislikes. She finds no traces of God's majesty in this world. Naturally, there was the conflict between the divine constancy and earthly temporaries. To find a solution of this problem she elevates her poems dealing with the theme of time to the height of metaphysical poetry. Her search ends with the finding that eternity is the only place where one can experience glimmerings of a settled time.

Dickinson's poem *There's a Certain Slant of Light* focuses on the theme of time. 'Winter Afternoon' is nothing but the closing years of life which is her most attended period of life in her poems. Both the 'Winter' and the 'Afternoon' are closing of season and day. They are naturally associated with the end of life. The words like hurt, despair, affliction, death, oppress and hefts are used to suggest the oppressiveness of death and the helplessness of human being:

When it comes, the Landscape listens –

Shadows – hold their breath –

When it goes, 'tis like the Distance

On the look of Death –

[<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/there-s-a-certain-slant-of-light-258/>]

Here the underlying process of decay in nature parallels man's psychological and emotional pain. The poem illustrates a good man's inability to control nature and the desperation with which he fights for survival. The poet succeeds in creating a kind of oneness with nature in this poem.

Though the ray of light is generally associated with cheerfulness, the poet here uses it to denote a profound sorrow. This light makes the poet feel the force of an eternal power that is irresistible

and omnipotent. The depth of human despair can be measured through the funeral bell of the Church announcing the end of life:

That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –

[<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/there-s-a-certain-slant-of-light-258/>]

Though some transcendental overtones run throughout the poem, the optimism of the transcendentalists is absent here. Rather the poet sounds like Melville's Ishmael, who feeling winter in his soul, begins to know the meaning of the word 'despair'.

The poem *My Life Closed Twice Before Its Close* is rich in biographical details. The poet says that her life closed twice before its close. She feels that the third event will herald immortality:

My life closed twice before its close –
It yet remains to see
If immortality unveil
A third event to me

The poet is not sure whether death takes man to heaven or hell:

Parting is all we know of heaven,
And all we need of hell.

Separation is a bitter and tragic experience in life and that is all we know of heaven or hell. The third event in the poet's life may be a huge one as she feels:

So huge, so hopeless to conceive
As these that twice befell.

[<http://www.bartleby.com/113/1096.html>]

It is said that the first two events may relate to the deaths of Newton and Wadsworth. She had a tender feeling towards both these young men. In many of her poetry, death comes as an inevitable end and a man becomes helpless before it. This poem also relates to the same theme by referring to the incidents of her life. Extreme time consciousness runs throughout the poem.

Conclusion

Dickinson started her poetic writing without the purpose of making it public. Her portrayal of time's haunting image and inevitability of death in human life brings her close to many other legendary poets of English literature. In her choice of words and self imposed seclusion, she

stands apart from the whole writing community. She is a unique voice of American poetry who echoes the solitary voice of loneliness and angst in literature. Though she does not attempt to philosophize the notion of death and also does not put burden of words into poetry; she successfully catches the attention of readers and critics working in the field of time and death.

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