



Love and Death in Emily Dickinson's poetry

*Premalatha

* Flat No.: 006, S. M. Arcade, No.: 1, First Main, II Cross, Kaveri Road, Udhaya Nagar, Bangalore

ABSTRACT

The introductory chapter deals with the Age of Emily Dickinson, where new discoveries and ideas accepted and warranted experiment and gives the idea of Emily Dickinson's life.

"Poetic style of Emily Dickinson" explains her style and theme. In addition she chose to adopt a unique approach to punctuation, capitalisation and verse forms. Her poems reflect her own experience by the use of pithy expression and vivid imagery.

Treatment of love: The majority of her poems handle the effects of passion upon the human soul. She describes three motifs in her poems where the first one shows the anticipation of lover's visit follows with the meeting of the lovers and concludes with the promise of heavenly bliss.

Treatment of Death: Emily perceived that death remained as the free agent than nature and imagined as the unknown courtier. She explains the sensations of dying person with crisp detachment. The article concludes with a partial evidence of her thought and inspires readers to get through the poem to understand her 'oddness'.

Keywords : Emily Dickinson's poetry, Love and Death, Treatment of love, Mystery of death

Love and Death in Emily Dickinson's poetry



Emily Dickinson

Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emily_Dickinson

Age of Emily Dickinson

By the middle of the 19th century, the United States of America emerging from the political turmoil which followed the declaration of independence from Great Britain in 1776, had begun to establish its own national identity the age of Emily was then, a complex one, fraught by conflicts between tradition and progress; it was a broken age, a century which saw the nation bandaging the wounds of its struggle for independence only to have these wounds torn open again in the savagery of a civil war. America was the land of opportunity for millions of European refugees, a land of excitement and development where new ideas were acceptable and new discoveries warranted experiment.

Life of Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts on the north-east coast of United States in 1830. Emily was sent to Amherst Academy, in 1840, a school remarkable for its enlightened curriculum. When Emily Dickinson left the academy in the autumn of 1847, her parents sent her to Mt. Holyoke female seminary, founded by a Mary Lyon (1797-1849). On learning Mt. Holyoke, Emily returned to a lively and stimulating circle of friends and family in Amherst and appears to have taken part in the social activities of her contemporaries. However as her friends left to get married or to follow careers, as her mother became an aged who required constant care, she became the 'myth' of Amherst, a strange figure, dressed in white who rarely left her home or greeted the visitors who came to see her. The last twenty-five years of her life are a chronicle of progressive isolation, and too many observers 'oddness.' Emily died in Amherst, in 1886 and was buried in the churchyard close to the house where she had spent most of her adult life.

The Poetic style of Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson's style is distinguished by its conciseness, its simplicity, its control and its economy. Nothing is overstated, indulged for its own sake or sentimentalized; no thought or theme is extended beyond its due measure. In addition she chose to adopt a unique approach to punctuation, capitalization, word usage, imagery and verse forms and some consideration of these individualities is essential to an informed reading of her work. Imagery is the life blood of poetry. It enables the poet to make intangible stuff of his ideas and perceptions tangible and real to his reader. Emily drew her images from a wide range of sources; they came from the natural world around her. Her poetic method was intensification; she polished and condensed each word, phrase, image until it shone with potential meaning. From her own experience she knew the difficulties of the creative act. "She is the poet of the passing insight, the moment of vision, the unitary experience; she had no social or political program and was inclined to smile at those who did." (Sharon Leiter 4).

Treatment of love

The majority of Emily Dickinson's love poems handle the effects of passion upon the human soul. Three principal motifs

in Emily Dickinson's poems are the anticipation of the lover's future visit and possible marriage, the climatic meeting of the lovers and their resulting separation, and finally the sublimation of the human passion in a celestial marriage, as she becomes the bride of Christ.

'The soul selects her own society Then shut the door'

A surface reading of the poem categorizes into a simple love poem and the central stanza supports the view for the 'pausing chariots' and the 'kneeling emperor' suggest future suitors being rejected because of the 'chosen one'. On the other hand 'one' may be god finally there is the hint of nunnery where she waits for god alone, the king of heaven.

'Unable are the loved to die
For love is immortality
Nay it is deity.

Thus according to Emily Dickinson love merges with deity and takes the shape by divinity and becomes immortal.

The Anticipation of the lover's visit

The first grouping contains her most sentimental and derivative love poems. Some deal with erotic expectations, employing the bee-flower image to convey the physical desire, as in 'come slowly-Eden!'

Lips unused to thee
Bashful-sip thy Jessamines,
As the fainting bee

With longing for imagined visits, and convey her exultation and triumph as she imagines herself a true wife and boasts of the superhuman intensity of her passion.

'Counting his nectars-enters
And his lost in balms

Meeting of the lovers

The largest grouping of her love poems is composed of those concerned with the actual meeting of the lovers usually recollected from the vantage point of separation and with the realization of the love's termination; they are dominated by a haunting sense of anguish in 'I can not live with you'.

'It would be life
And life is over there
Behind the shelf.

She speaks about her lover in this poem and expresses that she cannot live a full life with this man but she can't even think of either of them aging and dying.

Promise of heavenly bliss

'There came a day at summer's full' views a similar experience from a religious perspective, one that boldly assumes that the lover's earthly renunciation will gain them heavenly bliss.

'Heaven has different signs to me
Sometimes I think that won
Is but a symbol of the place'

Misery of separation

"I got so I could take his name" catches the terrible misery that the separation causes, depicting the soul's bleak efforts to discover some measure of religious consolation. The poet finds no assurance in conventional religions; her direct appeal to god for solace remains unanswered. The first two stanzas of a poem tell about disappointment in love. She has written about a man and says after a while the big effect of separation from him has seemed finally to abate.

'I got so I could take his name
Without tremendous gain
That stop sensation – on my soul

And thunder – in the room.
Where he turned so and I turned how
And all our sinew tore.

Denial of love for spiritual happiness

A final poem in this group 'I should have been too glad, I see', "marks a transition into her Bride of Christ poems, although the emotional splendour of her secular love modulates its religious emphasis" (Goyal 14). She argues that their relationship was so sublime and so complete that it endangered their love for God.

'Too lifted for the scant degree
Earth would have been too much I see

And heaven not enough for me' The ironic phrasing and her pleading tone indicate that this resignation is still some what forced in these lines.

'I should have had the joy
Without the year- to justify.

Earth would have become more wonderful than heaven. She would have 'had the joy' without the fear or pain or failure that characterize the normal human condition. I would have been too happy for a normal life and too happy to want to get saved told from the point of view of a pleading tone.

Sublimation of Passion – Bride Poems

Her most artistic love poems are those dealing with brides and marriage. In 'Because I could not stop for death' She imagines death as the lover and herself as the bride as she dressed in 'For only gossamer my gown

My tipper only tulle. (gossamer- thin wedding dress) tippet-scarf for neck and shoulders. In another poem she directly personifies her as the bride.

'To this world she returned
Circumference thou bride of Awe'

As the realization of the lover's loss deepened and as his physical presence became mere memory, she gradually sublimated her human passion into a divine experience. The term 'Bride' is viewed from various perspectives, first as an actual woman being married, then as the bride of death, which allows her to enter the third stage as wedded to god in paradise.

'Then midnight, I have passed from thee
Unte the east and victory

Emily Dickinson bids goodnight to the night as she hears the bustles of angels in the hall. Here midnight refers to the periods of her spiritual darkness of worldly existence and the morning represents her awakening from the midnight of temporal life and her transfer to the celestial life after death. In there came a day at summer's full she expresses that these two lovers tie on each other's crucifix which means essentially that they are each the other's instrument of death. This marriage constitutes a spiritual marriage in heaven.

'And so when all the time had leaked
Without external sound
Each bound the other's crucifix
To that new marriage
Justified through calvaries of love

The Divine Lover

The adjustment to the idea of a divine lover gradual and in the beginning she insists that after a long separation the heavenly lovers will celebrate a spiritual marriage before angelic hosts "of all the souls that stand create" is perhaps the best among the many poems dealing with this heavenly marriage. In the line 'when that which is and that which was' 'Apart intrinsic, stand' And this brief tragedy of flesh' 'Is shifted like a sand'. The human life is inter woven and shows the basic contrast between temporal lives.

Treatment of Death in her Poems Mystery and Fascination of Death

One of Emily Dickinson's unique contributions to American Literature is her poetic insight into the nature of death. The range of her poetic treatment varied from a philosophical examination of death's relation with love to a grim consideration of its physical processes. As she surveyed the broad universe and society itself, Emily perceived that death remained the one free agent, greater than nature and second only to God. She considered death the great unknown and never ceased to ponder its fascination and mystery death came as a wily courtier, stealthily wooing with a counterfeit charm. Emily Dickinson once wrote a mock biographical sketch of death, "Dust is the only secret; noting that death was the only one who remained unknown. This Poem typifies many of her verses that personify death, of which "Because I could not stop for Death" is the finest. She closely examined the sensations of the dying, the response of the onlookers, the terrible struggle of the body for life, adjustments in a house after death, the arranging of the body for the funeral; the church services and even the thoughts of the dead person. Death normally considered grim and terrible, surprisingly characterized as 'kindly', 'Slowly drove', and 'Knew no haste' amplify kindness of death. Imagery in the poem presents a rare understanding of life before and life after death. They fuse in unison personification of death. 'House' appears as Swelling of the ground and the cornice seen as "mound" suggesting 'grave'

'We slowly drove- he knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too
For his civility.
'Kindly' slowly drove' and knew no haste amplify kindness of death.

Sensations of the Dying person

Some of her best lyrics of death considered the sensations of the dying person; the physical experiences as the soul leave the body. In all these poems tension is established by contrasting the inertness of the dead person with the movement of the living and the external growth of nature.

'I heard a fly buzz- when I died"
'And then the windows failed and then'
I could not see to see,
As far as we can tell that means

That her eyes closed that she lost contact with the outside world. These lines contrasts the expectations of the dying person are presented with crisp detachment. The irony increases as the soul precisely arranges everything and waits confidently for death.

Death's dreadful Isolation

A more disturbing portrayal of Death is 'I felt funeral in my brain' with its detailed presentation of a complete funeral as felt through the ebbing sensations of a dead person, this poem borders on the morbid in portraying the terrible struggle that the separation of the body from the soul occasions. The physical death symbolizes spiritual decease and perhaps a momentary insight into the nature of infinity. The emphasis of dying sensations and failing powers suggests death's dreadful isolation. On another level the initial phrase 'in my brain' hints that this physical death represents some terrible pain or loss that brings an overwhelming sense of despair.

'As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And being but an Ear,
And I and silence, some strange race,
Wretched solitary here...

Effect of death on Dying person

In another themal grouping, the poet allows a detached observer to view death and analyze its effect upon the dying person. "I've seen a Dying Eye", captures the feverish intensity of a dying person's search for a 'something' which is found without ever being disclosed to the intent onlooker. Thus death

continues to baffle all human efforts to comprehend its meaning. In "I heard a fly buzz- when I died" death is envisioned as a graceful departure into the sublime waters of immortality. The finality of death leaves one helpless and even shakes faith's consolation.

The Soul's Exit- Terrible Emptiness

Some of Emily Dickinson's 'observer' poems on death emphasize its physical aspects to illustrate the terrible emptiness occasioned by the soul's departure. In "too cold is this"

"How went the Agile kernel out
Contusion of the husk
Nor rip, nor wrinkle indicate
But just an Asterisk."

Here she portrays death's complete dominion over life with chilling detachment the impersonality and callousness of the image manifest the desolation of the body once the soul has fled.'

Death- the Supreme Adversary

'The death I never feared
Except that it deprived of thee
In my own grave I breathe.

The profound implications in this small lyric show Emily Dickinson's skill in enriching her considerations of death with philosophical overtones and in deepening conventional themes with original insights. 'The death I never feared' True to her won soul, she never flinched from death's harsh reality nor ever ceased to face this supreme adversary. Significantly, one of her last poems is entitled "So give me back to death".

Because I could not stop for Death

In some of her death poems, Emily attempts an imaginative constructive of her own death: tries, in effect to catch herself at the very centre of the act of dying. Her ability to find images, actions and personifications that would transfix death at the very point of striking; this seems an ability that was entirely unique with Emily. One of the best poems written by her on this theme is "Because I could not stop for death" or 'Chariot'. The poem masterfully handles the effect of death's unexpected visit upon the victim, viewing her progression from flustered self-pleasure and comfortable anticipation to gradual fear and doubt into a full realization of death's deception and terrifying purpose throughout death is seen from various perspective; as a welcome relief from life's tensions; 'a carriage held but just ourselves and immortality' as a force which heightens one's satisfaction with life; as a lover gently conveying one to hidden pleasures; as a cynical caller, who poses beneath a cordial exterior and finally as a solemn guide leading one to the threshold of immortality.

I heard a Fly buzz – When I died

Some of Emily Dickinson's best lyrics on death considered the sensations of the dying person; the physical experience as the soul leaves the body. In all these poems tension is established by contrasting the inertness of the dead person with the movement of the living and the external growth of Nature. 'I heard a Fly buzz when I died' contrasts the expectations of death, with its realistic occurrence. The traditional Christian belief that death leads to eternal happiness is undercut by the appearance of an insignificant, distracting fly.

I felt a funeral in my Brain

This poem presents manifestly disturbing portrayal of death. With its detailed presentation of a complete funeral as felt through the ebbing sensations of a dead person, this poem borders on the morbid in portraying the terrible struggle that the separation of the body from the soul occasions. Here is no hope of immortality, only a despairing plunge into an external abyss.

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my soul

With those same boots of lead again.

'I felt a funeral in my brain' is made the great poem that it is by the particularizing quality of the symbol through the symbols of death and burial. She has bodied forth the sick and scrambled mind, approaching disintegration through the funeral images, with their suggestion of a passage from one state to another; she has shown us the divided personality, gradually losing control of its self and lapsing into the 'other' self of insanity.

This is my letter to the world

'Her message is committed
To hands I cannot see....

She lived and experienced all areas of life intensely. In a sense her poetry preserved her individuality and provided the needed release for yearnings that threatened her balance. Her isolation and suffering developed in her a habit of introspection and a fascination with the hidden areas of the soul. Rather than escape life, she fronted it on the most trying battleground- in her own spirit- and most mastered it through her art.

Conclusion

There is in her poetry some evidence of the literary works which influenced her thought and her mode of writing. The first requirement, then in achieving an understanding of a poem of Emily Dickinson's is to read the poem repeatedly; the second is to read it accurately; and the third is to formulate your response.

REFERENCES

Emily Dickinson - Selected Poems - B.S. Goyal.