

# On Characteristics of Emily Dickinson's *Death* Poems

Mengqi Song<sup>1, \*</sup>, Liping Chen<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Education, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China

<sup>2</sup>School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China

## Email address:

470043456@qq.com (Mengqi Song)

\*Corresponding author

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**Abstract:** Dickinson was “one of the greatest English poem poet”, and the poet created 1775 poems in her lifetime, a quarter of which is *death* poems. To analyze the characteristics of the *death* images of the *death* poems is particularly important for respecting Dickinson's artistic achievement in poetry. Emily Dickinson studies *death* from all angles, and expresses her true feelings in her poem. Characteristics of the images in poetry should be grasped to be able to understand the essence in them. Though not comprehensive enough obviously, through this thesis readers are able to have a rough glimpse of the extraordinary, unique artistic style of this genius female poet.

**Keywords:** Emily Dickinson, *Death* Images, *Death* Poems, Characteristics

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## 1. Introduction

Dickinson was “one of the greatest English poem poet”, and the poet created 1775 poems in her lifetime, a quarter of which is death poems. [1]

After half a century of repeated tasting, and in-depth study, the literary position as a great poet has been established that Dickinson made a significant contribution to American literature. She was asserted as the most prominent Western poetesses since the 7th century. In terms of the ability to control the English language, some even put her on a par with Shakespeare. [2] In any American poetry anthologies, Dickinson's poetry occupies a prominent place. Her poems have a large readership, and have a profound impact. Like Whitman, Dickinson has been recognized as a milestone marking a new era in American poetry. [3] She explores the *death* theme on multi-level and from multi-angle using her "mind's eye". Why does a young female poet, who seldom goes far away from her home, so concerned about life and *death* in her poetry? And why "Few living people can be as clear as she is on the issue of love and *death*"? [4] Her poems involve a lot of verses about the *death* scene and the experience of life and *death*. So, it is essential to study the *death* theme and its characteristics for further exploring the spirit and mind of Dickinson's poetry, and is particularly

important for the understanding of Dickinson's artistic achievement. Also it is of referential value for understanding and exploring the European and American modern poetry.

## 2. Previous Studies on Emily Dickinson's *Death* Poems

During Emily Dickinson's lifetime, few poems of her had been published, and she enjoyed no fame. After her death, her friends and families sorted out her work to publish them. Meanwhile, the US academia also began to work on Emily Dickinson. In 1955 and in 1958, collections of Dickinson's poems and letters were published in succession by Thomas Johnson and Ward, marking the advent of a new phase of researches on Dickinson in the United States. [5] After half a century of research and controversy, Dickinson's position in American poetry has been eventually set down. In 1984, to commemorate Washington Irving, the father of American literature, on the occasion of the bicentenary of his birth, American academia opened the "Poets' Corner" in the Church of St. John. Dickinson is one of the first several poets who are ranged into the corner. In fact, Dickinson enjoys a unique position in American poetry, who has influenced a large number of poets: Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell Williams, Sandburg, Stevens, Frost, Cummings, Scott Klein, Eliot etc.

in the 20th century, setting up a bridge to modernism. She has been recognized as “a milestone marking a new era in American poetry”. [6]

In recent years, studies on Emily Dickinson in China has made gratifying achievements. Wang Yugong's research has filled the gaps in studies on Dickinson. In 2000, Wu Ling translated a work of Dickinson's diaries, which provides a detailed reference for further domestic research. Liu Haiping and Wang Shouren introduced researches on Dickinson in the 1860s to the late 20th century of American academia with 8 pages in their work, providing a mirror for domestic study.

The main outcome of Chinese study on Dickinson is academic papers. According to incomplete statistics, more than 70 domestic research papers on Dickinson have been published in recent years. These research papers mainly focus on the following aspects: Dickinson's seclusion, reasons why she never gets married and rarely publishes works during his lifetime, Dickinson emotional entanglements and religion, theme of Dickinson's poetry, artistic style, the relationship between Dickinson and other writers in terms of culture and so forth. In addition, Zhang Jing and Wei Zhaoqiu [7] also have made some achievements in the study on compare review between Dickinson and Emerson and Xi Murong.

Although number of studies on Dickinson have made some achievements in recent years, but there are shortcomings of domestic research on Dickinson. First, the vision of domestic research is not open enough, and Chinese studies still lack new materials and new views compared to those of the United States. Lack of objective data and deficiency of subjective sense of innovation leads to the contemporary situation that researchers can only follow the footsteps of American scholars. Secondly, the domestic study is of significant repetitive nature. Finally, the scope of researches on Dickinson's poems are to some extent narrow. Because there are a limited number of those masterpieces which are translated into Chinese, and scholars who do their research relying on the original work of Dickinson are only part of the research team. Chinese study is thus limited, forming of a narrow scope of the study in the current situation.

### 3. The Image of *Death*

Dickinson's exploration to the theme of *death* will be of the meaning of life from the limited extension to the infinite, toward eternal life from disillusionment. Despite her limited world of life, she creates the world of soul. In this infinite universe, she explores the true meaning of life, "with anti-traditional metrical forms and strange new images". [8]

#### 3.1. *Death Is Part of the Life*

Dickinson pulls the notion of *death* from the end of life to the process of life, so that *death* becomes an existence with which life is faced: *death* is no longer an inaccessible future, but an objective reality in existing world. And actually *death* becomes a part of life. Before that, people's understanding of *death* varied.

'T was just this time last year I died.  
I know I heard the corn,  
When I was carried by the farms,  
It had the tassels on.

I thought how yellow it would look  
When Richard went to mill;  
And then I wanted to get out,  
But something held my will.

I thought just how red apples wedged  
The stubble's joints between;  
And carts went stooping round the fields  
To take the pumpkins in.

I wondered which would miss me least,  
And when Thanksgiving came,  
If father'd multiply the plates  
To make an even sum.

And if my stocking hung too high,  
Would it blur the Christmas glee,  
That not a Santa Claus could reach  
The altitude of me?

But this sort grieved myself, and so  
I thought how it would be  
When just this time, some perfect year,  
Themselves should come to me.'

It can be said that the spirit of the poem will take the poet flying into a realm which is difficult to understand for ordinary people, and there are many similar poems. Dickinson, not as a spectator but as a protagonist in the process of *death*, in which she regard herself as a participant to feel the glory and the meaning of life from her own vision. From such poems, readers can appreciate the poet's enthusiasm towards life, and even an impulse to be resurrected. Why should she put the subject in the position of *death* to experience the meaning of life? And if readers just take all of these as a poetic technique, it is not enough. Imagine the case of corn has the tassels on and the golden grain, and imagine red apple and sweet pumpkin, as anyone would sing for a live which is so specific, substantial and fresh. Yet the poet can only record the wonderful life to share with her friends in the future. Under the strong desire of this wish, both the poet and the reader will experience how close life and *death* are connected together, difficult to separate. In every moment of people's daily life, the *Death* exists everywhere and at all times. This experience of *death* forms a network by describing these vibrant daily life, covering us tightly, impossible to break through.

#### 3.2. *Death Is a Process*

Associated with the above point of view, since *death* entangled with life together, then *death* is no longer a point, but a line that became a perennial flow in Dickinson's psalms:

Do People moulder equally,  
They bury, in the Grave?  
I do believe a Species  
As positively live

As I, who testify it  
Deny that I—am dead—  
And fill my Lungs, for Witness—  
From Tanks—above my Head—

I say to you, said Jesus—  
That there be standing here—  
A Sort, that shall not taste of *Death*—  
If Jesus was sincere—

I need no further Argue—  
That statement of the Lord  
Is not a controvertible—  
He told me, *Death* was dead—

In Dickinson's poetry, *death* is not a concept of the end, but a diachronic concept. *Death* spreads out in a certain space and time, and apparently, the process of dying is enlarged by Dickinson. She stands in front of the *death*, carefully, savoring the pain, fear, sadness, sorrow and exaltation. Under Dickinson's pen, *death* is sometimes a part of the extended space, where time stopped with *death* diffusing and expanding in space only.

In this mood, readers will feel the *death* rising from the surrounding, becoming pervasive reality. In some of Dickinson's psalms, she sometimes acts as the deceased, sometimes a spectator of the process in which mental and physical are separated from each other, and even of the experiences after death.

Through these verses with meticulous descriptions, readers even really tend to believe that Dickinson is in dialogue with the gods. To see what she says after the *death* about meeting the ghost's:

The only ghost I ever saw  
Was dressed in mecllin—so;  
He wore no sandal on his foot,  
And stepped like flakes of snow.

His gait was soundless, like the bird,  
But rapid, like the roe;  
His fashions quaint, mosaic,  
Or, haply, mistletoe.

Hi conversation seldom,  
His laughter like the breeze  
That dies away in dimples  
Among the pensive trees.

Our interview was transient;—  
Of me, himself was shy;  
And God forbid I look behind  
Since that appalling day!

From this almost flapdoodle-like narrative, readers see the horror look of the deceased who rise to heaven with God. *Death* is inevitably accompanied by a variety of

circumstances, to make *death* seem a long and slow process.

### 3.3. *Death Is a Step to Eternal*

In Dickinson's death poems, *death* is the tavern to eternal life, ready for reach and full of warmth, where the travelers may recharge their batteries, and start a new journey:

What Inn is this  
Where for the night  
Peculiar Traveller comes?  
Who is the Landlord?  
Where the maids?  
Behold, what curious rooms!  
No ruddy fires on the hearth—  
No brimming Tankards flow—  
Necromancer! Landlord!  
Who are these below?

Different from classical authors, Dickinson does not miserably regard *death* as the hurried end of life, nor as modern Western writers who like take *death* as a life reference. [9] Eliot, by the description of *death*, pays attention to modern living situation, expressing human loneliness, helplessness and boredom, to elaborate philosophy of life. While Baudelaire, through the chant of the man's *death*, and even animals' carrion, directly express the theme of evil in human, and the evil and ugly are expressed most vividly to show the loss of the moral of life. [10] But Dickinson is to pursue the eternal life through *death*, and thus to gain strength. Facing *death*, she shows almost cold and stubborn strength and bravery:

Afraid! Of whom am I afraid?  
Not Death—for who is He?  
The Porter of my Father's Lodge  
As much abasheth me!

Of Life? 'Twere odd I fear a thing  
That comprehended me  
In one or two existences—  
As Deity decree—

Of Resurrection? Is the East  
Afraid to trust the Morn  
With her fastidious forehead?  
As soon impeach my Crown!

Dickinson returns to the Christian tradition of the pursuit of eternal life by the Calvinists and Transcendentalism thinking pattern of meditation and reflection. If people say Dickinson still sometimes has a little fear towards *death*, then it is poetry that help her get rid of this kind of fear, as she once said that when composing poetry, she was like "a child whistling over the graveyard".

In Dickinson's eyes, *death* is the Savior, who helps people get rid of the secular pain, and he is a considerate lover, a successful tour guide, leading people from their earthly life to the eternal one. Thus, life and *death* is no longer as simple as people think, and *death* is not the end of life. People can take the carriage of *death* to fly to "heaven", with only a short farewell to earth, but to welcome a new eternal life.

Dickinson plays a transitional function between the past and the future in the *death* poems. Her attitude towards *death* even includes a relaxed feeling in addition to a touch of sadness.

#### 4. Attitude to *Death*

The reason why Dickinson shows strong interest in her poems of *death* is perhaps that she reaches no result after long reflections on the value of human existence and destiny. Religious background and surroundings at home made her believe the spirit after the death, but actually she was skeptical. She describes the *death* in real life, and these poems are focused on describing the process and time of *death*, such as:

I've seen a Dying Eye  
Run round and round a Room—  
In search of something—as it seemed—  
Then cloudier become  
And then, obscure with fog—  
And then be soldered down  
Without disclosing what it be  
'T were blessed to have seen—

In this poem, the uncertainty and its nature of being beyond control of *death* has been showed. At the start, "*I've seen a Dying Eye/Run round and round a Room—/In search of something—as it seemed—*" Eyes are looking at something, but people do not know what he was looking at. People may not have this kind of experience when alive. It was only dying people that know what himself is looking. When *death* is imminent, the dying man's eyes. "And then be soldered down", which is an observed description of the process of *death*, but not about what specifically the dying man saw at that time. *Death* is inevitable, but what to see and what to think when dying, and how it is after *death*? These questions are left to the readers to think further. What this dying man "T were blessed to have seen—"? Let the living ones to think about that.

In some of Dickinson's poetry, she successfully describes the subjective consciousness of the deceased at the moment when *death* comes, thus she breaks the previous believe in unconscious *death*.

In the poem "*I felt a Funeral in my brain*", the author as a dead, calmly felt the coming *death*:

I felt a Funeral in my Brain  
And Mourners to and fro  
That Sense was breaking through—  
Kept treading-treading-till it seemed

In this poem, the author herself becomes a dying person, feeling all the surrounding around: the heavy footsteps of mourners (mourners kept treading—treading), the pray rituals as dull as the drums (A Service, like a Drum-Kept beating-beating). All this noise around function as a sharp contrast with the coming silent *death*, while the dead's brain begins to getting numb (going numb), and finally, "dropped down, and down" until the loss of consciousness (Finished knowing).

In the poem "*I heard a Fly buzz-when I Died*", the author also describes the moment of *death*, the description of *death* experience is more marvelous, incredible, but also convincing.

I heard a Fly buzz—when I Died  
The Stillness in the Room  
Was like the Stillness in the Air—  
Between the Heaves of Storm.

It's the feeling of the same moment of *death*, and the same comparison between a static one and an active one. Yet the difference is that in this poem, the author adds a significant imagery—a fly. Through this description from the initial buzz (buzz) of the fly in the silent room, to the unstable buzz at last (uncertain stumbling), and then finally the sound disappears, the author is intended to reflect how the people in the poem change from the conscious state into the unconscious state. Quiet being broken by the buzzing sounds of a fly in the room means that the *death* truly comes. Then the poet's consciousness and perception gradually decline, fly's sounds, shapes and colors have all disappeared in front of the poet. Throughout the whole description of this process, the poet has remained cool, objective, and calm state, bringing readers the reasonable experience of death.

Dickinson's descriptions of *death* are not limited to the description of the momentary experience of *death*, but Dickinson takes it as a shortcut leading directly to the eternal life. The poet always convey us a message: *Death* is not the end of life, but the bridge leading to the eternal life. So, immortal soul is an important component in the *death* poetry of Dickinson. [11]

#### 5. Conclusion

Emily Dickinson's poetry can be regarded as a broad and deep library. Dickinson has a lot of innovations in literature which are worth learning in terms of selecting themes, create images, and other aspects such as the use of rhetorical devices. This thesis conducts a study from the perspective of the theme of *death* and its characteristics. Though not comprehensive enough obviously, through this, readers are able to have a rough glimpse of the extraordinary, unique artistic style of this genius female poet.

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