
The Presentation of Death in the Poems of Emily Dickinson

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Abstract:

Emily Dickinson experienced the loss of several close loved ones early in her life, which led her to become melancholic and deeply preoccupied with death. Following these losses, she withdrew from the world, choosing a reclusive life where she remained in her room, writing poetry. Often dressed in white, Dickinson embodied a highly introverted nature. For her, death became a central theme and a profound measure for understanding life. Her distinctive portrayal of death is one of the most remarkable aspects of American literature. Throughout her life, death loomed large, and she continually grappled with its presence. She examined it from every possible angle, unable to easily forget any death or funeral she encountered. In her poems, Dickinson frequently personifies death using various symbols, particularly the figure of "Him," which she imbues with contradictions and complexities, mirroring the vastness of the universe itself.

Key words: Death, Personification, Immortality, Metaphor, Existential Inquiry

Introduction:

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), a prolific American poet, is renowned for her introspective and often reclusive nature. She wrote nearly 1,800 poems, exploring themes such as death, immortality, nature, and the soul. Despite her prolific output, Dickinson published very little during her lifetime, remaining largely unknown. After her death, her sister Lavinia discovered her manuscripts and ensured their posthumous publication, with the first collection appearing in 1890.

Raised in a Puritan community, Dickinson struggled with religious expectations, especially the notion of personal conversion, and this conflict is evident in her poetry. For Dickinson, death was both a literal and symbolic force, often personified in her poems, where it is depicted as an inevitable and mysterious presence. In works like "Because I could not stop for Death," death is personified as a respectful coachman, suggesting its inescapable nature.

Dickinson's complex relationship with death and religion influenced her writing style, which frequently altered hymn-like structures to reflect her inner doubts. Her poetry became a form of spiritual expression, a search for answers to life's profound questions. Ultimately, Dickinson's poetry serves as both a meditation on death and a triumph over it, offering a unique perspective on existence, mortality, and the afterlife. Death as an Inescapable Presence.

From the outset, Dickinson's poetry presents death as an omnipresent and inescapable force that permeates life. In several of her poems, she explores the inevitability of death and its perpetual proximity. In one of her most famous poems, "Because I could not stop for Death," Dickinson personifies death as a courteous "coachman" who arrives to escort the speaker to her final destination:

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

Here, death is depicted not as something to fear, but as a calm and almost respectful figure, providing a metaphorical "ride" to the afterlife. The imagery of a carriage ride serves to de-romanticize the fear associated with death, transforming it instead into a quiet journey, a necessary part of existence. The phrase "kindly stopped for me" suggests a level of inevitability and a lack of agency in the speaker's death, reinforcing the idea that death is inescapable. The mention of "Immortality" at the end suggests a continuation beyond death, implying that Dickinson viewed death not as the end, but as a passage to another state of being.

This representation of death as inevitable and always near is central to Dickinson's worldview. In her poem "I felt a Funeral in my Brain," Dickinson describes the experience of attending her own metaphorical funeral, where the sounds of the mourners and the imagery of burial suggest a loss of consciousness and identity:

"And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down –
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing – then –"

Here, death is not just a physical event but an internal experience of disintegration, a moment when the mind breaks down. The metaphor of the funeral, with its pounding rhythms and symbolic descent, evokes the overwhelming and inescapable nature of death. The final line, "Finished knowing," suggests that death leads to the cessation of

understanding, a loss of the intellectual and spiritual self. Thus, death in Dickinson's poems is not only a bodily end but a deep rupture of consciousness.

Death as a Complex Character:

Dickinson's treatment of death also includes a rich use of metaphor and personification. She frequently represents death through a variety of symbolic figures—each adding complexity to her understanding of mortality. In "Death is a Dialogue between," Dickinson explores the relationship between the living and the dead through the personification of death and the speaker's inner conflict:

"Death is a Dialogue between
The Spirit and the Dust.
'Dissolve' says Death – The Spirit 'Sir,
I have another trust!"

In this poem, Dickinson presents a conversation between the "Spirit" and "Dust," where the Spirit argues against death's command to dissolve the body, holding on to a belief in its eternal nature. The dialogue between the two entities illustrates the conflict between the physical and spiritual realms, capturing Dickinson's internal struggle with the idea of death and its finality. The Spirit's defiance of death's decree suggests Dickinson's desire for a sense of continuity beyond death, despite the body's inevitable decay.

In another of her poems, "The Bustle in a House," Dickinson personifies death as something that leaves a lingering, almost physical disturbance in the home:

"The Bustle in a House
The Morning after Death
Is solemnest of industries
Enacted upon Earth –"

Here, death is not merely the end of life but something that disrupts the fabric of daily existence. The word "bustle" implies activity or movement, suggesting that death, while silent, creates a profound shift in the dynamics of the world. Dickinson's use of the word "industries" evokes the sense that death, though sorrowful, is also a kind of process that must be attended to in life's aftermath. The shift from the living world to the realm of the dead is not just a moment of silence, but a complex "industry" that requires attention, ritual, and transformation.

Death as a Leveler:

One of the most intriguing ways that Dickinson presents death is as a great leveler—a force that reduces all people, regardless of status or circumstance, to the same ultimate

fate. In "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died," Dickinson presents death as an event that strips away distinctions between individuals, focusing instead on the inescapable physical process:

"For that last Onset—when the King
Be witnessed—at his Head—
The Day that I died—
Was like a Water of the Dead."

The image of the "King" here is ironic—death levels all, regardless of power or authority. The fly buzzing around in the moment of death further emphasizes this levelling quality; it is a simple, common creature that becomes an unwitting participant in the sacred moment of death. The fly's buzz acts as a reminder of life's ordinary, mundane aspects, even in the face of profound finality.

In "A Death blow is a Life blow to Some," Dickinson presents death as a form of transcendence, an experience that potentially liberates the spirit:

"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 begun."

This poem explores the paradoxical nature of death: it is both an end and a beginning. Some individuals, according to Dickinson, never truly live until they are confronted by death, as if death brings meaning to their existence. The idea that "Vitality begun" at death's moment suggests that death, in a sense, initiates a higher form of existence, one that transcends the limitations of the physical world. In this way, Dickinson presents death as a universal experience that offers a kind of transcendence or release from life's struggles.

Death and the Search for Meaning:

Throughout Dickinson's poems on death, one recurring theme is the search for meaning in the face of the unknown. Dickinson was deeply spiritual, yet she struggled to reconcile her beliefs with the rigid religious doctrines of her time. Her poetry, in many ways, can be seen as a response to this struggle—an attempt to explore death's mysteries without arriving at easy answers. Dickinson's agnosticism towards religion is perhaps best captured in her letter to her cousin, in which she wrote, "Let Emily sing for you because she cannot pray." For Dickinson, poetry was a means of engaging with the divine and the eternal, a substitute for conventional prayer in her search for spiritual resolution.

In her poem "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass," Dickinson compares the sensation of encountering death to an unsettling experience in nature:

"A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides –
You may have met him – did you not
His notice sudden is –"

This poem illustrates Dickinson's method of grappling with the uncertainties of death by comparing it to a sudden, unsettling encounter with a serpent. The feeling of dread that the speaker experiences mirrors the fear and uncertainty that Dickinson herself often felt in contemplating death. Yet, despite the fear, Dickinson's poetry never fully resolves the question of death, suggesting that for her, it remained a mystery to the end.

Conclusion:

In the poems of Emily Dickinson, death is presented as a central, multifaceted theme, filled with contradictions, uncertainties, and paradoxes. Through personification, metaphor, and symbolic language, Dickinson explores death in all its complexities, from an inescapable presence to a liberating force. While she never resolves the mystery of death, her poems allow for a profound reflection on mortality, life, and the afterlife. Dickinson's death poems remain timeless, not only because they express universal truths about the human condition but also because they reflect the poet's ongoing search for meaning in the face of the great unknown. As Dickinson herself wrote in "I'm Nobody! Who are you?":

"How dreary – to be – Somebody!
How public – like a Frog –
To tell your name – the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog!"

Just as Dickinson eludes the expectations of society, her treatment of death transcends conventional understandings, inviting readers to engage with the unknown in their own way. The presentation of death in her poetry remains an open-ended inquiry, a space for contemplation and discovery.

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