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## The Notion of 'Being-toward-Death' in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

Ankur Chakraborty  
Department of English  
Dibrugarh University  
Dibrugarh-786001  
Assam

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### Abstract:

Emily Dickinson, Calvinistic in her outlook and attitude seemed to be preoccupied with death in almost all of her poems. Her withdrawal from society into isolation of her father's room possibly made death and life-after-death a daily obsession. To Emily, death seemed to be associated with immortality or eternity. In a way, it can be said that she believed death to be the culmination of life, but her poems paradoxically imply that after death, a new life began. This very notion regarding death conforms to Martin Heidegger's existential analysis of death. Human beings constantly project their lives onto the horizon of their death, and this Heidegger termed as "Being-toward-Death".

Death is the condition of being without life. It marks the end of life. For the simple reason that our life would come to an end, our existence tends to be finite. We ordinarily view death as the endpoint, the final cessation or dead-end of our being, hence, the finishing off of all that was once possible. But, Heidegger presents a radically different interpretation of death. In *Being and Time*, death does not simply spell the end of existence, for in recognizing the undeniable certainty of one's death, something else is revealed, something more fundamental is disclosed.

This paper aims to study the theme of death in Emily Dickinson's poetry by relating it to Heidegger's philosophy of being-towards-death. It also seeks to examine Dickinson's conception of life (as underscored in her poetry) in the philosophical/metaphysical backdrop of Heidegger's conception of living. In the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the air of ambivalence that Dickinson's notions on death as reflected in her poetry appears to embody, has particular bearing and resonance with the postmodern turn to philosophy that has come about, and that has begun to increasingly interrogate the concept of 'being' in very playful terms.

**Keywords:** Being, death, existential, time, life

A close reading of Dickinson's poems indicates that the best of her poems centers on the mysterious concept of death. My paper aims to study the theme of death in Emily Dickinson's poetry by relating it to Heidegger's philosophy of Being-toward-Death. Heidegger's existential approach to death seems to be contested by Dickinson's metaphysical approach towards death that seems to envision an afterlife after death. In the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Dickinson's ambivalent notions on death

appears to have particular bearing and resonance with the postmodern turn to philosophy that interrogates the concept of "being" in very playful terms.

Before analyzing the theme of "death", I would like to focus on some of the probable aspects that led Emily Dickinson to be in a state of fractured sensibility. What could have caused Dickinson to seclude herself from society? This is a question that continues to perplex new generations of Dickinson scholars. One could argue that Dickinson took up this ritual and transformed it from something negative to something positive – confining herself in order to give birth to her poetry. But it will perhaps never be known for certain the motivations behind Dickinson's self-induced seclusion and creative outburst.

Dickinson endured increasing hardships in her personal life. In 1874, while giving a speech, her father Edward Dickinson collapsed and died soon after. Over the next decade, Dickinson suffered the loss of many close friends. Samuel Bowles died in 1878 followed by Reverend Wadsworth in 1879 and her mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson in 1882. In the following years, she mourned the loss of her beloved Judge Lord as well as her friend and admirer Helen Hunt Jackson. However, the most difficult death to overcome was the death of her nephew Gib. Her preoccupation with death is not just confined to the last decade of her life. On the contrary, at the age of 21, Dickinson wrote to Jane Humphrey – "I think of the grave very often" (Martin, Wendy 98). Some of her very earliest poems written in 1852-53, though extremely conventional and sentimental, are nonetheless interested in death, resurrection, and eternity. Were these incidents responsible in affecting her "being" and deadening her senses to the horror of death? This is one of those mysteries that might never be unraveled. On the developed sensibility to "death" of Dickinson, Conrad Aiken remarked that she must have consciously died a little every day. Aiken, in his critical review of one of her poems "There's a slant of light", said that Emily Dickinson liked to be alone. It is mostly true that her isolation from the outside world did affect her poetry and the moods of her poems.

Dickinson's view on death seems to be unconventional and deeply personal. In *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretative Biography* (1960), Thomas H. Johnson suggests that Emily Dickinson's poems could be divided into three categories. First, there are poems dealing with the "physical demise of the body"; with the object, often as the body of the self (the narrator) or of another. Second, there are poems where death is personified, where the central relation is of the narratorial self to Death's other as part of a process of transition. Finally, there are the "lyrical commemorations" of the deaths of friends or personages. This gets reflected in some of her poems like "Ambition cannot find him" (Johnson 597) which is an elegy on her father's death and "Lay this Laurel on the One" (Johnson 1393). To her, death seemed to be associated with immortality or eternity. She believed that death is not dreadful: it is only an escape from the routine of this life, a relief from the trials and tribulations of this world. She further believes that death is the culmination of this life, and after death, a new life would begin. Such a viewpoint regarding death gets reflected in some of her poems like "Because I could not stop for death" (Johnson 350) and "I heard a Fly buzz-when I died"(Johnson 223) This very notion regarding death seems to contest Martin Heidegger's existentialist analysis of death. Human beings constantly project their lives onto the

horizon of their death and this Heidegger termed as “Being-toward-Death”. Heidegger’s central project consisted in a radical re-examination of the notion of “being”, in its intrinsic relationship with time.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger insisted that philosophers till date had failed to answer the question raised by Plato and Aristotle: what is being? In this work, Heidegger analyses what he terms ‘dasein’ or ‘human’ being. What characterizes human being is its “thrownness” into the world or “facticity”: a human being is already cast into a series of relationships and surroundings that constitute his or her “world”. A second feature is “existentiality” or “transcendence”, whereby a human being appropriates her world, impressing on it the unique image of her own existence and potential. In other words, she uses the various elements of her world as given to realize herself. Yet this positive feature is accompanied by a third characteristic, that of “fallenness”; in attempting to create herself, human being falls from true Being, becoming immersed instead in the distractions of day-to-day living, becoming entangled in particular beings. The authentic being, the authentic self, is thus buried beneath the cares and distractions of life.

Heidegger suggests that there is one particular state of mind which is unique: dread or “angst”. This refers to the sense of nothingness, of less, of the emptiness, when we look at life or existence in its totality, as essentially orientated toward death. The basic idea in *Being and Time* is: being is time and time is finite. For human beings, time comes to an end with our death. Therefore, if we want to understand what it means to be an authentic human being, then it is essential that we constantly project our lives onto the horizon of our death. This is what Heidegger famously calls “being-toward-death”. Heidegger puts forward a few propositions regarding his conception of Being-toward-Death. My paper concentrates on how these propositions seem to contest Emily Dickinson’s philosophy towards death.

The very first proposition that Heidegger puts forward in his *Being and Time* is about the non-relational aspect of death. It is non-relational in the sense that in standing before death one has to cut off all relations with others. He argues that the only authentic death is one’s own. To die for another, he writes, would simply be to “sacrifice oneself”. To that extent, for Heidegger, the deaths for others are secondary to his own death, which is primary. Death cannot be experienced through the deaths of others, but only through one’s own relation to his death.

This view on death has been contested by quite a few scholars who opine that the realization and awareness of death comes into our world through the deaths of others – whether as close as a parent, partner or child or as far as the unknown victim of a distant famine or war. They further argue that the relation to death is not first and foremost one’s fear for her own demise, but the sense of being undone by the experience of grief and mourning. From a close analysis of Dickinson’s ‘death’ poems, it seems that she does not pursue death with a single-minded attitude. From her very early age, she witnessed the funeral processions of her closed ones. It seems to have had a psychological effect on her and it apparently got reflected in such poem like, for instance, “I heard a Fly buzz- when I died”. Here, a deathbed scene is presented. The speaker is now a corpse, and the friends gathered round are trying to enact a sentimental deathbed scene. The faces of loved ones brace for the final

moments, possessions and keepsakes are willed away, the last words are spoken. The speaker's family is there to see off their loved one as she lay dying. It tells of the family's patient wait for her death to come. She describes them as "The eyes around- had wrung them dry."

The Eyes around-had wrung them dry –  
And Breaths were gathering firm  
For the last Onset- when the king  
Be witnessed-- in the Room—

I willed my Keepsakes-Signed away... (Johnson 223; 5-9)

Thus the relatives prepare for the final moment of death, the "last Onset". Here the speaker, who is dead, views the after-death life. She is a being-after-death and thus it contradicts Heidegger's Being-toward-Death.

Also, in another poem "The Last Night that she lived" (Johnson 496), there is an emphasis on the physical presence and the shared emotions of the witnesses at a death bed. The onlookers see everything with increased sharpness because death makes the world mysterious and precious. After the first two stanzas, the poem has four stanzas that underline the contrast between the situation and the mental state of the dying woman and those of the onlookers. Moving in and out of the death room as a nervous response to their powerlessness, the onlookers become resentful that others may live while this dear woman must die. The jealousy for her is not an envy of her death; it is a jealous defense of her right to live. As the fifth stanza ends, the tense moment of death arrives.

As we went out and in  
Between Her final Room  
And Rooms where Those to be alive  
Tomorrow were a Blame  
That Others could exist  
While She must finish quite  
A Jealousy for her arose  
So nearly infinite –  
We waited while she passed -- ...(Johnson 496-7)

Here, Heideggerian philosophy of death, that is, one's own death is primary, is contested. There is a sense of being undone among the onlookers by the experience of grief and mourning. Thus death is experienced through the death of others.

Secondly, Heidegger talks about the certainty of death. It is certain that death is inevitable for all. “Being-toward-Death” understands the indeterminate nature of one’s own inevitable death – one never knows when or how it is going to come. This death marks the culmination of selfhood.

But I feel this very pragmatic notion of Heidegger again is contested by Dickinson. “Because I could not stop for Death” (Johnson 350) is the poem that perhaps brings this to light. The theme of transition in this poem sets it apart from poems that deal only with the approach to death. It describes the immediate aftermath, or transitional process, of death, of a subject’s journey from one world to the next world. It is the transition with the self as self undead, as a soul in purgatory approaching an undescribed end. The carriage drives forward. Its journey begins from life to death and ultimately to eternity. The journey is slow and death reflects chivalric “civility”

Because I could not stop for Death –  
 He kindly stopped for me –  
 The Carriage held but just Ourselves –  
 And Immortality.  
 We slowly drove – He knew no haste  
 And I had put away  
 My labour and my leisure too,  
 For His Civility --... (Johnson 350; 1-8)

However, in a way, this poem seems to affirm Heideggerian philosophy of death. The “carriage” journeys straight away from home and town, eventually passing “the setting Sun”. But when the narrator suddenly adds “Or rather- He passed Us”, the journey’s progress seems to become confusing. This abrupt turn in the poem flags a movement away from the sentimental idea of death as an easy spiritual journey. The poem has quickly moved from the positive image of “the Fields of Gazing Grain” to the darker image of the “Dews...quivering and chill” that threaten a vulnerable body clad with “only Gossamer” and “only Tulle”. The journey ends not with the arrival at a heavenly home, but in the buried and suffocating home “in the ground” – the physical grave. The carriage that seemed so comfortable in the first half of the poem is not a chariot that transports a soul to an afterlife but a hearse transporting a body to the cemetery.

The silence and mystery of the grave are constants in Dickinson’s writings even when she tries to hope that there is an afterlife or some kind of reunion of loved ones. In one of her poems “ This World is not Conclusion” ( Johnson;p.243) while claiming at its beginning that there is another world beyond this one, focuses more on the mystery of death than the certainty of afterlife:

This World is not Conclusion  
 A Species stands beyond.

Invisible, as Music –

But positive, as sound -- ... (Johnson 243; 1-4)

Heidegger, further proposes the idea of death as the “possibility of impossibility”. Death is that limit against which one’s potentiality-for-being is to be measured. It is that essential impotence against which the potency of one’s freedom shatters itself. Thus, in Heideggerian terminology, death is never celebrated. While for Emily Dickinson, she explores and imagines death not to uncover any certainty about death and immortality, but to grapple with its mystery and uncertainty. Dickinson was never able to solve death’s “riddle”, but ultimately for her, the apparent finality of death is what gives meaning to life. In many of her “death” poems, the concept of death seems to be celebrated. The dread of the living, especially humans, towards death is neutralized, almost diluted in these poems. For example, in “Because I could not stop for Death”, death is presented as lover and a “supple suitor”. The words “kindly” and “civility” suggest that death has come as a courteous gentleman.

To conclude, Emily Dickinson seemed to imagine death in metaphysical terms which anticipates possibility of life after death. She talks about isolation within “being” during life, but also anticipates a more “fruitful” world after death. She celebrates the idea of after-life in her poems unlike Heidegger who is more focused upon gazing at death in an existentialist manner, implying a fatalist/ pessimistic vision of life with the death of “being” as the ultimate truth. In the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this notion of Heidegger appears outdated. Postmodernism has displaced modernism’s tenor of high seriousness with a ludic (playful) take on the matter of “being.” Emily Dickinson’s relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century rests on the fact that she played on the notion of “being” in a number of ways, with wit, ingenuity, and a note of levity characterizing her poems on death that presages a postmodern turn in her worldview. This is where her enduring claim to fame rests.

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