

Death and Immortality:

the Everlasting Themes

LA MORT ET L'IMMORTALITÉ:

UN THÈME ÉTERNEL

REN Xiao-chuan¹

Abstract: The themes of death and eternity impenetrate most of Emily Dickinson's poems. This paper will analyze and appreciate one of her famous poems--- "Because I could not stop for death" to help readers achieve better understanding of the themes.

Key words: death; eternity; immortality

Résumé: La plupart des poèmes d'Emily Dickenson ont pour thème la mort et l'éternité. Dans cet article, nous allons analyser l'un de ses plus célèbres poèmes - Parce que je ne pouvais pas m'arrêter pour la mort à fin d'aider les lecteurs à mieux comprendre ce thème.

Mots-Clés: mort; éternité; immortalité

In Emily Dickinson's poems, we can sense her concerns with human perception, suffering, growth, friendship and love. Still important are her concerns with death and immortality. Many of her poems deal with this theme, such as "It was not Death, for I stood up", "Those not live yet", "The last Night that She lived" and "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died". Actually, about one third of her poems are about this theme, which lies at the center of her poetic world.

A brief introduction to her background can help give us insights into her religious viewpoint and throw light on the question why she was obsessed with death and immortality. Calvinism, sometimes called Puritanism, which was also the conventional religion of her family, was the major underpinning of nineteenth-century Amherst society, though it was undergoing shocks and assaults. The major ideas lie in that man is sinful and unregenerate. God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. For Dickinson, the crucial religious question was the survival of the soul after death. She rejected absolutely the idea of man's innate depravity; she favored the Emersonian partial reversal of Puritanism that conceived greatness of soul as the source of immortality. The God of the Bible was alternately real, mythical, and unlikely to her.

¹ (1972.1)The Foreign Language Department, Qingdao University of Science and Technology. China.
E-mail: marieren72@gmail.com.

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She could neither accept nor reject His assurance of a life beyond death. This struggle and doubts about the existence of God and the realization of after-life have found their way in her works.

Chekhov once said that there was a macula swaying in front of every one. It turned out that it was our grave when we could see it clearly. We approach the macula with the passage of time. None of us can move over the macula. Nor can we stop approaching it. Therefore, many people are filled with fear concerning death. As for Emily Dickinson, she did not fear it, because the arrival in another world is only through the grave and the forgiveness from God is the only way to eternity. But the fact that many friends died before her, and that death seemed to occur often in the Amherst of the time added to her gloomy meditation. As there were frequent death-scenes in homes, this factor contributed to her preoccupation with death. Dickinson's interest in death was often criticized as being morbid, but in our time readers tend to be impressed by her sensitive and imaginative handling of this painful subject.

“Because I could Not Stop for Death” is Emily Dickinson's most anthologized and discussed poem. The poem and its translation are as follows:

Because I could not stop for Death

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 labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility--

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess--in the Ring--
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain--
We passed the Setting Sun--

Or rather--He passed us--
The Dews drew quivering and chill--
For only Gossamer, my Gown--
My Tippet--only Tulle--

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground--
The Roof was scarcely visible--
The Cornice--in the Ground--

Since then--'tis Centuries--and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity—

----By Emily Dickinson

因为我不能够停下等死

因为我不能够停下等死—
他为我停下友善和气—
四轮马车只载着我俩—
和不死。

我们慢慢驱车—他知道不急
而我也挥去了
我的工作和安逸，
缘他彬彬有礼—

我们经过学校，值课间休息
孩子们围成圆环—打逗游戏—
我们经过农田凝望五谷
我们经过落日—

确切地说—是他经过了我们—
那露水引来了冷颤寒气—
因我的女礼服—仅为纤细的薄纱织物
我的披肩—不过是绢网而已

我们暂停于一幢建筑物前
它看上去好似一片地面隆起—
那屋顶几乎看不见—
宛如飞檐装饰着大地—

自那以后—若干个世纪—
可还是感觉比那天短，
我的一次猜测到那马头
是朝向永恒之地—

Some critics believe that this poem shows death escorting the female speaker to an assured paradise. Others believe that death comes in the form of a deceiver, perhaps even a rapist, to carry her off to destruction. Still others think that the poem leaves the question of her destination open. As does “I heard a Fly buzz—when I died”, this poem gains initial force by having its protagonist speak from beyond death. Here, however, dying has largely preceded the action, and its physical aspects are only hinted at. The first stanza presents an apparently cheerful view of a grim subject. Death is kindly. He comes in a vehicle connoting respect or courtship, and he is accompanied by immortality—or at least its promise. Note the use of personification in this poem. The word “stop” can mean to stop by for a person, but it also can mean stopping one’s daily activities. With this pun in mind, death’s kindness may be seen as ironical, suggesting his grim determination to take the woman despite her occupation with life. Her being alone—or almost alone—with death helps characterize him as a suitor. Death knows not haste because he always has enough power and time. In the second stanza, the speaker now acknowledges that she has put her labor and leisure aside; she has given up her claims on life and seems pleased with her exchange of life for death’s civility, a civility appropriate for a suitor but an ironic quality of a force that has no need for rudeness. The third stanza creates a sense of motion and of the separation between the living and the dead. Children go on with life’s conflicts and games, which are now irrelevant to the dead woman. The vitality of nature which is embodied in the grain and the sun is also irrelevant to her state; it makes a frightening contrast. However, in the fourth stanza, she becomes troubled by her separation from nature and by what seems to be a physical threat. She realizes that the sun is passing them rather than they the sun, suggesting both that she has lost the power of independent movement, and that time is leaving her behind. Her dress and her scarf are made of frail materials and the wet chill of evening, symbolizing the coldness of death, assaults her. In the fifth stanza, the body is deposited in the grave and the flatness of its roof and its low roof-supports reinforce the atmosphere of dissolution and may symbolize the swiftness with which the dead are forgotten. The last stanza implies that the carriage with driver and guest are still traveling. If it is centuries since the body was deposited, then the soul is moving on without the body. That first day felt longer than the succeeding centuries because during it, she experienced the shock of death. Even then, she knew that the destination was eternity, but the poem does not tell if that eternity is filled with anything more than the blankness into which her senses are dissolving. The conclusion withholds a description of what immortality may be like. The presence of immortality in the carriage may be part of a mocking game or it may indicate some kind of real promise. Anyway, the borderline

between Emily Dickinson's treatment of death as having an uncertain outcome and her affirmation of immortality can not be clearly defined.

Generally speaking, "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" maintains a serene tone. Emily Dickinson uses remembered images of the past to clarify infinite conceptions through the establishment of a dialectical relationship between reality and imagination, the known and the unknown. By viewing this relationship holistically and hierarchically ordering the stages of life to include death and eternity, Dickinson suggests the interconnected and mutually determined nature of the finite and infinite.

As for eternity, she recalls experiences that happened on earth centuries ago. In her recollection, she attempts to identify the eternal world by its relationship to temporal standards, as she states that "Centuries" in eternity are "shorter than the [earthly] day". Likewise, by anthropomorphizing Death as a kind and civil gentleman, the speaker particularizes Death's characteristics with favorable connotations. Similarly, the finite and infinite are amalgamated in the fourth stanza.

The Dews drew quivering and chill-- For only Gossamer, my Gown--My Tippet--only Tulle--

In these lines the speaker's temporal existence, which allows her to quiver as she is chilled by the "Dew," merges with the spiritual universe, as the speaker is attired in a "Gown" and cape or "Tippet," made respectively of "Gossamer," a cobweb, and "Tulle," a kind of thin, open net-temporal coverings that suggest transparent, spiritual qualities. By recalling specific stages of life on earth, the speaker not only settles her temporal past but also views these happenings from a higher awareness, both literally and figuratively. In a literal sense, for example, as the carriage gains altitude to make its heavenly approach, a house seems as "A Swelling of the Ground" . Exactly it refers to grave. Figuratively the poem may symbolize the three stages of life: "School, where Children strove" may represent childhood; "Fields of Gazing Grain" , maturity; and "Setting Sun" ,old age. Viewing the progression of these stages-life, to death, to eternity-as a continuum invests these isolated, often incomprehensible events with meaning. From her eternal perspective, the speaker comprehends that life, like the "Horses Heads" , leads "toward Eternity" , the timeless and perfect realm of eternity. To some extent, people are not yet alive if they do not believe that they will live for a second time—that is, after death. The truth is, life is part of a single continuity. Death is merely a painful hesitation as we move from one phase to the next—the immortality, which is the realm of God's timelessness. On the other hand, man's life is sometimes like a living hell, presumably of conflict, denial, and alienation. That may partly account for man's yearning for an immortal life.

It is hard to locate a developing pattern in Emily Dickinson's poems on death and immortality. Clearly, Emily Dickinson wanted to believe in God and immortality, and she often thought life and the universe would make little sense without them.. Possibly her faith increased in her middle and later years; we can observe the signs of an inner conversion. Nevertheless, serious expressions of doubt persist, to the very end of her works.

Few of us have any clear idea of when we will die. The Bible says that for everything there is a fixed time, and a time for every business under the sun. A time for birth and a time for death. We are increasingly familiar with the inevitability and mystery of death and this knowledge inspires our desire for a meaningful life on earth and also a peaceful life after death. Therefore, I believe death and immortality will continue to be expressed powerfully in literary works just as it has been in Emily Dickinson's poems.

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