

When you have done, pray tell me,
That I my thoughts may dim;
Haste! lest while you are lagging,
I may remember him!

Emily Dickinson, the "white nun" of Amherst, author of more than sixteen hundred poems, thus became a poet, only after she had been disappointed in love and had learned to accept that disappointment.

—DES MULLALLY

Emily Dickinson's Views on Death

The theme of death is central in much of Emily Dickinson's writing. She viewed it from many angles in her poems.

To understand her poems on death, a knowledge of the two intellectual and spiritual forces that shaped her thinking, may be helpful. These were the Puritan traditions into which she was born and the romantic and transcendental doctrines shared by the New England intelligentsia of her time. In her home Puritan convictions were strongly held. And they were enunciated by the First Church, which her family attended. Though she often rebelled against them, these convictions remained at the root of her thinking. Such religious traditions held that man is a dependable creature not perfectable in this life or by his own effort. His intuitions are untrustworthy. She refused to believe that a chosen few were saved or that God would punish anyone. The doctrine of original sin to her was not a reasonable concept. The Puritan religion expounded more a jealous God than a compassionate Savior, and this she could never convince herself to accept.

New England transcendentalism asserted the primacy of spiritual over material values, and maintained that sense experiences are fundamental in reality. It taught that man's inner nature is unique, that every man must follow his own intuitions or his own "inner light". Transcendentalism was never a religion. It rejected a belief in an arbitrary God and asserted the perfectability of man. Deity was a pervading principle to be found in all men everywhere. For the transcendentalists, revelation is supplanted by intuition and man is the source of the moral law. These views stirred Emily Dickinson but did not greatly affect her thinking. The Puritan traditions of her family and community were too deep to be easily supplanted by any outside force such as transcendentalism. Throughout her life she was troubled by religious convictions and did not formally adopt any religion.

Her poems on death can be divided into three groups. First, those which are concerned with the physical death of the body describe the act of dying with the detachment of an observer, or with emotional violence. Others depict the face and form of the dying or ponder upon death itself. There is the second group in which death is personified as a suitor. The theme deals less with the precise moment of death than with the life of here-and-now and life to come. There are, thirdly, the elegies and epitaphs, lyrical commemorations of friends or relatives or personages whom she admired, like Elizabeth Barrett Browning or Charlotte Bronte.

The one persistent thought that seems to bind together all her poems on death is the belief that it roles us of those whom we have known and loved and the uncertainty as to whether or not we will ever be reunited with them.

One poem from each of the three groups can best explain the three very distinct types of poems on death.

In the poem beginning "The last night she lived", Emily Dickinson takes the reader into the presence of one who is dying. The author witnesses the death from two directions. One direction is through the eyes of an observer;

It was a common night,
Except the dying; this to us
Made nature different,

We noticed smallest things,
Things overlooked before,
By this great light upon our
minds
Italicized, as't were.

The other direction is through the apparent sensations of the dying person.

She mentioned, and forgot;
Then lightly as a reed
Bent to the water, shivered
scarce,
Consented and, was dead.

After the death we find the concrete detail so often found in her work:

And we, we placed the hair,
And drew the head erect . . .

Two words in this poem indicate the author's feeling about death. One is "jealousy"; it indicates that the author is envious of the one who is dying and about to discover the answer to the riddle of death while she must continue in doubt. The other word is "blame"; she seems to blame God for keeping the secret of death from all the living.

The author was always much concerned with death and any death was an experience in which she keenly shared. In the presence of the dying she hopes to find an answer to the mystery of death.

The second type of poem she wrote about death in which she personifies it— is exemplified by the poem beginning:

Because I could not stop for
Death,
He kindly stopped for me. .

Death is personified as a suitor. He could be any Amherst gentleman. She did not have time to stop for death, but he stopped for her. She hints that this was a gesture of kindness and genteelness on the part of death.

The carriage held but just our-
selves
And *Immortality*.

Some readers believe there were only two in the carriage; but since *Immortality* is also personified it seems more likely that the carriage had three: Death, *Immortality*, and "me".

The drive is the last, unhurried and leisurely. She was willing to put aside her work and her leisure moments because of Death's politeness in stopping for her:

We slowly drove he knew no
haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For his civility.

The next stanza denotes the daily routine of the school children playing at recess, and the fields of grain on the way. When we come to the last line of the stanza we begin to feel that the sense of time is becoming dimmer.

We passed the setting sun,

The journey is almost over. The opening line of the next stanza,

Or rather he passed us. . .

indicates that time and change have passed them by. The sun passes all who are in the grave. She becomes more aware of the dampness and the cold and conscious of the sheerness of her dress and "gossamer" scarf.

Toward the end of the poem the concreteness found earlier decreases steadily. Death as a person recedes into the background and is mentioned only once in these last two stanzas, and then only in an impersonal way when she says "we passed". He is no longer the squire and companion he was on the journey. Concreteness has almost disappeared when she begins the last stanza with the lines:

Since then 'tis centuries and yet
feels shorter than the day. . .

The last two lines of the poem recall the last objects before her eyes on the journey:

I first surmised the horses heads
Were toward eternity.

Throughout the poem we feel that life is very short; in fact, it is only a journey to eternity. During life we may be very busy and not have time to even think of death, but death will think of us and will "stop" for us. We were turned "toward eternity" since we were born, because as soon as we begin to live we begin to die.

Emily Dickinson wrote many elegies and epitaphs. She participated emotionally in the death of any one she loved. Some of her elegies are among the finest of her works; others are among the least. Many are written for clearly identifiable people but many are generalized and indefinite.

I never lost as much but twice,
And that was in the sod;
Twice have I stood a beggar
Before the door of God!

This is an example of one of her many elegies. The "twice" most likely refers to the death of Ben Newton and the death of her nephew, Gilbert because the date of it is thought to be 1858. Miss Dickinson was deeply saddened by the two deaths. The "beggar" suggests how alone and robbed she felt after the deaths of her two loved ones. To understand how the death of a friend could be such a tragedy in her life, we must remember that she possessed a deep emotional nature; so deep that it caused her to withdraw from personal contact with her friends in later years. The death of one of her friends produced a great emotional upheaval in her life. She so revered and treasured her friends that she called them her "estate".

Burglar, banker, father,
I am poor once more!

In the closing lines she apparently accuses God of giving friends (banker) and then taking them away from her (burglar).

Emily Dickinson feared death because it was always present and so often robbed her of someone she loved. But her ideas on death are not morbid. To her death is a changing figure part element of nature, part elf; but mostly a country squire, suave, illusive, and genteel. These views of death are implanted in her writing on the theme. She was always intensely curious about death and deeply interested in it and so she surveyed it from several angles. She always sought an explanation for death, but she was never able to find a satisfactory one. More than anything else or more than any other concept she might have of it, death to Emily Dickinson was a mystery, impenetrable and elusive.

—MARY ELAINE TRAINOR '59