

ISSN: 0976-8165

# *The Criterion*

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly Peer-Reviewed and Indexed eJournal

*9th Year of Open Access*

Vol. 9, Issue-VI December 2018

Editor-In-Chief- **Dr. Vishwanath Bite**



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## The Death Motif and its Reflections in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson

**M. Selvam**

Assistant Professor of English,  
RKMVERI- FAR,  
Coimbatore - 641020

**&**

**N. Shanmugan**

Assistant Professor  
Department of English,  
SRMV College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore - 641020.

**Article History:** Submitted-24/10/2018, Revised-25/12/2018, Accepted-27/12/2018, Published-10/01/2019.

### **Abstract:**

Dickinson's poems are deliberately conveying a persona that is overwhelmed and which is unable to gain certainty. In presenting in this manner, she has quite often been vehemently accused of dramatizing experimental pain and loss and in the confusion of category, which destroys the dichotomy conflict between an inner psychological events and an external social ceremony. This dramatic effort and a sort of confusion however is one of the parts of the brilliance in Dickinson's work. The most vital theme of Emily Dickinson is Death which left its impact on all her thinking and gave its tint to the majority of her poems. According to her, death is the supreme touchstone for life. Most of her life she lived incessantly in his presence. She was quite conscious of its nearness and inevitability. The prominent features of death which are implied in her death poems reveal the very contradictions, absurdities and complexities of our life. The portrayal of Death was completely refined and respected coachman, a cruel victimizer and a personal enemy, a leveler, an elusive lover, a suitor, an assassin, and a democrat. She always uses concrete images to portray Death, which is an abstract force, in an attempt to come to terms with it as well as to fathom it. Dickinson gave in an new dimension of death in human and nonhuman characteristics as part of her inexorable quest to comprehend it. The concept related to death poems, she did not offer a final view of death because death for her remains the great unknown mystery. This paper is intend to examine meticulously and to make an attempt critically to analyze these images of death in selected poems of Emily Dickinson in order to gain a better picture of her perception of death in her poems as well as to understand the western philosophy of death.

**Keywords: Dickinson poems, dichotomy, Poetry, Death, Images, Personal Enemy, Leveler, Courtier, Determiner, Supple Suitor, Immortality, western philosophy.**

## **Introduction**

Emily Dickinson was one of the most prominent and eminent American intellectual writer of the nineteenth century. Dickinson was born in 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts and died in 1886 in her house. Followed her bereavement, her sister, Lavinia, discovered her collection of 1800 poems and published them in 1890. In the modern significant poetic world of America, Emily Dickinson played a multifarious role that made her different from contemporary poets. Her writing to be an original and very powerful poetic line which was delivered through in her conscious mind with complete certainty and her mystic imagery made her icon in the realm of American Literature. Her poems talked about of great power questioning the nature of death, immortality, trinity, religion, nature, love, God and so on. In all these aspects, however she is renowned for her morbid sensibilities and her preoccupation with the theme of death. It was the period with the declaration of independence of the United States of America from Great Britain in 1776, the age of Dickinson had become a complex one, burdened by conflicts between tradition and progress. The poetic world seems to flourish and Dickinson 's poetry best defines with distinctive qualities of American experience; an emanation of liberal independent soul against the religious restrictions and the dogmatic thought of religious dependence of Calvinism, her works was much like a revolt against tradition and some religious dogmas. The poems by Emily Dickinson were completely different from any other modes of her era. The successful outcome of her poems where some pointed out that it was her isolation from the society which created a small mysterious world in her poems. The acquaintance with other poets and writers of her age were only few to be represented during her period. Dickinson poetry was influenced by the poems of Emerson and Hawthorne.

**Poetry for Dickinson had special definition. She wrote to Thomas W Higginson that:**

“The moment I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know that is poetry. I feel physically and mentally as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?” (Johnson, 472-474)

The most dominant theme of Dickinson is Death, where she narrated without any limitations, and nothing could curb her. The quite most frequent themes in her poems are the teaching of Jesus Christ, nature, love, God, Religious pain, identity, immortality, separation, the inner world of a person, pain and suffering, and obviously Death. Being a spinster and on spiritual values, Dickinson inculcated her religious beliefs, rather her rejection of established religion, her deep love of God, and hope in the after-life.

The most important to be mentioned while recognizing that many poets have made death central in much of their poetry. In the lines of Thomas H. Johnson strongly argues that “Emily Dickinson did so in hers to an unusual degree” (203). Death seems to be a prevalent theme in Emily Dickinson’s poetry. Her complete death poems are scattered through the two volumes which contain her poetic works. The work has been mentioned that at least a quarter of all her works deals chiefly with this theme (Henry W, 94). Most of the critics of Emily Dickinson have pointed out the prominence of the theme of death in her poetry. For example, George Frisbie Whicher, states that Dickinson “recurred to it more frequently than to any other” (298). Richard chase confirms in a statement that “in the large majority of Emily Dickinson’s poems, from the least impressive to the most, there are intimations of Death” (230). According to Charles R. Anderson, the concept of death and immortality were “the two profoundest themes that challenged her poetic powers” (284). A complete analysis of Dickinson’s poetry dealing with death reveals that there are four major categories: poems dealing with death and immortality, poems dealing with the physical aspects of death, poems that personify death, and elegiac poems. However, many themes were brought out by Emily Dickinson among them Death is one of the most prominent theme in all her poems. This study is about the poems which personify death and its reflections.

Dickinson was completely preoccupied with the theme of death throughout her life. The representation was given by her niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi noted, Emily Dickinson was “eternally preoccupied with death” (83). Most of her letters contains with many references to death, confirming the fact that her preoccupation with the theme of death was a lifelong. As she is quite aware of the incidents in her life when she depicted a letter to T. W.Higginson dated 1863, she is quite aware and with certainty she referred the early awareness of death: “Perhaps Death gave me awe for friends striking sharp and early, for which I held them since in a sense of brittle love, of more alarm, than peace” (423). Dickinson attachment to death continued all over her life. In the critical stage, One month before her death she wrote” There is no Trumpet like the Tomb” (Johnson 904). This sort of preoccupation with death may be attributed to her involvement with religious and spiritual

values such as God, Time, Resurrection, Immortality, Infinity, etc. Considering in all these aspects, Dickinson's treatment of the theme of death in her poetry may be regarded as one of her outstanding contributions to American Literature. Among the poems she wrote more than five hundred poems on the subject of death. The theme based on the subject of death offers a sincere attempt to understand the true nature of death. Death seems to take various contradictory images and personalities such as a coachman, a cunning courtier, a king, a democrat, a lover, a murderer, a wild beast, a frost, a brutal killer, etc.

### **Discussion**

In most of her poems, Dickinson glorifies and personifies death in various characters. Take for example one of her best poems, in "The only Ghost I ever saw", she personifies Death as:

The only Ghost I ever saw  
Was dressed in Mechlin – so –  
He wore no sandal on his foot –  
And stepped like flakes of snow –

From the lines, Death has portrayed as a barefooted ghost whose gaits are soundless albeit rapid. Here, Death is also personified as an elusive and crafty lover who makes an interview with the poet for a while. Death seems to be an intangible lover and a quiet intelligent courter whose main features are shyness, agility, cleverness and subtlety.

The theme of the death as something to be embraced finds best expression in "Because I could not stop for Death", where Dickinson actually personifies Death as a gentleman who makes an attempt to kindly stops to collect the speaker in his carriage. Here, however, the poetic lines of dying have largely preceded the action and its physical aspects are only hinted at.

Because I could not stop for Death –  
He kindly stopped for me  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –  
And Immortality.

### James Reeves comments on this poem:

This could be one of the best poems in which Emily triumphs over death by accepting calmly, civilly, as befits a gentlewoman receiving the attentions of a gentleman. It is an essay in death-in-life. (20)

Jane Crosthwaite points out that the poem is not a projection of the poet's death but a record of her encounter with the fact or inevitability of death and the theme that made an impact of consequences of that discovery on the life remaining (90). This unique poem has elements of all of Emily's diverse mystical preoccupations with death and immortality. It completely presents death as an objective fact. It seems to reveal the morbidly fanciful attempt to think of her in the present as also, into that future objective condition. Death has undergone a sense of experienced subjectivity as deprivation and less possibility and symbolized by objective death, the grave.

In "What care the Dead, for Chanticleer", Dickinson narrated death as a leveler i.e. there is no exception for death. She portrayed death as God's vehicle to bring all human lives to heaven.

What care the Dead, for Chanticleer—  
 What care the Dead for Day?  
 'Tis late your Sunrise vex their face—  
 And Purple Ribaldry—of Morning  
 Pour as blank on them  
 As on the Tier of Wall  
 The Mason builded, yesterday,  
 And equally as cool—

The poetic lines implies that death can occur at any moment, today or tomorrow, summer or winter, day or night. Dickinson in her depiction portrays death as a determiner which sets everything in the same level and position. Death is the path of determiner to make every human being equal no matter who they are. Death is the ultimate destination for them all. The complete fear of death makes people realize more and more about their lives' duties and obligations.

In the poem, “Color- Caste-Denomination” and “Not any higher stands the Grave”, Dickinson gave a vivid and eminent theme of death as it personifies death as a democrat, the great equalizer or the complete force which claims without discrimination men and women. In “Color- Caste- Denomination”, death completely discards all differences which exist among the living:

Color-Caste-Denomination-

These-are Time’s Affair-

Death’s diviner Classifying

Does not know they are

As in sleep-All Hue forgotten-

Tenets-put behind-

Death’s large-Democratic fingers

Rub away the Brand-

People, whether they are white, black, or blonde are all subject to death:

If Circassian-He is careless-

If He put away

Chrysalis of Blonde-or Umber-

Equal Butterfly-

The concept and the image of death as a democrat is found again in “Not any higher stands the Grave”. Death is quite common to all people, young and old, poor and rich will inevitably face death.

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 equal lulls

The Beggar and his Queen

Propitiate this Democrat

A Summer’s Afternoon.

In “Death is the Supple Suitor”, death assumes the powerful character of a skilful lover wooing a lady:

Death is the supple Suitor  
That wins at last-  
He moves slowly with craft aiming not to offend by being too bold:  
It is a stealthy Wooing  
Conducted first  
By pallid innuendoes  
And dim approach  
Achieving success in his wooing, he comes with bugles and a coach and:  
It bears away in triumph  
To Troth unknown.

Most of Dickinson's poems present death as a reward in the hereafter for the deceased people because they exist in such a peaceful place in the afterlife while some poems depicted death as a punishment for a sense of awareness because dying people experience boredom or damnation after death. She strongly believed that There is a spiritual world in the life after death which is another level of existence after death where the dead reside together to wait for the judgment day.

In "All but Death can be Adjusted", Dickinson portrayed death as predetermined and fixed end, something which is fixed for all human beings. Death is the ultimate fate that nobody can change except God. In "They dropped like Flakes"; death as given in a new dimension and portrayed in a positive way. It is viewed as ordinary subject but still it is under the control of God.

THEY dropped like flakes, they dropped like stars,  
Like petals from a rose,  
When suddenly across the June  
A wind with fingers goes.  
They perished in the seamless grass,—  
No eye could find the place;  
But God on his repealless list  
Can summon every face.

The above mentioned lines explain a character of death that changes like the flakes, the stars, and the petals. The given natural materials are presented to signify the delicate and



fragile lives of human beings. Dickinson uses these natural elements to emphasize that death is naturally common and an acceptable matter. The imagery of grass and the daisy are used as similes of death. The portrayal of these two plants can help to enable the readers to view death positively because their color invites a peaceful feeling while their appearances make the matter of death ordinary and beautiful. These two natural plants were the source that makes the images of death in the poem which is clearly understandable one to the readers.

### **CONCLUSION:**

On the whole, Death has its own path and claims in the hands of Emily Dickinson; As Wendy Martin believes that, “Death was the ultimate problem for Dickinson, which is in the form of a riddle she could never solve, but which she is always prepared to explore it” (5). The image of Death that Dickinson almost faced everyday is a central problem of her life; she saw it all around herself in her family, friends, love, life and convictions. The death theme in her poetry as attracted a large critical attention. Among in all her poems, Death is not only one of her most frequent themes, but also one that preoccupies her lifelong attention. Dickinson lived a life with a passion towards Death throughout her life; a reason for such an immense preoccupation is her involvement with religious and spiritual values, such as time, god, eternity, immortality, nature, and love.

The following death poems of Dickinson have been selected and briefly and critically analyzed to examine and reach out a thorough understanding of the multiple images of death which the poet personifies in the selected poems:

- 1-The only Ghost I ever saw
- 2-Because I could not stop for Death
- 3-A Clock stopped
- 4-What care the Dead, for Chanticleer
- 5-Color- Caste-Denomination
- 6-Not any higher stands the Grave
- 7-Not any higher stands the Grave
- 8-All but Death can be adjusted
- 9-death is the Supple Suitor
- 10-They dropped like Flakes

The portrayal of images in which the poet personifies in the aforementioned poems include: the image of death as a supple suitor, an elusive lover, a decent gentleman, a cruel personal enemy with vengeance and a brutal killer, a democrat and determiner, a leveler, death as a reward or punishment on the day of judgment, and finally death as a predetermined and fixed end. In the final part, it can be concluded that Dickinson's perception and approach towards death is inconstant and fluctuating. In analysing in the form of critically the death poems of Dickinson, one feels that the feelings of the poet concerning death is varied and fluctuating; sometimes the poet seems to be overwhelmed with sorrow, grief, pain, suffering, and depression, however, in some parts of her poems one feels that a sense of joy and hope overwhelms her.

**Works Cited:**

- Anderson, Charles R. *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1960.
- Johnson, Thomas H. and Ward, Theodora (eds.) *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. 3 Vols. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University.
- Johnson, Thomas, *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretative Biography*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1955.
- Ravees, James. *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Richard Sewall. Prentice: Hall, 1963.
- Reeves, James. *Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson*. London: Heinemann, 1976.
- Well, Henry W. *Introduction to Emily Dickinson*. New York: Hendricks House, 1959.
- Whicher, George Frisbie. *This was a Poet*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938.