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DEATH: A CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY A RESEARCH IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Emily Dickinson was an American writer and poet of the 19th century. Emily was born on December 10, 1890; she was raised in Amherst and was against all Victorian laws. Emily chose to live an independent life without marriage and away from the traditions of religion. Although Emily lived in the Victorian era, she refused to follow its strict principles. Emily lived a life of isolation, her isolation due to the many medical problems she faced, and she spent most of her life isolated from her friends, lamenting her disappointment in love. This research deals with the philosophy of death and how the poet Emily Dickinson expresses it using the unusual in her poems; as she likened it to the lover she longs to meet, and sometimes she likened it to the king or a fair democrat among all people or a cruel monster that separates everyone. For her, death has become a mystery that she seeks to explain. Emily also deals with the feeling of death and the reactions of passersby at every funeral, the methods of preparing and getting ready for funeral ceremonies, and the moment the soul leaves the body. Dickinson crystallizes all these events in her poems as if death were an extension of life. Sometimes you see death as a pleasant guest, sometimes as something that threatens life, and sometimes as something inevitable. Emily embodies the philosophy of death in different ways in many poems, as most of her poems were about the philosophy of death in unusual ways.

الموت: قضية خلافية في شعر إميلي ديكنسون بحث في الأدب الإنجليزي

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الملخص:

تعد إميلي ديكنسن كاتبة أمريكية من شعراء القرن التاسع عشر. ولدت إميلي في العاشر من شهر ديسمبر عام 1890م؛ حيث نشأت في مدينة إيمهرست وكانت ضد جميع القوانين الفيكتورية. اختارت إميلي أن تعيش حياة الاستقلال بدون زواج بمنأى عن التقاليد في الدين. وبالرغم من أن إميلي عاشت في العصر الفيكتوري إلا أنها رفضت أن تسير حذو مبادئه الصارمة. عاشت إميلي حياة من العزلة، حيث كانت عزلتها ترجع لعديد من المشاكل الطبية التي تواجهها حيث قضيت معظم حياتها بمنأى عن أصدقائها نادبة خيبة أمالها بالحب. يتناول هذا البحث فلسفة الموت وكيف تعبر عنه الشاعرة إميلي ديكنسن باستخدام ما هو غير مألوف في قصائدها؛ حيث إنها شبهته كالحيب الذي تهفو للقاءه وتارة كانت تشبّهه كالمالك أو كديمقراطي عادل بين جميع البشر أو كوحش قاس يفرق بين الجميع. فالموت بالنسبة لها أصبح لغزا تبحث عن تفسيره. وتتناول إميلي أيضا شعور الموت ورد أفعال المارة في كل جنازة وطرق التحضير والاستعداد لمراسم الجنازة ولحظة مفارقة الروح للجسد. وتبلور ديكنسن كل هذه الأحداث في قصائدها وكأن الموت امتداد للحياة. فأحيانا تزي الموت ضيف لطيف وأحيانا شيئا يهدد الحياة وأحيانا شيئا لا مفر منه. وتجسد إميلي فلسفة الموت بطرق مختلفة في كثير من القصائد حيث كانت أغلب قصائدها عن فلسفة الموت بطرق غير معتادة.

INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson was born on 10th of December in 1830 in Amherst Massachusetts. She was brought up in society which was strict with the Victorian and the traditional codes. When anyone didn't follow the rules, he was committed to be against the society. Although there were fanatic instructions from teachers, society, religion, and her father, she stood against the society expectations. The poet lived a life of seclusion, totally devoid of the outward events. She considers that life as a vale of sorrow and happiness is just a temporary relief. What she lacks in her society, she finds in her secluded life. Therefore, she was absorbed in writing poetry to compensate for what she lacked in her life. There are three worlds which she epitomizes in her poems: the world of nature (the creatures she realizes), the world of immortality (the unseen one) and the world of death.

Dickinson is considered one of America's greatest poets. She is an extraordinary poet not just a thinker or a philosopher. With her distinctive literary talent and amazing sense of perception, she instills and infuses new life into her subjects. She writes over seventeen hundred poems in her life of seclusion. She represents her unique ideas concerning nature, time, and death with an outstanding style. It reflects the use of simple language and child-like innocence to embody complex thoughts.

Dickinson lived in the society according to her rules not just the conventional rules. Although Dickinson observes the sensible world in detail, she never seeks the inner meaning of what she sees, hears, smells or touches. The imagery she uses clarifies her own reaction to experience. This research handles how Dickinson treats death in an innovative way, believing it to be a great touchstone in her life.

George Frisbie Whicher states that Dickinson focusses on this subject more than any other subject (298). The poet turns the usual philosophy of death into unusual, sophisticated philosophy that she embodies it through innovative images in her poems.

Death is the separation of the soul from the body and the movement to another world. The soul departs from the world of immortality and moves to the world of eternity. Poets don't mainly focus on the theme of death; they talk about it as the end of life. Death to Dickinson isn't an ordinary theme as it occupies her lifelong attention. It signifies the atmosphere of frustration, suffering, pain, grief, and loneliness. Death shapes Dickinson's life and invades her vision with many characters. Richard Chase mentions that "in the large majority of Emily Dickinson's poems, from the least impressive to the most, there are intimations of death" (230). This saying signifies that death is the thing that doesn't get away from Dickinson in her life, she always represents it with different characters in her poems. Although it's supposed to be a notion after life, the poet engages it in life as it's an element in it not just a stage that comes after life. Conard Aiken also asserts that "Death, and the problem of life after death, obsessed her" (1924). She assumes that death is a riddle, a personal enemy, a courtly lover, a dreadful assassin, a physical corruptor, a free agent in nature, a disappointing thing, a creature, a friend, a king, a frost, a beast, a man with self-identity, a leveler and a democrat.



Death as a Riddle:

Dickinson claims that death is a riddle which needs to be solved. She tries to investigate it to find out what it is. She engages herself in the process of death to discuss what death is. In “Dust is the only secret” Dickinson identifies death as a person who lacks identity. This is clear in:

Nobody knew “his father” Never was a Boy- Hadn’t any playmates, Or “Early history”- (5-8)

The poet describes death that it’s anonymous, it has no father nor history. In addition, it doesn’t have any friends, and no one can find out what it is.

Moreover, she tries to discover the mystery of death to solve this riddle. She uses dashes after the words “boy” and “history” to emphasize the uncertainty concerning the identity of death. She uses concrete and homely images to describe the process of death. She speculates the true personality of death, however information about it is very scarce.

Death as a Fact for all Human Beings:

Dickinson considers death as a comfortable thing that happens without any hurt so the dead can’t feel anything. She assumes that death is a solace from this disturbing world so she can find her refuge in these lines:

To die- takes just a little while- They say it doesn’t hurt It’s only fainter- by degrees- and then -it’s out of sight (1-4)

The poet believes that death happens without any torture, it’s a process that takes a little time without any hurt. Life of the dead becomes gradually fainter until it fades completely from sight. Death is the mystic experience towards immortality and an escapist route.

Death tends to identify death as a right for all the living things, it doesn’t depend on the quality. It isn’t a privilege but it’s a common right for all creatures. This claim is reflected in “A toad can die of light / Death is the common right / Of toads and men” (1-3). There’s no privilege in death, it happens inevitably. Dickinson uses an image of a toad to symbolize both good and evil things and how the two forces are led to the same destination which is death. Micheal Ferber cites that “toads are distinctively ugly, venomous, and evil” (82).

All human beings are subject to death because they all are mortals; Only God is immortal. The poem “Death is potential to that Man” exposes that death is a common right.

Death is potential to that man who dies- and to his friend beyond that- inconspicuous to anyone but God- (1-4)

These lines highlight Dickinson’s discussion about the friendship of two men who are separated by death. God, the supreme power only knows the fate of man because he is the creator of this world. The poet clarifies her view that death isn’t a thing to be feared of since it’s the accepted universal truth for all. It’s the fixed end for all the human beings so they all should face it. In addition, the poet does a comparison between the possibility of death to man and to God to emphasize that death is the controlling power on man, but God is the highly power that controls death.



Death as a Ruthless Enemy:

Though Dickinson welcomes the reality of death in the previous poems, she also handles the cruelty of it in other poems. She visualizes the dying persons as victims who are tortured by painful death. Some of the images of death are visualized as a personal enemy that tries to torture and kill the victim. Piyakun Khaangku in “The Images of Death in Emily Dickinson” says that “Emily describes death as a ruthless killer with superior power who attacks the dying person without mercy” (20). Death is the final visitor who interrupts our life without permission, it comes suddenly without invitation.

Visualizing death as a personal enemy who hinders the human beings from continuing their life is obvious in “I heard a Fly Buzz- when I died” (465) through the following lines:

I heard a fly buzz-when I died the Stillness in the Room was like the stillness in the Air between the Heaves of Storm-(1-4)

The narrator is on the deathbed and describes the progression towards death. It’s the process of torturing the dying person.

Dickinson imagines herself as a dead person who is passing away and has the experience of the process of dying. While there is stillness in the room, there’s a noisy sound. It’s the sound of a fly which symbolizes the effect of the process of death which isolates the dying person from the world. The use of “Storm” symbolizes the final moments of torturous death. “I heard a fly buzz-when I died” is peculiar because of the impossibility of hearing someone speak from beyond his death. Dickinson draws an image of establishing the character of the speaker as a participant in the narrative. There’s a comparison in the lines “The stillness in the room / Was like the stillness in the air” (2-3) that juxtaposes the speaker’s death with his observation of the air during his lifetime.

Death is also compared to an insect in “Death is like the insect” (95), Dickinson uses some elements from nature as an insect and a tree to signify that death happens naturally. “The insect” symbolizes the disgusting thing that destroys life. The following lines assure this image.

Death is like the insect menacing the tree, competent to kill it, but decoyed may be (1-4)

There’s a simile in “Death is like the insect” to indicate the meaning of the poem that death is annoying. Moreover, Dickinson uses some phrases such as “menacing the tree, competent to kill it” to show how death can damage everything in life. The verb “decoy” signifies that death is deceitful. Death is like an insect because an insect is bothersome to humans in the world. In addition, Dickinson is annoyed with the way that she doesn’t have control over death. She uses the word “tree” to show the inability of life to escape from death because the tree is fixed, it can’t run away from death. It’s a destructive enemy who fights against life.

The poet also shows the suffering of the dying person in the dying moments in ‘A Clock stopped’, Death isn’t only just an enemy but a cruel one. One can observe this view in ‘A Clock stopped’.



A clock stopped not the mantel's geneva's farthest skill can't put the puppet bowing that just now dangled still (1-5)

Dickinson characterizes death as a ruthless enemy that takes away the soul of the victim, so death is a source of pain. The poet makes a comparison between the dead clock and the heart when it stops.

The movement of the second hand represents the pulses of the heart. The metaphor "a clock stopped" takes the reader away to imagine what happens when the heart stops. The reader lives in this poem the process of dying and its pain. Death becomes the mournful reality that threatens the lives of the human beings as Piyakun Khaangku represents how Dickinson describes the dying moment in an unpleasant way as it's "unpleasant reality that frightens most people" (22). The poet uses the metaphor of "puppet" to describe the weakness of the dying person and how it can only move with the help of the others, death here controls the dying person.

Death as a Kind Suitor and a Proof of Self Identity:

Dickinson refers to her self-identity through the process of death. Death proves her personality. It's a release from life and its complex chains. While death to any person is something that ends life and the personal identity, death to her is a beginning of self-identity. Nasim and Leila "visualize" death in Emily Dickinson's poetry as "actualization of identity" (337). Death is a way of self-reflection to ask who we are? Is there a life after death? As Douglas Davies asserts in the beginning lines of his "A Brief History of Death" "Who are we? Whence do we come, and whither go after death? there's an afterlife, what's like and how might we prepare for it? But if this life is the fullness of our time, how best might we live it? Knowing are we going to die?" (1)

A lot of poems written by Dickinson represent death as a reflection of self-realization that she recognizes herself through the process of death. In "Because I couldn't stop for Death" (479) Dickinson doesn't only present the theme of death but also uses the pronoun "I" to talk about the narrator's death. The following lines highlight the narrator's identity.

Because I couldn't stop for death he kindly stopped for me the carriage held but ourselves and immortality we slowly drove- He knew no haste and I had put away my labor and my leisure too, for his Civility-(1-8)

The poem is a personal encounter between the narrator and death. Dickinson uses dashes between and at the end of lines to enhance the flow of the dialogue. She takes the reader on a mysterious journey through time and into a world beyond time. Death is the phase to prove Dickinson's identity using the pronouns "I-me".

There are some personifications of death, firstly, Dickinson imagines it as a driver who takes her away, he drives slowly with no haste. She leaves everything for his civility so "the terror of death is objectified through the character of the genteel driver who is made ironically to serve the end of immortality" (Tate18). The poet tries to recite the story of death, she makes the speaker and her central character in the poem richly colored.



In addition, these lines show the “pageantry of death” as death is displayed as a thing that’s magnificent. Death is the honor which the dead get as it is represented as a friend who takes his soul mate to eternity. From the title, one can understand that the dying person has no time to stop for death. He should finish all the mortal tasks quickly before leaving with death. Secondly, Dickinson portrays death as a lover or a gentle man who loves her and then it takes her with him on his carriage. The use of the adverb “kindly” contradicts the popular image of death as cruel. The use of the phrase “And immortality” indicates that there is another passenger who is the immortality.

Death assumes the character of a skillful lover wooing a lady in “Death is the supple suitor”. He asks his beloved for marriage to be a tie between them.

Death is the supple suitor that wins at last it is a stealthy wooing conducted first by pallid innuendoes and dim approach but brave at last with bugles and a bisected coach (1-7)

The word “supple” refers to the inherent flexibility of death as it can adjust itself to various forms and can strike anytime. Death as a suitor tries to woo his beloved through a stealthy way. “Pallid” refers to the sickness when the skin of a person becomes pale.

Dickinson states that death tries wooing his beloved through such pallid suggestions. It stops its indirect advances and rides out with bugles and bisected coach. This metaphor represents the moments when the person is old and sick, so he doesn’t have much life force left to defy death. It’s both the groom and the agent for cessation of life. Death appears in the shape of the groom who takes away his bride and no one knows the details of their marriage or the pledges that death has made to his bride.

Death as a Leveler:

Emily Dickinson also personifies death as a leveler who comes to equate between all the living beings. Death is a determiner who makes every human being equal. It isn’t important who they are, death is the final destination for all of them. Death is a new phase to make no difference between a human and an animal. Even colors are used by Dickinson to classify the death experience; be it a peaceful one or a hateful experience.

In ‘The Color of the Grave is Green’ the use of the colors: green and white expresses the pleasant and the unpleasant moods about death.

The color of the grave is green the outer grave-I mean you would not know it from the field except it own stone-(1-4)

The green color symbolizes the picture of pleasant death that means the refreshment of life after death. It’s peaceful and no one can differ the grave from the color of the field.

The color of the grave within the duplicate-I mean not all the snows could make it white not all the summers-green-(17-20)

These lines imply the uncertain appearance of the grave to the outsiders because their views vary due to the changes of the weather or the seasons. Death happens to be the leveler for dying people because they are finally equal inside their tomb.

Death is also portrayed as something that’s experienced by people many times; this is clear in ‘After a hundred years.



After a hundred years nobody knows the place agony that enacted there motionless as peace weeds triumphant ranged strangers strolled and spelled at the lone orthography of the elder dead (1-8)

As the years pass, death becomes a memory for people. Death in this poem is peaceful and it's the leveler who equates between all the persons. Dickinson explains that agony disappears as time passes by while plants grow up.

Dickinson uses some techniques to clarify her unusual view. The word "place" is a metaphor of the tomb because Dickinson states that agony resides there. There's an alliteration in the words "peace" and "place" that establishes a connotative sign that conveys a positive feeling upon death. The phrase 'Strangers strolled and spelled' exposes the number of people who finally gather at that place. Death is the leveler who brings them together in the same level and the same graveyard.

Death as a Reward:

Death is also presented as a reward, some of Dickinson's poems visualize death as a reward for dying people because they exist in a peaceful place in the afterlife and some poems describe death as a punishment because dying people experience only boredom or damnation after death. Dickinson depicts the transitional moment between life and death as it's a moment without physical or emotional pain. This is obvious in "I heard, as if I had no ear" that the moment the dying people is a beginning stage of a new level of consciousness.

I heard, as if I had no ear until a vital word came all the vary from life to me and then 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. (1-10)

The first-person narrator is used to clarify the transition process that happens. The "light" is utilized as a symbol of life or a rebirth of the soul. The repetition of "I" refers to the voice of the dying person who regains her consciousness and body functions after death. "And now I know 'twas light, because / It fitted them, came in" indicates that the light is the signal of the separation of the soul from this lifeless body, a rebirth into new life after death.

Death as a Democrat:

Death is also personified as a democrat, the person who equals among people without discrimination. It's obvious in this poem "Color – Caste- Denomination".

Color – Caste- Denomination These -are Time's Affair- Death's diviner classifying Does not know they are (1-4)

Death is personified in unusual way as a democrat who doesn't differentiate between persons. All people to it are like each other. All the persons whether they are white, black are subject to death. Racial, social and religious distinctions are merely "Time's Affair". In the face of death, they're meaningless. Death doesn't care about color, it throws all the tents aside as it establishes the ultimate democracy. Death is absolute in our minds and destroys our individuality and classification.



The image also of death as a democrat is also found in “ Not any higher stands the Grave” Not any higher stands the Grave for Heroes than for men-not any nearer for the child than numb Three scores and ten- this latest leisure equals lulls the beggar and his Queen Propitiate this democrat a Summer’s afternoon (1-8)

One can notice that death is the democrat who comes to make all equal. The heroes and the men are subject to death. The children and the adults should face death. The beggars and the rich must be controlled by death.

Death as a King:

In addition to the previous images, Dickinson dwells upon more unusual images that personify death. She presents death as a king and an emperor. These innovative images are mentioned in “I heard a Fly Buzz”.

The eyes around had wrung them dry and breaths were gathering firm for that last onset, when the king be witnessed in the room (5-8)

In this stanza, death is personified as a king with its power. All the persons respect its power. The breaths and the sights are fixed to see this great scene, the coming of the king. Dickinson makes death as a mighty emperor who has a supreme power over all the creatures. Moreover, she depicts the scene of the mourners when they observe the appearance of the king. All the eyes shed tears for the dying person. Furthermore, all the breaths are shocked from this horrible scene. Death is a glorified king who has all the authorities.

Death as Strange Creature:

Though death is visualized with lovely personifications as a lover, a democrat and a king, it isn’t also given a human analogy in some poems. She adds mystery to death as she withholds from death the human personality. This is presented in “It’s coming – the postpone less creature”

It’s coming – the postponeless Creature it gains the Block –and now It gains the door chooses its latch, from all the other fastenings-enters –with “You know me-Sir”? Simple Salute –and certain recognition bold- were it enemy –brief- were it friend dressed each house in crape and Icicle and carries one-out of it- to God-(1-8)

Dickinson depicts death as a creature that we don’t know whether it has personal characteristics or not. It suddenly comes to take the soul and then it asks “You know me- Sir? The pronoun ‘it’ is used to indicate the separation between death and the world of living men and women. Death is doubted whether it’s an enemy or a friend. Though Dickinson presents death in the first stanza as a creature with no personal characteristics, she adds to death the personal characteristics to be whether an enemy or a friend. She states that there’s a simple salute from death. It comes in the shape of a friend or an enemy. The house where death dwells upon, is colored and decorated by its features. Then death leaves with one of the occupants.



Death as a Frost:

The image of the frost is repeatedly used in Dickinson's poems. In "A visitor in Marl", death is personified as a frost which takes place in life.

A visitor in Marl who influences flowers till they are orderly as busts-and elegant – as glass- who visits in the night-and just before the Sun-Concludes his glistening interview-caresses- and is gone-but whom his fingers touched-and where his feet have run-and whatsoever mouth be kissed-is as it had not been-(1-12)

Death is an insidious visitor because its surface appearance seems to be "orderly" and elegant. The flowers here have a marble "visitor" who comes at night and influences them. He holds an interview after which he offers caresses and a kiss before he takes his leave. Death is personified as a visitor who is dressed in marl or marble- a white stone that's often referred to as cold. This visitor's influence is cold and inanimate. The visitor's nighttime visit concludes with the sun. His interview with the flowers is glistening and sparkling with the rising sun.

His visit is a fatal one because whatever flower he has touched or kissed is as good as dead.

In "The Frost of Death was on the Pane", death is portrayed as a beast, or a monster being hunted by people. Death is given the qualities of human speech.

The Frost of Death was on the Pane -"Secure your Flower," said he.

Like Sailors fighting with a Leak we fought Mortality (1-4)

People try to hold death back from a dying person by placing themselves between him and death, but they fail. Death is cunning and deceiving, it deludes the dead that it rescues them. There's a simile in "like sailors fighting with a leak" that people fight death as sailors.

Till all her helpless beauty bent and then our wrath begun -we hunted him to his Ravine we chased him to his Den -we hated Death and hated Life and nowhere was to go –than Sea and continent there is a larger — it is Woe —(11-18)

People are frustrated in their fight against death. They rage against him and decide to hunt him to his den. There is here a challenge towards the powerful force. A trial to turn what is mortal into immortal. This trial is futile because death is a frost that comes and turns everything into coldness. Dickinson expresses her confusion about death and represents her sorrow because humans live in a world without any consolation. In a poem entitled "Apparently with no surprise", Dickinson presents the image of death as a frost, and she describes it as a "blonde assassin". The frost is visualized as a headsman.

Apparently with no surprise to any happy flower the frost beheads it at its play- in accidental power –the blonde assassin passes on- the sun proceeds unmoved to measure off another day for an approving god. (1-8)

It's a murder scene as the frost kills a bloomed flower and continues in its way. The sun watches what happens below. It continues in its course uninvolved and uninterested in what



takes place. Dickinson states the cause of death directly to God. She dwells upon a metaphor that frost “beheads” a “happy flower” as it plays back and forth in a breeze. The flower isn’t shocked that it has died in this way, even if the power of the frost is accidental. The surprise is that the real assassin is “blonde” and this metaphor refers to the deceiving sun which beholds its warmth and allows the frost to do its mournful task. There’s an oxymoron in “the sun proceeds unmoved” to emphasize that the sun observes the deeds of death from its high vantage point. It measures off another day and God approves it all as director of the conspiracy.

Dickinson studies death from all angles, she expresses her feelings in the poems. She is able to turn the ordinary things into extraordinary syndromes. The theme of death engages Dickinson’s thinking, the meaning of life is the infinite extension towards what is eternal. Despite the limited world of life, she creates the world of soul. Dickinson represents the notion of death as it’s an agent of life. Death becomes a part of life, so the poet stands in front of death, carefully, savoring the pain, fear, sadness, sorrow, and exaltation. Dickinson visualizes death as a way to eternal life. It’s full of warmth so the dead may recharge their batteries and start a new journey.

In Dickinson’s eyes, death is personified as the savior who helps people get rid of the secular pain. He is a considerate lover, a successful tour guide, leading people from their earthly life to the eternal one. Dickinson’s impression of death includes a relaxed one in addition to the sadness tone. Death is the escapist route away from the life of isolation that she lives. It triggers a conflict in her thoughts to be an innovative philosophy through all the ages.

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