

# Death as a Recurrent Theme in Emily Dickinson's Select Poems

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## Abstract

This article attempts to analyse the theme of death in Emily Dickinson's select poems. Death is Emily Dickinson's principal theme. It influences all her thinking and tinted the majority of her poetry. Dickinson considers death to be the ultimate criterion for life. She was continuously aware of its proximity and impending arrival. Her dying poetry's key characteristics highlight the very paradoxes, absurdities, and complexities of life. She does not present a final perspective on death in her poems dealing with death because death is a vast unknown mystery for her. A selection of Emily Dickinson's poems has been chosen to examine the concept of death. The article examines the various aspects of death like death's impartiality, immortality, and imagery. A detailed examination of the select poetry reveals that death is both natural and unprejudiced. Death can strike at any time and in any place in one's life. God determines one's death at the time of one's birth itself. The only person who can avoid death is God. So the poet says that man has to accept death as a natural phenomenon like birth.

**Keywords:** Death Images, Immortality of Death, Impartiality of Death.

Emily Dickinson was a 19th-century New England poetess. Dickinson lived a reclusive and private life. She once stated that, "I don't go from home, unless emergency leads me by hand, and then I do it obstinately, and drew back if I can" (Vivian Pollak 23). So, she had been in only a few places such as Boston, Washington, and Philadelphia. Though Dickinson isolated herself from the community, she corresponded with many friends and read widely at home. In 1862, Dickinson wrote to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a famous scholar and writer, and enclosed four poems with her letter because she wanted to attain Higginson's opinions about her verse. Since then, they continually corresponded and he became her close friend. Though she wrote 1800 poems, only seven of Dickinson's poems were published during her lifetime, despite Higginson's acceptance that her poetry was clever and brilliant.

Dickinson's sister Lavinia discovered a large number of Dickinson's papers and manuscripts in her room after her death from Bright's disease in 1886. Lavinia approached certain academics, notably Higginson, and requested that they should gather and revise her sister's work. Dickinson's poems and letters were published then, and her works became widely known in the twentieth century.

Emily Dickinson's poetry expresses her feelings of isolation. Throughout her life, she faced numerous challenges. Those experiences were turned into poems. Many people still admire her use of words and imagery. Everything she went through had an impact on her writings, which elicited a wide range of emotions in the audience. Inspirational elements pepper her poetry, implying a sense of joy. She pioneered a unique writing style. She shares her thoughts and feelings with her audience through her writing. She uses dashes and irregular capitalization, as well as unusual broken rhyming metre; In her writings, she frequently employs metaphors.

Poetry is one of the most often used forms of expression. There were a lot of things going on in the world in the mid-nineteenth century. The Civil War and World War I are two examples of historical occurrences. There was no time for poetry because there were so many significant events occurring around the world. Many people followed the events of the two wars very closely and wrote about them.

Despite the fact that this was a difficult time for poets, Dickinson managed to connect with her audience. Death, love, and nature are always the major topics in her poems. After Dickinson's poems were published, these topics acquired traction. Readers of all genres were taken aback by how elegantly thoughts can be turned into poetry. As a result, demand for poetry increased, and poetry became increasingly popular from that year onwards. For people all across the world, death is both a strange truth and a highly personal issue. It's a part of the human life cycle that occurs spontaneously. Everyone knows that death is the inevitable end of all life, the majority of people consider it terrible and unkind. People are afraid of death because it is a conclusion that requires something. Death is unwelcomed but unavoidable, and it has been questioned repeatedly. People's fascination with death is mostly focused on the potential of death arriving unexpectedly, as well as how people perceive death. Frank and Judith McMahon state that "We may have seen death, read about death, or even come close to death, but we have never died. Thus, we face the ultimate unknown, and the fact that our society refuses to admit that death is a natural process" (413).

In Dickinson's writings, the impartiality of death has been examined. Janaro and Altshuler believe that death is the life event that equalizes all living things. On this planet, people are born in various ways. Their lives, circumstances, and challenges are all different. But death, on the other hand, is the inevitable end to all lives, and no one can ever avoid it. After a while, everyone turns into dust. Death maintains nature's equilibrium; otherwise, there would be no room for new life on the planet. All living things, according to Dickinson, must die. Dickinson utilizes animals to highlight the equality of life and death in her poems, which is fascinating.

The two poems, "Color- Caste-Denomination" and "What Care the Dead, for Chanticleer"-, present that there is no exception for death. The duration of the life of all species are managed by death without exception in the end. "As in sleep -All Hue forgotten -/ Tenets - put behind -/ Death's large - Democratic fingers/ Rub away the Brand" (5-8). As she repeats the following sentences in her poetry, the poet demonstrates death's indifference in choosing living thing specie. "What care the Dead, for Chanticleer -/ What care the Dead for Day?" (1-2) / "What care the Dead for summer?" (9) "What care the Dead for Winter?" (17) Death can strike at any time of day or night, today or tomorrow, summer or winter. In these two poems, the author admits that she is afraid of death. It functions similarly to the determiner, which keeps everything at the same level and in the same place. At the end of the latter poem, however, the

poet demonstrates her knowledge of the incident. Even while death kills lives, nature keeps the world in balance by encouraging the birth of new life.

In, "A Toad, can Die of Light" –, death is presented as a right that everyone normally is born with.

A Toad, can die of Light –  
 Death is the Common Right  
 Of Toads and men  
 Of Earl and Midge  
 The privilege –  
 Why swagger, then?  
 The Gnat's supremacy is large as Thin –. (1-7)

Toads represent human and animal destiny that are comparable. Michael Ferber claims that "toads are distinctively ugly, venomous, and evil" (82). He further observes that toads in the Middle Ages were normally used as "the symbols of evil or of several sins" (83). The toad is utilised in this poem to represent all living creatures' common end step, death. The toad is also used to represent the fact that both good and evil come to an end in the same place. A midge, for example, is a little bug that lives near the river's edge. The midge represents the animal-human hierarchy in this illustration. They are divided into different species, but there is no distinction between them because they will all die at some point. Death in this poem is not viewed negatively because the poet states that it is "The privilege" (5).

Death is described as something that many individuals have encountered multiple times in their lifetimes in "After a Hundred Years." Death will eventually become a distant memory for everyone as time passes:

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  
 Winds of Summer Fields  
 Recollect the way –  
 Instincts picking up the Key  
 Dropped by memory –. (1-12)

According to the poem, "agony" fades away as time passes and plants mature. The narrator implies that agony exists there, the word "Place" refers to the tomb. In addition, the poet uses the word "Peace," which is an alliteration of "Place." It demonstrates that the connotative sign "Place" that becomes "Peace" delivers a favourable sense after death. As a result, the death's vision depicted in this poem should not be dismissed just because it is presented as an experience that will fade from people's recollections over time. The phrase "Strangers strolled and spelled" (6) expresses the large number of people who eventually

congregate in that location. They come to pay their respect to the gravestones in the cemetery. This means that humans can be equal if they think of death as a leveller that leads them all to the same spot beneath their tomb. Finally, people must die and lay together in the same level and the same graveyard. Most of the images of death in the second category are not dreadful or tough. It is portrayed as the determiner that ensures that all living things are treated equally, with no exceptions or conditions. Each poem's tone is serene and tranquil, allowing readers to understand that death is simply human nature or a reality of life that must be accepted by all. Thus, Dickinson shows that death is impartial and common to all. But no one knows when it approaches whom.

Emily Dickinson's poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" expresses her feelings about death clearly. Death does not cause her any dread, agony, tension, or trauma, but it does provide her with the peace and anxiety of accepting death in order to stop this terrible life and reach the state of immortality, where she is no longer concerned about the physical world. She embraces death as a tangible fact and a reasonable truth that is unavoidable and should be welcomed at all times.

In her poem "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died," she weaves together two of the most common themes, death and immortality. It depicts the emotions of a mortal person anticipating death in order to achieve immortality. It portrays the atmosphere of death in and around the victim's bodily and mental state miserably and nervously.

The eyes besides – had wrung them dry –  
And Breaths were gathering sure  
For that last onset, when the king  
Be witnessed in his power. (5 – 8)

She, here, hopes to rescue herself from the never ending and sadistic torture of her life by escaping death.

Dickinson's conception of death is that it is merely a brief pause after a brief life of mortality, before entering a never-ending life of immortality. Indeed, death, which is the conclusion of existence, confers immortality. In "A Death Blow is a Life Blow to Some",

A death-blow is a Life – blow to some  
Who, till they died, did not alive become;  
Who had they lived, had died but when  
They died, vitality began. (1-4)

Emily paints a dramatic picture of death in this relatively brief poem of only four lines. This mortal life is filled with tension, strain, and a never-ending stream of activity that can only be ended by death. Death provides the opportunity to re-energize one's energy, strength, and vitality in preparation for entering the endless life of eternity.

Despite the fact that her poems often depict her retreating mentality from life's issues, she appears to be optimistic, as evidenced by her poem "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed,". This poem depicts a woman's desire to be immortal while she enjoys her life by indulging in its pleasures. She is fully satisfied by her life and she wants to continue it further:

I shall but drink the more!  
Till seraphs swing their snowy Hats,  
And saints to windows run,  
To see the little Tippler

### Leaning against the Sun! (12-16)

Emily Dickinson's poems sometimes have death or sometimes immortality as themes. But there are some poems which are a blend of death and immortality. She combines these two themes and as a result very thought provoking and heart touching poems have been brought up by her. The best example is "Because I Could not Stop for Death." It is supposed to be the most famous, the most acclaimed, and the most talked about poem of all her poems. It is also one of her most technically perfect poems.

In this poem, death and immortality are personified as two characters who guide the author to her final destination. Suspense, terror, and tension are all there in the poem's first few lines. "Because I could not stop for Death, / He kindly stopped for me" (1-2). She gives her ideas about the horror and terror when one sees one's grave. She describes grave as a "House" and it is as if the ground has a swelling:

We paused before a House that seemed  
A Swelling of the Ground;  
The Roof was scarcely visible,  
The cornice but a Ground. (17-20)

The most striking part of this poem is her companion's death-induced 'immortality.' Death transports her to immortality, freeing her from the agonies of mortality for all time. Her mind is so preoccupied with her companion and so she doesn't even care to know where they are going.

This poem literally depicts a person's trip to the final resting place, the grave. However, if closely examined, it also connotes an individual's voyage to a spiritual world, in which one arrives at the destination by resting, i.e., meditation.

Since then – 'tis centuries – and yet  
Feels shorter than the day  
I first surmised the horse's heads  
Were toward Eternity-. (21-24)

Death, according to Dickinson, is a pathway to eternity or immortality. However, there is considerable ambiguity in the last two lines when she states she "first surmised," (23) implying that she is unsure whether death leads to eternal life or not. Even in death, her concerns follow her.

"Behind Me-Dips Eternity," provides a realistic portrayal of immortality. Emily's immortality poem is one of her most well-known works. She says:

Behind Me – dips Eternity –  
Before Me – Immortality –  
Myself – the Term between –  
Death but the Drift of Eastern Gray,  
Dissolving into Dawn away,  
Before the West begin-. (1-6)

The poet illustrates the moments leading up to one's death in this painting. She has the impression that she stands at the crossroads of her life, with Eternity and Immortality on each

side. She tries to travel to the Eastern side, which is somewhat dull as indicated by the use of the colour 'grey,' but even this light fades into dawn very quickly.

She then considers the western world. She depicts her existence and after life using imagery of East and West. She hasn't experienced eternity or immortality yet, she says, "Before the west begin" (6). She abruptly starts talking about divinity in the second stanza, breaking away from this paradigm. However, the idea of the first stanza is repeated in the third stanza. In the third verse, she describes immortality as a "miracle" that defies logic. The imagery she uses here is superb:

Tis Miracle before Me – then –  
 Tis Miracle behind – between –  
     A crescent in the Sea –  
 With Midnight to the North of Her –  
 And Midnight to the South of Her –  
 And Maelstrom – in the sky – (13-18)

Emily imagines herself as a crescent rising in the sky after having lived through the darkness of her life. She notices miracles everywhere she goes. She is a fresh moon on the horizon of the 'Immortality' kingdom. She is free of the darkness in her life, and she finally feels the spell of gloomy nightfall that would break up into what. As a result, the sky is completely chaotic. Thus, the most remarkable poems of Emily Dickinson deal with the theme of death and immortality.

The imagery of death found in Dickinson's poetry is viewed in light of Janaro and Altshuler's conceptions of death. Death is regarded as a personal enemy, according to Janaro and Altshuler. No one wants to meet it or be its companion because it is terrifying and unpredictable. Death is commonly associated with agony for those who die; so it is viewed as a terrible adversary. Death also takes away people's loved ones as well as their ability to live their life and achieve their objectives. As death is both terrifying and undesired, it causes immense terror in people's minds.

Death is depicted as an enemy in Dickinson's poetry, with the intention of torturing and killing the sufferer. Death is the last uninvited visitor in one's life. The poet employs a natural environment in "Death is Like the Insect" to emphasise that death comes naturally to humans, much as insects are drawn to trees. The enemy's intention is to study and destroy life in the form of the death picture. Death is symbolised by the insect, whereas life is symbolised by the tree:

Death is like the insect  
     Menacing the tree,  
     Competent to kill it,  
     But decoyed may be.  
 Bait it with the balsam,  
     Seek it with the saw,  
     Baffle, if it cost you  
 Everything you are. (1-8)

Dickenson juxtaposes life and death on opposing sides, implying that the poet compares the tree to life in order to demonstrate the latter's incapacity to flee or resist death. The insect indicates something that always causes decay and damage to the tree. This portrays what life is like after death. It creates an image of death like a destroyer that ruins other living things on earth. This poetry depicts death as a destructive and hostile adversary of life.

The poet depicts her subject's suffering in the final moments of life in "A Clock Stopped." Death is a fierce adversary in this poem, attacking the crippled victim and inflicting tremendous anguish on her:

A Clock stopped –  
Not the Mantel's –  
Geneva's farthest skill  
Can't put the puppet bowing –  
That just now dangled still –  
An awe came on the Trinket!  
The Figures hunched, with pain –  
Then quivered out of Decimals –  
Into Degreeless Noon .(1-9)

A heart that has ceased beating is a dead clock. The heart is represented by Dickinson by a clock and its second hand. The second hand's movements mirror the heart's beating. Then, by using a dead clock to represent the heart, the readers get a clear picture of what happens when the heart stops beating and death occurs. This is the point when a person's biological processes begin to slow or cease. It symbolises the human body's demise.

With the passage of time, the intensity of the pain grows. This depiction of death is revolting since it torments the dying individual from a low to a high level of anguish. This implies that death will continue to wreak havoc on the dying individual until the last breath. This is one of the reasons why death becomes a dreadful reality for most people.

The puppet represents a dying person who is unable to move or feel. The puppet creates a negative death image because it destroys a person's abilities and senses. The puppet not only depicts a dying person's frailty, but it also portrays death as a completely gloomy image, as the puppet can only be moved with the assistance of others. The reader now understands that death has complete influence over a dying person, whether it wants to make it painful or serene.

Death is equated to dust in "Dust is the Only Secret," implying that it means nothing or even has no significance. It is rarely, if ever, spoken in her company. It causes no harm or leads the locals to be afraid of it:

Dust is the only secret –  
Death, the only One  
You cannot find out all about  
In his "native town"  
Nobody knew "his father"  
Never was a Boy –  
Hadn't any playmates,  
Or "Early history –"  
Industrious! Laconic!

Punctual! Sedate  
 Bold as a Brigand!  
 Stiller than a fleet! (1-12)

The poet's ambiguity concerning death is clear. Nobody knows who it is, where it comes from, or how long it has been around. As a result, death is regarded as insignificant in Dickinson's early writings. Dickinson expresses her thoughts on death in a number of poems, and the pictures of death in those poems aren't frightening. The majority of these photographs are depicted through the talk of a dying person on the deathbed.

Later, in 1862, death has become more important to Dickinson because the poems on this topic are especially intense. The loss of her teacher, her suffering from palsy, and the Civil War casualties all prompted Dickinson to write a lot of death poetry in this year. Dickinson, according to the stories, not only deals with her own physical agony, but also with some mental disease. Her thoughts are consumed by her fear of pain and the anguish that comes with it.

All of these poems convey to readers that death is natural in the human life cycle, and that life after death is not difficult because a dying person knows, where his remains will be interred in a tranquil and dignified manner.

Many important themes run through Emily Dickinson's work like, religion, mortality, home and family, nature, and love. She was a devout Christian, and her poems frequently reference religion. In many of her poetry, she discusses God and Heaven. Emily Dickinson talks a lot about death in her writings. She often equates immortality with death, revealing her religious side. Her poetry reflects her fear of dying. The influence of Dickinson's family on her writing is significant. She was also confined to her home for the majority of her life; therefore, her poetry portrays her feelings of isolation. Emily Dickinson's writings are heavily influenced by nature. Nature is a source of joy for her, but it is also perilous in her writing. Dickinson finds happiness in nature, and some of her writing reflects this. Dickinson's poetry is replete with reference to love. Emily Dickinson was never married, yet reading some of her love poems gives the impression that she was in love at some point in her life.

Life and death are inextricably linked. To live a true and fearless life, one must acknowledge that death is unavoidable. Death should not inspire fear, but rather inspire people to live their life to the fullest. Understanding the rites and rituals that accompany a death in one's culture, religion, or spiritual group can help one better prepare for death.

Dickinson's poems on the subject of death draw a lot of attention from critics. Death is not just one of her most common subjects, but it also fills her thoughts throughout her life. Dickinson's interest with religious and spiritual ideals, such as time, God, eternity, immortality, nature, and love, contribute to her fascination with death. The reoccurring theme of death in Emily Dickinson's poems is thus more believable after analysing a selection of her writings. Emily Dickinson, one of America's most recognised poets, explores this issue from various perspectives.

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