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# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 14:3 March 2014  
ISSN 1930-2940

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

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### Abstract

The following essay offers a discussion of Emily Dickinson's poems, *I Like a Look of Agony* (241), *A Clock Stopped* (287), and *Death Sets a Thing Significant* (360). Emily Dickinson's poetry made her recognized as a deeply religious poet because what she represented in her poems were her own spiritual experiences. Among all the themes which Dickinson wrote about, death is the predominant one. A great body of her work has been written about death. In this essay, we analyze some of Dickinson's poems in order to recognize how the views of death are embedded in every line of these poems.

**Key terms:** Death, The Images of Death.

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 14:3 March 2014

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## Introduction

Emily Dickinson was one of the intellectuals of the nineteenth century. She was born in 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts and died in 1886 in her house. After her death, her sister, Lavinia, discovered her collection of 1800 poems and published them in 1890. Emily's original and powerful mind as well as her mystic imagery made her an icon in the world of literature. Dickinson's poetry was much like a rebellion against tradition. Her poems were different from any other models of her era. She kept herself in isolation from society and created a small mysterious world through her poems. She just had a little contact with other poets and writers of her age but she read a lot. Emily Dickinson's poetry was influenced by the poems of Emerson and Hawthorne.

Poetry for Dickinson had special definition. She wrote to Thomas W Higginson that "If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know that is poetry...." She wrote her poems without any limitations, and nothing could restrict her. The 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, and death. Her religious beliefs, rather her rejection of established religion, her deep love of God, and hope in the after-life, are persistent on spiritual values she had inculcated even as a young woman. The themes of her poems include immortality, eternity and infinity, resurrection, the question of life after death, and the death of her close friends; these are considered as the main elements which propelled her to concentrate much of her attention on death.

## A Variety of Approaches to Death

Emily Dickinson's treatment of the topic of death was of so many different motifs in her poems. In some of her death poems, she encounters death as a part of nature and she likes it, but in others death is depicted as man's enemy and as an attack upon one to ruin his/her life.

1.

### The Images of Death in Three Selected Poems:

1. *I Like a Look of Agony* (241)

2. *A Clock Stopped* (287) and 3. *Death Sets a Thing Significant*. (360)

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1.

**The Images of Death in *I Like a Look of Agony*:**

241

I like a look of agony,  
Because I know it's true—  
Men do not sham convulsion,  
Nor simulate, a throe—

The Eyes glaze once—and that is Death  
Impossible to feign  
The Beads upon the Forehead  
By homely Anguish strung

In this poem death emerges as a part of nature. Emily Dickinson in *I Like a Look of Agony* just focuses on death and the moment of death during which a dying person can not pretend anything. The speaker in *I Like a Look of Agony* likes death because she thinks that death is the only truth of human life. She admires truth and it is equal to death. In the moment of dying every movement which is seen by the witnesses of death is real. This pure truth is admired by the speaker. Emily Dickinson in this poem defines a situation which could not be feigned. In this situation, people do not feel shame from their disturbance and they just represent the depth of their sorrow and grief and these feelings which are seen by the speaker are the truth.

In the second stanza an outside observer explains the physical process of dying - “the eyes glaze once - that is death”. In the last two lines “the beads upon the forehead...”, the death image that Emily Dickinson depicts is skillfully shown. These beads show the end of a life and the absolute death that occurs at this moment. **Therefore**, according to Emily's *I Like a Look of Agony*, death has the ability of washing away 'feigning' - any pretense one might have maintained in life - from the dead person and also from all people who are related to the dead one. It seems that among all the uncertainty about this life with which Dickinson was concerned, in this poem she was sure that death is one big truth of human life and is not feigned.

**2. The Images of Death in *A Clock***

***Stopped: 278***

A clock stopped

Not the mantels  
Geneva's farthest skill  
Can't put the puppet bowing—  
That just now dangled still—

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An awe came on the trinket!  
The figures hunched with pain,  
Then quire red out of decimals

Into degreeless noon.  
It will not stir for doctors,  
This pendulum of snow  
The shop man importunes it  
While cool, concern less No

Nods from the gilded pointers  
Nods from second slim  
Decades of arrogance between  
The dial life and him.

In this poem again Emily Dickinson depicts the dying moment of a person by using the metaphor of a clock as a heart of a human which is stopped. In *A Clock Stopped*, death is considered a powerful enemy which causes someone to die, by its attack on them; and this death causes severe pain for others. The hands of the clock stop moving any more just like the heart which stops beating. In this moment death occurs and even a skillful clock maker cannot make the clock to work again - just as the dead person whom the doctor tries to revive, but it cannot be done. Both the doctor and the clock maker attempt revival in vain. The moment which Dickinson visualizes in *A Clock Stopped* is the last moment of life of a human that no one can pause or postpone.

The second stanza starts with “an awe came on the trinket” which shows the dread of death now seems to make man a fake. The dying man in this poem is shown as a puppet which is motionless and also numb. The use of the puppet instead of a man shows the weakness and inability of the dead person to move, who needs others to move him/her. It is also implied that death has such power of destruction that even a doctor cannot fight against it.

Beyond the clock all measurements of time have stopped; then the pause and stillness become complete. “This pendulum of snow” shows that the body of the dying figure that has lost its warmth and gotten cold. “Pendulum” because of its motion which was once the sign of life, in contrast to the “snow” which is the present sign of death; so the association of these two opposites shows that life now has become still, when death occurs. In the last stanza the silence

enters with the coming of death and at last when death conquers life, it seems that there is a long distance between the dead man and his past life.

**3.The Images of Death in *Death Sets a Thing Significant*:360**

DEATH sets a thing significant

The eye had hurried by,

Except a perished creature

Entreat us tenderly

To ponder little workmanships

In crayon or in wool,

With “This was last her fingers did,”

Industrious until

The thimble weighed too heavy,

The stitches stopped themselves,

And then ’t was put among the dust

Upon the closet shelves.

A book I have, a friend gave,

Whose pencil, here and there,

Had notched the place that pleased  
him,—

At rest his fingers are.

Now, when I read, I read not,

For interrupting tears

Obliterate the etchings

Too costly for repairs.

*Death Sets a Thing Significant* depicts the image of death as an unfavorable thing which causes every trivial fact that one did not pay attention to, when they lived, be considered as something significant. The recollection of the old memory of a friend causes the speaker to beseech the friend for forgiveness. Every trifling matter reminds her of the presence of a friend

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who passed away. Everything that the friend made or even touched causes this recollection. In other words, the speaker seeks to find some trace of a lost one in the object in order to keep alive the memory of a friend.

In the forth stanza the speaker mentions that she has a book that the friend (who passed away) gave her and she found some writing on papers in which her friend seemed to have been pleased by some facts. When the speaker found these writings she suddenly thought of the fingers that are at rest now. In *Death Sets a Thing Significant* Emily shows how the value of objects which belong to a friend can change when the friend passes away. What Emily has suggested in this poem might have happened to anyone.

### 3. Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, the main sources of Emily Dickinson's death poems are the deaths of her friends and relatives, their funerals, and burials. Her religious belief and her isolation from the outside world seems to have left a strong impression on her and pushed her to pay more attention to death than life. Wendy Martin says, "death was the problem for Dickinson, a riddle she could never solve, but which she always explored." Emily's attitude toward death was not consistent. By reading her death poems, the reader recognizes that in some part of them a strange sense of depression and despairing is stronger, while in some other parts a sense of joy and happiness is felt. Some of her death poems also represent her doubts, concern, and uncertainty about the world in which she lived, as well as her mystic thoughts and expectations about the afterlife. Wendy Martin also says that "the poems record the changes in Dickinson's fluctuating emotions."

Emily has mentioned different individual experiences of death in her poems; therefore, the varieties of ideas regarding the encounter human beings have with death in her poems are revealed. The main point is that most of her poems flow from the same background/theme and that is the mysterious essence of the world of after-life which she tried to represent in her poems. To a certain extent she does surmount the mystery of the life hereafter in some of her poems; in the poem, "*because I could not stop for death*" she looks upon death as the gentleman escort who comes by in his coach to take her to her eternal home. When she says "*he kindly stopped for me*", we can see she has no fear of death. She is not ready to go, but he thinks it was time for her to go. Her childhood, youth and old age are gone by and now she must go Home. One must also know very well the Christian mystic element in her makeup in order to understand her poems.

She is a mystic poet, resembling some of the mystic poets of earlier eras, and as such she is not someone we can analyze or interpret very easily. This is the main reason, so many people have interpreted her poems in so many different ways, and some of such analysis are mind-boggling. A true mystic remains a mystery for all time.

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