
Death in Some of Emily Dickinson's Selected Poems*

Raia Abdul-Wahid Abdul-Aziz

Lect., Female Teachers Training Institute / Nineveh

Abstract

The present study aims at shedding light on death in some of Emily Dickinson's selected poems. It is divided into three sections and a conclusion.

The first section is an introductory one. It is devoted to the definition of death and how it became a recurrent theme in literature. It gives examples from the ancient works of literature which show how many feared it and stood puzzled in front of its destructive power. It also alludes to some aspects of Emily Dickinson's life and views towards death as they appear through her autobiography and letters.

The second section tackles the anxiety of death in Emily Dickinson's selected poems. It concentrates on the staggering of the poet between faith and faithlessness in addition to her failure in love and the loss of her lover.

The third section talks about the images of death. It tackles some positive images where death comes to be a lover who accompanies her as a bridegroom or a lover-towards eternity. Other images come to be negative where death seems to be a destructive power which cuts the continuity of life and turns it to a limitless silence. The images of fly, darkness, and snow also contribute in showing death as a foggy, mysterious world.

The conclusion sums up the results which the study reaches.

(*) Received: 29/3/2012, Accepted: 17/6/2012.

الموت في بعض قصائد إملي دكنسون المختارة

رائعة عبد الواحد عبد العزيز

مدرس، معهد إعداد المعلمات، نينوى

□

المستخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء على الموت في بعض قصائد إملي دكنسون المختارة. وتقسم إلى ثلاثة مباحث وخاتمة.

خصص المبحث الأول لتعريف الموت وكيف أصبح ثيمة متداولة في الأدب، ويقدم نماذج مما تبقى من أقدم الكتابات الأدبية والتي في أغلبها تظهر خوف الإنسان من الموت وموقفه الحائر أمام هذه القوة المدمرة، كما يلمح إلى بعض الجوانب في حياة الشاعرة ووجهات نظرها كما يظهر من خلال حياتها وبعض رسائلها.

أما المبحث الثاني فيعالج مسألة القلق من الموت في بعض قصائد الشاعرة، ويركز على حالة التآرجح بين الإيمان واللاإيمان فضلاً عن فشل الشاعرة في تجربة الحب وفقدان الحبيب.

ويعالج المبحث الثالث صور الموت، إذ تظهر بعض منها ايجابيته إذ يصبح الموت حبيباً يرافقها كعريس نحو عالم الخلود. أما البعض الآخر فكان سلبياً إذ يظهر الموت كقوة مدمرة تقطع استمرارية الحياة وتخمد صخبها وتحولها إلى صمت ليس له حدود. كما أن صور الذبابة والظلام والثلج تساهم في إظهار ضبابية عالم الموت وسره.

وأخيراً الخاتمة إذ تلخص أهم النتائج التي توصلت إليها الدراسة.

1. Introduction

Since the dawn of existence, death had been the most important matter that disturbs man. Man tried to find an interpretation for this phenomenon, but all what he could produce was moving in the circle of primitiveness and myths. Primitive man believed that death was a result of curse or spell. It was interpreted as an unnatural happening which is the effect of spiritual retribution, or secrecy of witchcraft; i.e. human retribution ⁽¹⁾. The primitive man thought that man was born to be immortal and death came to the world because of a mistake man committed or because of god's curse which was -sometime-carried without a clear reason ⁽²⁾.

However, man became aware of this destructive power which is closely related to the creative power of birth. Ruezameen argues that "everywhere around us in the universe, two forces are constantly at work-the creative force and the destructive force. Birth gives a beginning to life and death puts an end to it". ⁽³⁾ Hence, death may simply be defined as "the end of life" ⁽⁴⁾.

This subject occupies a broad area in the literature of all nations. We can find this in the first survival litererary productions. Gilgamish Epic shows how man surrendered to this destructive power as he found himself face to face with it as a result of the death of his friend Enkidu:

*Gilgamish for Enkidu, his friend,
Weeps bitterly and roams over the desert
When I die, shall I not be like unto unkidu?
Sorrow has entered my heart
I am afraid of death and roam over the desert* ⁽⁵⁾. Tablet 2
Column I

The death of others reminds man of his mortality. This evokes a gloomy view toward his future and arises fear as well.

The inevitability of death is the basic theme of the epic. Death cannot be avoided even by Gilgamish, the hero, who as myths tell us, is two thirds an immortal god and only-third mortal:

*Gilgamish, whither runnest thou?
The life which thou seekest thou will not find,
(For) when the gods created man kind,
They allotted death to man kind,
(But) life they retained in their keeping⁽⁶⁾. Tablet 2 Column*

2

There is an implicit outcry against gods for "they allotted death to mankind" while they keep immortality for themselves.

In Homer's The Odessey, Achilles the hero of The Illiad, prefers simple life to death. He is ready to sacrifice his glory, only to still living. He expresses his refusal and hatred to Hades where the spirits of the dead live. He addresses Odysseus who visits the place to receive prophecy:

O shining Odysseus, never try to console Me from dying. I would rather follow the plow and thrall to another man, one with no land allotted him, and not much to live one than be a king over the perished dead⁽⁷⁾.

Consolation cannot elevate the problem of death; for it is still destructive:

In the Roman tradition man began, meditating the problem of death more rationally. It became an eternal absence where one knows no path to return from:

*Sun may sink and return;
For us, when once our brief sun has set
There comes the long sleep of everlasting night*⁽⁸⁾.

Things are allotted a cyclic return while man's life is linear; it only leads to death which is compared to an "everlasting night".

To talk about death in Dickinson's poetry, one should be aware of some social and biographical aspects of the poet. The nineteenth century was a century of contrasts and uncertainty. New England Calvinism and the nineteenth -century sentimental - romantic tradition were both obsessed with death in their own way, and were a part of the background and environment⁽⁹⁾. It witnessed the civil war. In spite of this complex age, America was the land of opportunity for millions of European refugees. New ideas were acceptable and new discoveries took place⁽¹⁰⁾.

Though little is known about her life, yet some available information encourages scholars to discover the implicit and sometimes explicit relationship between the poet's life and her poetry. Emily Dickinson was a nineteenth-century poet from Massachusetts who did not become famous until decades after death⁽¹¹⁾. Looking carefully in her poetry, one can realize she was highly affected by death and religion. Her poetry harmonized her feelings of depression and loneliness. She had her own views towards life and death. In a letter following up this idea she said: "of our first creation we are unconscious and of living, too, until death forces us to be conscious of it"⁽¹²⁾. As a child she caught glimpse of grave yard and graves. She heard mourning. As a school girl she reported in a letter: "yesterday as I sat by the north window the funeral train entered the open gate of the church yard"⁽¹³⁾. She also lost a young friend. Hence no wonder death became a main theme for her poetry.

2- Anxiety of Death: Reading with the Grain

Everyone has a kind of anxiety of death but it becomes a real problem in the life of some people that it is even reflected in every aspect of their behaviors including their thinking and writings. Dickinson's autobiography reveals many reasons behind this anxiety. During Higginson's first visit to her in 1870, she fired him with some exclamations which show her fondness of life and her fear of death. She said: "I find ecstasy in living - the mere sense of living is joy enough"⁽¹⁴⁾. In a previous letter to Higginson she expresses her fear of death implicitly. As a result, she turns to poetry as a career. She confessed that she had "a terror – since September – I could tell to none and so I sing, as the boy dose by the burying ground because I am afraid"⁽¹⁵⁾.

The lack of love or the loss of lover may be one of the important reasons behind the anxiety of death. There have been many theories proposed as why Dickinson became a recluse. The most important one is that which is tackled by Fitzgibbon, which sees that she was rejected by a man she loved, "a man who appears in her poems and letters as "Master"⁽¹⁶⁾. Hence, love became a symbol interchangeable with death ⁽¹⁷⁾. She concentrates on the loss of a lover rather than on his rejection. The transcendent value of love is usually confronted with its extinction in death. Some of her poems, though not usually the best, "Seem to relate this extreme suffering to a loss of love"⁽¹⁸⁾. Hence, all what can she do is to conjoin love and death. She sees that this raises a hope of reunion in heaven. Death becomes a social "significant event, set off by ritual rites and supported by installation"⁽¹⁹⁾. The awareness of man's separation arouses hopelessness in him and his existence becomes disunited and unbearable prison as Eric Fromm argues ⁽²⁰⁾.

The love-death symbolism emerges with a special implication in the fourth stanza of her poem "Because I could not stop for death":

*For only Gossamer my Gown-
My Tippet only Tulle-we paused before a House that
seemed*

A swelling of the Ground (LL. 12-14)

Anderson sees that this is not a description of conventional burial clothes. It is instead a bridal dress, but a very special sort. She is probably dressed for a celestial marriage. Death is not the true bride-groom but surrogate⁽²¹⁾.

This undoubtedly leads to death wish which is "a desire for self-destruction, often accompanied by feeling of depression, hopelessness"; it means to "choose death more than life, or to buy death if it is acceptable"⁽²²⁾.

In "Safe in their Albaster Chambers", there is an implicit wish for death. The poet describes the dead as having rest in their graves; they have got rid from the problems of life which is definitely not a new theme or view. An Arabic poet, Abu Al-Ala Al-Ma'ari regards death as a sleep where anxiety has no way to it:

ضجعة القبر رقدة يستريح الجسم فيها والعيش مثل السهاد⁽²³⁾.

The dead don't feel time. Hence, time losses his destructive power which dominates everything:

Untouched by morning and untouched by noon. (L. 2)

The staggering between faith and faithlessness play a vital role in deepening the sense of anxiety in Emily Dickinson. Her major poetic method in dealing with religious subjects reflects the tension in her mind between belief and disbelief. This staggering, however, makes her uncertain about the coming

world. Even faith which is supposed to reduce death anxiety, increases it sometimes⁽²⁴⁾.

In her poem, "I know he exists. Would not the fun", Dickinson talks about the existence of God and how the dead move the world of eternity where they become part of God's Kingdom and live in the circle of his presence. Then, toward the end of the poem, the poet is infatuated with a barrage of suspect and uncertainty concerning God's existence:

*That hand is amputated now
And God can not be found
But – Should the play
Prove piercing earnest
Should the glee – glaze page. (LL. 12-17)*

If God is not found, death becomes a path which leads to nothingness. If God is not found; it is certain that there will be no salvation. In "Death's-stiff-stare", the poet, after some questions, concludes that if there is no salvation then all our efforts and worships will be in vain and we are really fooled:

*If there is no salvation after death
A cruel Joke indeed would have been played on us. (LL. 7-8)*

The sense of worry about salvation after death takes many forms in every period of her life. This doubt leads to despair and the coming world comes to be just an illusion which is followed by the fool. Hence, death is no longer regarded as a point that separates mortality from immortality; it just leads to dust. This doubt or faithlessness is expressed explicitly in "My life closed twice before its close". She says that a third event, which is life after death, is not existed. Hence death comes to be:

So huge, so hopeless to conceive. (L. 5)

The uncertainty about after-life makes death fearful and its road drab.

In addition to these reasons, women are subject to this anxiety more than men. Walter Cannon concentrates on the role gender in this realm. He argues that "Women are more open to death-related thought and feelings"⁽²⁵⁾. Jacques Choron, in Modern Man and Mortality, expresses the same view. He argues that "Women tend to report somewhat higher levels of death-related anxiety"⁽²⁶⁾. Some psychoanalysts attribute this increasing anxiety to some psychological disturbance. Chandler sees that Emily Dickinson "Suffered from some form of agoraphobia or anxiety disorder"⁽²⁷⁾. Whatever, the reasons may be, some of Dickinson's poems express this anxiety openly and clearly.

3- Images of Death

The images of death in Emily Dickinson's poetry range from those which express happiness and rest to others which are somehow gloomy and destructive. In some of her poems, death comes to be a road to eternity. To gain eternity we must die first. In "Because I could not stop for Death". She describes death and herself as moving to eternity:

*The carriage held but just ourselves
And immortality ...* (LL. 3-4)

In fact, the poet sees that immortality comes as soon as one dies and the image of the chariot and the horse has a long story in myths and religions.

In "I heard a fly buzz when I died" the phrase "Last on set" means the beginning and the end. For Christian, death represents the beginning of eternity where "the king", who may by God "is witnessed in his power". Hence, death brings revelation.

As a result, death becomes a lover who does not take, but accompanies her to immortality. In "Because I could not stop for Death" her lover (death) drives slowly and she had got rid from her commitments before that:

*We slowly drove, he knew no haste,
And I had put away
My labor, and my leisure too,
For his civility... (LL. 4-7)*

The carriage drive "was a standard mode of courtship a century ago" and "love has frequently been an idea linked with death"⁽²⁸⁾. The poet wrote to her brother: "I've been to ride twice since I wrote you ... last evening with sophomore Emmons alone", and a few weeks later she confided to her future sister-in-law:

"I've found a beautiful new friend"⁽²⁹⁾. Her treatment of death as a friend makes it seem as people are silly for fearing it.

During this trip, she experiences a chill because she is not warmly dressed. In fact, her garments are more appropriate for a wedding, representing a new beginning, than for a funeral:

*The Dews drew quivering and chill
For only Gossamer, my Gown
My Tippet-only Tulle- (LL. 11-13)*

Sometimes, an indirect reference to desire emerges in some of her poems a matter which mingles spiritual love with eroticism. In "Success is counted sweetest", the poet "uses alliteration in every stanza and imagery to show desire"⁽³⁰⁾:

Success is counted sweetest by those who never succeed. (L. 1)

In other words, those people who are rarely successful will appreciate winning the most. In the second and third lines:

*To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.* (LL. 2-3)

There is an unconscious desire for there is a reference to the nectar as drink, the drink as a desire, and that one be thirsty in order to appreciate the drink.

She usually sees that desire cannot be reached. The image of the apple expresses man's desire which is forbidden to be attained according to religious instructions:

*The apple on the tree
Provided it do hopeless-hang
That heaven is to me.* (LL. 2-4)

It seems that the depression of sexual instincts under the restrictions of the superego drives the poet to despair and directs these instincts far from their sexual aims to other and no more sexual⁽³¹⁾. The poet is forced to sublime these instincts and direct them to other fields. The new Freudians who adopted this theory talked about emotional conflicts and subliminal effect⁽³²⁾. The same theory is adopted by Christophel Cowdwell who thinks that the sexual sublimity "takes a number of forms: artistic, religious and philosophical"⁽³³⁾.

"In wild Nights-Wild Nights", the erotic image controls the atmosphere of the poem despite the fact that the recurrent end is Eden. If "I" is considered Emily Dickinson – the spinster – the frank eroticism might puzzle the reader. The role of the lover is not clear in the poem but the word "Luxury" makes the reader aware of the theme she is dealing with:

Wild nights-wild nights!
Where I with thee
Wild nights should be
Our luxury. (LL. 1-4)

Luxury as Anderson argues "included the meaning of lust as well as lavishness of sensuous enjoyment (34). However, the enjoyment will be carried out in "Eden", after death:

Rowing in Eden. (L. 9)

Hence, death comes to be a medium which offers both eternity and love where sexual passion is lawless.

The idea of death as a lover is connected with religion especially with the idea of the Christ as a heavenly bridegroom. In "Death is a supple suitor", the speaker (the poet) changes from a girl to a coy virgin:

Death is the supple suitor
That wins at last. (LL. 1-2)

Her maidenly reserve is indicated by the manner in which she is forced to conduct his courtship by:

By pallid innuendoes
And dim approach. (LL. 5-6)

Furthermore, the phrase "brave – bugles" in (L. 7) may announce a royal marriage though she is sure of the mystery of death and its end:

It bears a way in triumph
To Troth unknown. (LL. 9-10)

At any rate, some of Dickinson's love poems combine love with death; funeral with wedding. Death becomes a lover transports her to eternity. Sometimes, death comes to be a place where one has rest. In the previous poem the poet describes a grave and likens it to a house:

*We passed before a house that seemed
A swelling of the ground; (LL. 13-14)*

In "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers", the poet sees that death is no more than an endless sleep where time – the destructive power – knows no path to disturb its serenity:

*Safe in their alabaster chambers,
Untouched by morning and untouched by noon, (LL. 1- 2)*

Man becomes out of the circle of time, untouched by its passing and cyclic movement. The dead are sleeping under stony roofs, waiting for resurrection:

*Sleep the meek members of the resurrection
Rafters of stain and roof of stone. (LL. 3-4)*

The dead are indifferent of what is going on in the world of the living:

*Babels the bee in a stolid ear
Pipe the sweet birds in ignorant cadence, (LL. 5-6)*

The poet means that the solid ear is indifferent or unresponsive to the living and the birds are ignorant because they know nothing of the dead.

Her "I died for Beauty – but was scarce" , questions life after death. From the second line she refers to herself as another person:

*Adjusted in the tomb
When one who died for truth was lain
In an adjoining room (LL. 2-4)*

The word (adjusted) connotes familiarity, the word (lain) connotes rest, and the word room connotes a house or residence.

Although death represents rest in this poem and in some other poems, yet, sometimes, the atmosphere is hunted by despair where death becomes an endless waiting for rising to heaven:

*We talked between the rooms.
Until the moss had reached our lips
And covered up our names. (LL. 6-8)*

The walking between the rooms expresses the tension of waiting in vain while (moss) steadily grows, till it reaches the grave stones and covers the names of the dead. Perhaps when the moss reaches the speakers' lips and names they will finally be able to rest. Death can also be a destructive power which deletes whatever connects the dead to the world of the living.

The images of death in some poems are passive where destruction, darkness and silence enfold everything. In her imaginative trip towards eternity. In "I Could not Stop for Death" the images of the fields of grain and the setting sun connote the coming harvest and the end of life consequently. Hence, "she realizes that death is an integral part of life"⁽³⁵⁾.

*We passed the fields of gazing grain,
We past the setting sun. (LL. 9-10)*

The ruthlessness of death, its cold, frosty look on life distresses her. In "Like Times insidious wrinkle", she describes the utter darkness of the heart of death:

*His heart was darker than the starless night
For that there is a moon
But in black receptacle
Can be no bode of dawn (LL. 3-6)*

She likens death to night which has no dawn. The moon seems to shine shyly; it can not challenge the eternal night of death. In "within thy Grave", death rends mankind and scatters life to pieces:

*Thou only comest to mankind
To rend it with goodnight. (LL. 3-4)*

Again death comes to be a night "a dark narrow road where man must walk alone"⁽³⁶⁾ till resurrection. Darkness is present in the moments of dying. In "I heard a fly buzz when I died", the buzz passes between the dying eyes and light. She can no more see the window, the only means through which light enters the room, and then she can see nothing:

*With blue, uncertain, stumbling buzz,
Between the light and me;
And then the window failed, and then
I could not see to see. (LL. 2-5)*

Silence also presents in these moments; it controls everything even the air:

There is stillness in the air (L. 6)

Silence, in "Death's waylaying not the Sharpest", is described as a "sorer rubber". Death assaults man, and it poses a constant threat to his existence. Silence plunders man's peace which prevails over his "Life's Consummate Cluster":

*There marauds a sorer Rubber,
Silence – is his name –
No assault, nor any men ace
Doth betoken him.
But from Life's Consummate Cluster
He supplant the Balm. (LL. 3-8)*

The image of the fly in "I heard a fly buzz when I died" expresses the darkness of death in addition to its silence. Before the speaker passes, she speaks of "stillness in the air ". The flies come between the speaker and the light. Whether this is the light from the sun, or the light from awaiting heaven is unclear, but in either case, this fly "seems to have been given some sort of power over the speaker; a great power would need to be bestowed for any fly to be able to interpose on a human soul"⁽³⁷⁾. The windows in the "the windows failed", seem to be the speaker's eyes, which can no longer sense light, and the speaker moves into the blackness of death. The image of the fly may be a foreshadowing of the after death where decay is the future of the body. Flies, after all, feed on (dead flesh). Hence, there is doubt concerning eternity after death. The fly here, "may stand for Beelzebub, who is also known as lord of the flies"⁽³⁸⁾.

In "It will not stir for Doctors"; the images of the clock and snow are mingled to show the first moments of death. The medium of measuring time is depicted- with its swinging pendulum – as heart throbs in the breast. The main difference is that the chime of the watch is everlasting:

*And the everlasting clocks-
Chime – Noon
"The Pendulum of Snow". (LL. 2-4)*

Snow connotes both the whiteness when blood drains away from the body and freezing of motion into the stillness of death⁽³⁹⁾. It also appears frequently in the poetic vocabulary as the image of eternity and so of death. In "Dying in the Night!" snow – like night – is shown as a world of loss where one cannot find his way in:

*Won't somebody bring the light
So I can see which way to go
Into the everlasting snow ? (LL. 2-4)*

Conclusion

Since the dawn of poetic creation, death had become a poetic subject that occupied broad areas of poetic productions. Poets were fully aware of its destructive power and its main action which is to cut the continuity of life. They feared it and expressed this fear through some poems which embodied a longing for living whatever the circumstances of their lives may be. As for Emily Dickinson, some social and autobiographical factors contribute in making her sensitive towards death. The spirit of the age witnessed different views toward existence and the environment she lived in strengthened this sense. The fear of loss and separation also deepened this sense. The lack of love and the staggering between faith and faithlessness led her to the circle of anxiety of death. Hence, the images of death come to be traditional and personal. The images of darkness, night and snow, for instance are traditional one while other images are purely personal. The image of death as a lover who will take his beloved toward eternity is not a traditional one. Many poets write about death-wish but Emily Dickinson is the only one who writes about it as a lover. Some other images-like the image of the "fly"- is dealt with in complex way that it is still open to different interpretations.

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