

A Thematic Study of Death in Emily Dickinson's Selected Poems

دراسة موضوعية في الموت
في قصائد مختارة لايميلي ديكنسون

Isra Hasan Jassim

م.إسراء حسن جاسم

Imam Ja'afar Al-Sadiq University-College of Arts

جامعة الإمام جعفر الصادق (عليه السلام) / كلية الآداب

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Abstract

The theme of death is one of the themes that are often tackled in literature. Death is the end of tragedies and many poets wrote elegies to eulogize their loved ones. Furthermore, poets, novelists, and dramatists wrote about the causes of death, such as wars and diseases. Nevertheless, They did not overlook the sorrow that is caused by death. Thus, literature contains symbols and images that portray death, its causes, and the sorrow after death.

One of the poets who dealt with the theme of death is Emily Dickinson who wrote many poems that deal with the experience of death itself. Her poems are distinguished by the minute examination of the experience of death and deathbed scenes.

The aim of this study is to explore the theme of death in Emily Dickinson's selected poems. It also aims to shed light on the images used by the poetess to portray death.

الملخص

يعد موضوع الموت أحد الموضوعات التي غالباً ما يتم تناولها في الأدب. فالموت هو نهاية المآسي، وكثير من الشعراء كتبوا مرثيات لتأبين أحبائهم. كما كتب الشعراء والروائيون والمسرحيون عن أسباب الوفاة كالحروب والأمراض. ومع ذلك لم يغفلوا الحزن الذي يسببه الموت وهكذا فإن الأدب يحتوي على رموز وصور تصور الموت وأسبابه والحزن بعد الموت. ومن الشعراء الذين تناولوا موضوع الموت إميلي ديكنسون التي كتبت العديد من القصائد التي تتناول تجربة الموت نفسها. تميزت قصائدها بالفحص الدقيق لتجربة مشاهد الموت و Fraas الموت.

إنّ الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو استكشاف موضوع الموت في قصائد إميلي ديكنسون المختارة. كما تهدف إلى إلقاء الضوء على الصور التي تستخدمها الشاعرة في تصوير الموت.

Historical Context

In the nineteenth century, death was dominant especially because of diseases and wars. Infectious diseases were increasing as cities began to grow, in addition, medical science had little effective ways to treat or prevent the spread of these diseases. Adults, children, and childbirth mortality rates remained quite high until the end of the century (Carter and Farr: 2009, p.129).

Besides, Emily Dickinson wrote during the time of the Civil War. Although the Civil War did not affect her directly, the emotional suffering of the time appears through in some of her works(Carter and Farr: 2009 ,p71). Miss Dickinson's treatment of death is related to the cultural circumstances of her time: she lived at a time when the old religious certainty of a life after death was detached by a world dominated by science which neglects an afterlife and emphasizes the physical phenomenon of death. Dickinson's superior education at Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke female seminary made her question puritan beliefs, in combination with the general changes in science, all these factors made her question death on the physical and the metaphysical level (Ottliger: 1996, P.31).

Death in Emily Dickinson's Life

Dickinson lived in the Dickinson Homestead in Amherst, Massachusetts all her life with exception of fifteen years, when the family lived on Pleasant Street. She could almost daily watch funeral processions pass her home and go to the cemetery from her upstairs bedroom window; thus, she was reminded of death regularly (Sewall: 2003,p.18).

In 1874, Emily's father died. Her father was one of the important influences in her life, in addition to her mother's death who remained sick for many years before her death. Emily

suffered the death of dear and near friends and relatives. The most important incident which gave her a sense of the immediacy of death was the death of young Ben Newton, who in 1828 lived with her family as her father's law-apprentice. Emily's reaction to the death of this young brilliant man was profound, it made her more philosophically aware of death as a perplexing and puzzling phenomenon of life (Tandon and Trevedi: 2008, p.78).

In 1883, she experienced the death of her nephew, Gilbert. This period of Emily Dickinson's life was spent in mourning as she suffered the deaths of many friends and members of her family (Sewall: 2003 , pp. 69-81).

Writing poetry about death was her strategy to cope with the loss of beloved people and the physical explorations for death and her dangling between the belief in an afterlife (Ottlinger: 1996, p.32).

Emily Dickinson's Perspective of Death

Emily Dickinson regarded death as the great unknown and never stopped to meditate its mystery. Ultimately the obsession became morbid and she developed an excessive desire to know the details of how human beings experienced death. (Tandon and Trevedi: 2008, p.77).

She had no certainty about life beyond death, but she also refused to believe that having created the entire universe, God would let it all be given over to death (Lundin: 1998, p 261).

The Images of Death in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

Miss Dickinson's poetic insight into the nature of death may be regarded as one of her unique contributions to the American Literature; her poems show a wide range of treatment of the subject of death; from a philosophical examination of death's

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relation with love to a gloomy consideration of its physical processes (Lall: 2011, p.53).

In her poems on the subject of death, Miss Dickinson closely examines the sensations of the dying, the response of the observers, the terrible struggle of the body for life, the adjustment in a house after death, the arranging of the body for the funeral, the church services, and even the thoughts of the dead person (Lall: 2011, p.53).

In Dickinson's best poems, she explains death's sensational and emotional aspects to probe its ultimate relation with love and immortality. Death comes as a cunning courtier, it commands one's presence as a king stings like an insect, it is also compared to a brook which inspires fear. Miss Dickinson also wrote many morbid poems that were full of pathos and sentimentality(Lall: 2011, p.53).

The Traditional concept of Death Satirized in "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died"

In this short poem, death is transformed into a single fly which dominates the scene with its buzzing noise that nothing else seems to matter to the dying person(Pratt: 1996, p.50) : “ I heard a Fly buzz when I died/ the Stillness in the room” (Emily Dickinson: 1960, p.223) the speaker sees the mourners around her holding their breath, they are waiting for death which they conceive as "the King" who will come and claim her(Pratt: 1996, p.50) : “ For that last onset when the King/ Be witnessed in the Room” (Emily Dickinson: 1960, p.224) This poem satirizes the traditional view of death as a release from life's pressures and a glorious entry into immortality, the poetess sees only disappointment, a buzzing fly, and the terrible attempts of the soul to prolong life (Lall: 2011, p.54).

Miss Dickinson's poem "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—" turns traditional Calvinist concept of death upside down. The speaker in the poem spends her dying moments attentive to a fly (Mamunes: 2008, p.122) Rather imagining the soul's continuing life in heaven, the poetess stresses physical death with the fly buzzing around the corpse. This physical perspective of death undermines the sentimental notion of an angelic death(Mamunes: 2008, p.122): “ There interposed a Fly/ with Blue uncertain stumbling Buzz” (Emily Dickinson: 1960, p.223)

She questions the traditional religious concept in which death is an occasion to go to the afterlife, but here, the "king" is witnessed neither by the mourners nor by the dying person, instead, the fly which represents the physical universe interposes between the speaker and the light which may represent the eternal light of God or the failing light of earthly existence ((Mamunes: 2008, p. 88).

In "I heard a fly buzz—when I died—," there is the drama of the deathbed scene, the watchers by the bed side, the dying person, and the buzzing fly breaks the stillness. It is death dramatized; but there is no shock or lamentation(Sewall: 2003, p.718).

This poem conveys imaginary scene because in it, the poetess seems to pursue the physical experience of death to its uttermost limit beyond human consciousness, and yet the words are those of a person who must be alive. She speaks of death before it happens, but takes the viewpoint of someone who has experienced death. Thus, her short poem performs an act of imagination . (Pratt: 1996, p. 57). The poetess states that “ [she] could not see to see.” (Emily Dickinson: 1960, p.224) , yet the poetess is present to narrate what she had seen earlier as if she comes back to life to report what had happened to her.

Dickinson's Concept About Death in "A Clock stopped—"

In this poem about death and its irreversibility , Emily Dickinson organizes a metaphor of man as a clock which ticks to his death. Although the speaker implies she is reporting on an experience death that she has just witnessed, all personal details vanish as she explores a vision of what it means to be a human "clock" that has come to the end of his/its "Dial life". (Leiter: 2007, p. 27). In the poem, life is compared to a clock and the end of life is compared to the mechanical stoppage of the clock:

A clock stopped-

Not the Mantel's-

Geneva's farthest skill

Can't put the puppet bowing. (Emily Dickinson: 1960, p.132)

The poetess portrays the metaphor in a way that readers can scarcely separate out three levels of existence: the mechanical, the human, and the metaphysical reality of death (Leiter: 2007, p. 27).

"A Clock stopped—" is a fuller examination of death. The philosophical and religious insights of death in this poem are deeper, the poetess here uses a metaphor of a man as a clock and she also uses the age-old comparison of life to a timepiece. Through these metaphors, she portrays death as the sudden breakdown of a carefully constructed clock, but even this master craftsman cannot repair the springs and broken gears of this clock (Lall: 2011 , p.55).

The whole poem subtly blends the despairing reality of physical death with the matter of eternity. The bitter tone is softened by the suggestion of the soul's existence after death. The

poem might be read as a satire of Calvinism's precise and logical philosophy which codifies man's life only to break down when faced with the reality of death (Lall: 2011 , p.55).

The Ritual and Inner portrayal of death in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain"

In this poem, Miss Dickinson portrays a description through a series of shifting scenes in which she achieves a final vision. The events are related in the past tense to offer an explanation of what has happened to the speaker. Loneliness and isolation from others are dominant in the poem(Farr:2004, p. 90). The poetess expresses her isolation is a silent space: “And I , and Silence, some strange race/ Wrecked , solitary, here.” (Emily Dickinson: 1960, p.128) No one interacts with anyone else at the funeral. No individual is ever mentioned, no sentence is ever uttered, and no mourning clothes are described. The mourners are faceless and devoid of feeling (Farr: 2004, p. 90). The poetess describes the attendants and she describes herself as well:

And Mourners to and fro

Kept treading- treading- till it seemed

That Sense was breaking through-

And when they all were seated

A Service , like a Drum-

Kept beating –beating- till I thought

My Mind was going numb. (Emily Dickinson: 1960, p.128)

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The poem is a mindscape in which its first setting—"a Funeral, in my Brain"—establishes the subject, the death of consciousness, but not until the tenth line, when the mourners are decidedly identified as interiors who "creak" across her soul, does the poem make clear that this funeral records the steady failure of perception. The vivid and severe equations between physiological sensations and ceremonial ritual point up the experience. Ultimately, the poetess moves from feeling to "finished knowing" (Farr: 2004, p. 90).

In "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," it is remarkable that the last "then" followed by its dash, suggests the continuity of intellect. At one time "—then—" the funeral took place, but the speaker is still alive to think and record it (Farr: 2004, p. 91).

This poem is a disturbing portrayal of death. There is no hope of immortality, it depicts a despairing force into an eternal void. The poem borders almost on the morbid in describing the terrible struggle that the separation of the body from the soul causes, but the physical death also seems to offer a short insight into the nature of infinity (Lall: 2011, p.54).

A Different View to Death in "Because I could not stop for Death"

"Because I could not stop for Death" is one of Dickinson's most famous and widely discussed poems, it had already been singled out as one of her greatest poems about the transition from life to death; it also continues to be hailed as a summary statement of her most important themes: death and immortality (Lall: 2011, p.57). Dickinson explored the moment of dying in images of movement and destination (Lall: 2011, p.103).

Scholars have suggested that Dickinson's carriage ride with Death was inspired by a biographical incident, that is, the death

of Olivia Coleman , the beautiful old sister of Emily's close friend Eliza M. Coleman who died of a tubercular hemorrhage while she was out riding in a carriage ,but there are also abundant cultural sources for the image.

In “Because I could not stop for Death—,” we see death personified. He is not frightening, or even intimidating her, but rather a courteous and gentle guide, leading her to eternity. (Farr:2004,p.92) The poetess uses words, such as “ kindly” and “civility” when she mentions death: “He kindly stopped for me/ For his Civility” (Emily Dickinson :1960, p.350) The speaker feels no fear when Death picks her up in his carriage, she just sees it as an act of kindness, as she was too busy to find time for him (Farr:2004,p.92).

In this poem, the speaker who is dressed in gossamer and tulle is overtaken on life's road by death as a courtly suitor; he conducts her out of this world. The speaker never expresses any direct emotion about her journey with death, she seems to experience neither fear nor pain. On the other hand, there is no indication that she is enamored of Death, because she does not stop for death and it is he who takes the initiative. Yet, she does not resist and responds well giving away her labor and her leisure, too, that is, the whole of her life (Armand: 1986,p73).

The poetess narrates the incidents of a journey where she and Death passed through several places after the poetess left her work and her personal affairs:

We passed the school, where children strove

At Recess- in the Ring-

We passed the Fields of Gazing Gram-

We passed the Setting Sun-

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We paused before a House that seemed. (Emily Dickinson: 1960, p.350)

The real landscape is translated under their carriage wheels into a grave which is placed out of time, but the speaker has passed into this level without apparent pain(Armand: 1986 ,p.73). In this poem, there is a sense of reconciliation as she accepts death calmly and civilly as befits a lady receiving the attention of a gentleman. That immortality is the goal is hinted at in the first stanza, where “Immortality” is the only other occupant of the carriage, yet it is only in the final stanza that we see that the speaker has obtained it (Farr:2004,p.92).

Conclusion

Emily Dickinson's poems holds a wavering attitude between the exploration of the physical experience of death represented by the poem "I Felt a Funeral in My Brain" and the concept of eternity represented by the poem "Because I Could not Stop for Death"

Dickinson's poems depict death through various metaphors. At times, death is compared to a suitor who kindly stops for the speaker in the poem. At other times, life is compared to a clock in the poem "A Clock Stopped" and death stops this "dial life." Moreover, the poetess suggests imaginary scenes of death where the speaker of the poem is conscious enough to observe what goes around, yet, she is also dead.

Emily Dickinson's interpretation of death is the outcome of the social and personal influences around her, such as: death in the family, her ill health, and her seclusion. Thus, the anxiety found in the poems: "I Felt a Funeral in My Brain," "A Clock Stopped," and "I Heard a Fly buzz When I Died" is transformed to a reconciliation and an implied wish to die.

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