

An Interpretation of Emily Dickinson's Death Poem Take Because I Could not Stop for Death as an Example

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Abstract. Emily Dickinson is one of the most outstanding and influential poets of the 19th century. Her poetry mainly depicts ordinary things of daily life, but with profound content and originality, particularly in exploring the issue of death, which is the most concerning topic for poets in the 20th century. Dickinson showed her strong concern for the value and meaning of life in her poems about death and immortality. Her attitude toward death and immortality developed throughout her life, and death stimulated her passion to transcend the limitations of life and pursue eternity. In the end, the poet transcendently accepts the pain and limitations of life, spits out a strong self-consciousness after profound despair, finds the meaning of life in ordinary daily life, and therefore cherishes the greatness and smallness of life. She is devoted to poetry, constructs her self-world, and realizes her self-value. In poetry, her life finally transcends the limitation and realizes eternal life. Dickinson's poems on death and eternal life and her consciousness of death have gone beyond death itself, and more reflect the poet's profound and positive thoughts on the meaning of life. This paper analyzes the death imagery in "Because I could not stop for Death" to illustrate the poet's view of death, which is to accept it calmly, whereby the human soul attains eternal life.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson; death poetry; life consciousness.

1. Introduction

Emily Dickinson is one of the greatest poets of the 20th century, and one-third of her surviving poetry is devoted to death. Although her poetry on death has been extensively studied from various perspectives and levels in academia, there has been no specialized analysis of the meaning of death in a particular poem.

Domestic research on Dickinson's poetry did not really begin until the 80s of the 20th centuries. During this period, translations of her poems were published by famous translators including Jiang Feng (1984), Guan Tianxi (1992), Wu Juntao (1996) and others. These translations laid the foundation for later studies of Dickinson, focusing on Dickinson's poetics, romanticism, and modernism; Her poetic language features; Interpreting Dickinson's poetry from the perspectives of structuralism, feminist criticism, and psychology, Wang Yugong (2000) is the first monograph in China on the classification and phonology of her poetry. Pu Long (2001) and Li Hengchun (1996) translations of Dickinson's Letters provide detailed material for a new study of Dickinson's life and poetry. Liu Shoulun's monograph (2006) provides a detailed and comprehensive introduction to Emily Dickinson's research. However, it should be noted that domestic research has copied foreign roads to a certain extent and lacks innovation. Future research should strive to analyze her work from new perspectives.

Based on relevant historical materials such as the poem's text and thesis data, this paper combines the death poetry with life and religion in nineteenth century, and interprets Dickinson's death poetry, with a special focus on exploring the theme in "Because I could not stop for Death" from three aspects: Dickinson's personal experience, the relationship between death and eternal life and the meaning of death in her writing.

2. Emily Dickinson's Personal Experience

A distinguished American female poet, Emily Dickinson bequeathed a collection of 1,800 poems to posterity. This encompassed a definitive edition of 1,775 poems along with 25 recently unearthed ones, reflecting her remarkable creative prowess that catered to her own enjoyment as well as that of others. Despite her astonishing output, only seven of her poems were published during her lifetime, with the remaining being gradually compiled and published by her acquaintances within three decades after her demise. Her poems garnered widespread readership and wielded a profound influence, marking a significant milestone in the evolution of American poetry.

The broader readership of Emily Dickinson's poetry was not realized until the publication of "Poems of Emily Dickinson" in 1890. A comprehensive compilation of her works, "The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition," did not gain public attention until 1955. Today, this once introverted and reclusive female poet is revered as one of the preeminent American lyricists. She exhibited a rare ability to articulate profound emotions through intelligent language. Her poetry is characterized by its abundance of associations, audacious thoughts, and elegant expressions. Although not strictly adherent to established poetic forms, Dickinson ingeniously employed traditional structures in her innovative compositions.

Dickinson's family background was notably influential. Her grandfather was the founder of Amherst College, while her father held conservative views as the town's chief lawyer. Raised within a tradition-bound religious environment, her adolescence was tranquil yet monotonous. Preferring seclusion, she rarely ventured outside and undertook only a single journey. She pursued education at Mount Holyoke College, an esteemed women's institution, where she displayed quick wit, astuteness, and open-mindedness. After completing her studies and returning home, she chose to reside in her ancestral house, a brick building on Main Street constructed by her grandfather. Her cherished spot within this residence was the east-side greenhouse, where she nurtured winter-flowering plants and composed poems at a small desk by the window. This environment fostered her solitary and contemplative lifestyle, an escape from the world's clamour into a realm shaped by her inner essence. After seeing all the vicissitudes of life and experiencing the pain of the death of her relatives, Dickinson finally calmly faced and accepted the complexity and variability of the objective world and embraced the multiple aspects of nature and life with a detached attitude. Death, as an inseparable part of nature and life, is an important theme in her poems [1].

Dickinson's writing style bore a meticulous quality, marked by lucid reasoning, ethereal storytelling, and a keen exploration of the inner realm. She harnessed innovative and distinct concepts, employing unconventional techniques to unveil hidden emotions of pain and hope residing in the human heart. In 1862, the departure of Charles Wadsworth, a married pastor whom Dickinson admired, for California induced an emotional upheaval in her. This period catalyzed a surge in her poetic output, delving into the existential and essential aspects of life. Among these, the renowned poem "I Cannot Live with You" emerged.

Irrespective of a poet's individual creative process, their work remains inseparable from the broader socio-cultural backdrop. The prevailing societal context invariably molds the poet's worldview and life perspective, which subtly permeate their verses. Emily Dickinson existed within a distinctive era of historical transformation. Emerging in the latter half of the 18th century, the United States fought and secured independence, commencing a period of territorial expansion. Within a span of approximately 60-70 years, from 1803 to 1867, the nation's geographical expanse tripled. Dickinson's birth coincided with this transformative phase, unavoidably subjecting her poetry to the sway of this overarching societal context. Most of Dickinson's death poems are written in the first person, which fundamentally reflects the independent thought of women [2]. Unconstrained by convention, her poetry traversed uncharted territories, envisioning God as a thief and Death as both a gentleman and pursuer. These imaginative departures from tradition were inspired by the profound influence of her social environment [3].

A few days before her death in 1886, Dickinson wrote a note with just two words in English: "Called back." Death brought her back to heaven in her heart, where she had been "dreaming" all her

life. The word "back" fits the poet's consciousness of life and death. Death is the return of life, life is death, and death is life. Emily Dickinson used her life to interpret her cherishing and love for life, because only people who live seriously will face the coming of death and set foot on the way home without regret [4].

3. The Relationship Between Death and Life

Despite Dickinson's personal fear of death, her writings about the subject often convey a sense of peaceful acceptance. This perspective is evident in her poems, where she portrays death as a transition rather than an end. Dickinson held the belief that the soul persists beyond death while the physical body fades away. This conviction enabled her to confront mortality calmly [5]. Notably, Fox coined her death-themed poems as "the novel that regenerates death."

On the contrary, St. Ammon presents a different interpretation. According to her, Dickinson's death poetry captures both pain and joy, worry and anticipation, treated openly and serenely. St. Ammon portrays death as a serene and peaceful process, devoid of suffering or helplessness. To her, death acts as a gateway to eternal life.

Consider the poem "I Can't Stop and Wait for Death." In this six-stanza piece, Dickinson adopts the voice of a deceased individual reflecting on the journey from life to the afterlife. The poem artfully blends metaphysical themes with tangible imagery, presenting mundane scenes from the voyage to eternity. This interplay between the mundane and the metaphysical underscores Dickinson's acceptance of death and her strong belief in immortality.

The poem's opening emphasizes the protagonist's busyness, highlighting the unpredictability of death's arrival. Death waits patiently for the protagonist, a departure from the traditional grim reaper image. Instead, death is portrayed as a gentleman, leading to a solemn and calm meeting. This sets the tone for the rest of the poem.

As the journey unfolds, "Immortality" and "Eternal Life" accompany the protagonist. The carriage represents the protagonist's physical body, transporting the soul through various life stages. The carriage wheel's circular motion symbolizes the cycle of life and death, culminating in new life. The presence of "Eternal Life" suggests that death is a step towards a continuing existence [6].

The poem's middle stanzas metaphorically depict life's stages through various environments. The school symbolizes childhood struggles, highlighting the challenges youngsters face. The grain imagery signifies maturity and harvest, paralleling human life cycles. The setting sun represents old age and the transition to the twilight years. This progression from reality to the intangible underscores the journey towards eternal life [7].

The poem's fourth stanza introduces a sense of coldness associated with death. However, the author focuses on delicate textures like "gossamer," "tippet," and "tulle," tempering the gloomy atmosphere with a gentle tone.

The poem concludes with the imagery of a tombstone, poetically depicted as a house, implying death's peace and contentment. The final stanza compresses centuries into an instant, highlighting the timelessness of eternity. The poem itself becomes a representation of infinity.

In summary, Dickinson's approach to death, despite her personal fear, is one of calm acceptance and a belief in the continuity of the soul. St. Ammon's interpretation adds nuances of serenity and anticipation. Through the poem "I Can't Stop and Wait for Death," Dickinson skillfully presents a journey from life to eternity, combining metaphysical themes with tangible imagery, ultimately expressing her embrace of death and belief in immortality.

4. The Meaning of Death

The poem "Because I could not stop for Death" appears more akin to a woman's introspective musings than a conventional poem. It provides a window into Emily Dickinson's psyche. During her youth, Dickinson, like most individuals, experienced ordinary romantic emotions. However, as the

1850s came to a close, she exhibited a propensity for seclusion that eventually led her to a reclusive life in the countryside, eschewing marriage. "Death" in this poem serves as a vessel through which the poet channels her fervent inner emotions. Although, on the surface, this tool does not seem directly related to love, it does not capture the complexity of her heart's contradictions, pains, and the intricate interplay of longing for love and marriage alongside feelings of failure.

Delving deeper, the opening line, "Because I could not stop for Death," transcends its literal meaning. It encapsulates the notion of why she chose a path that seems to resist traditional expectations of seeking love and companionship. These reframing views "Death" as a symbol of "true love." The crux of comprehending the poem lies in understanding the choice of a perpetual single life, which is rooted in "Because I can't stop and wait for love." The dual motifs of "Death" and "love" are intertwined, yet Dickinson consciously opted for a solitary existence despite her deep-seated experience of sincere and unforgettable love [8].

Within this death-themed poem, Dickinson contemplates life, death, and eternity – recurring themes in her poetry. Initially, death was depicted as ominous and grotesque, but here it takes on a romantic guise. Dickinson uses a lot of metaphors in her "death" poems. These metaphors enrich the connotation of the poems and let the readers enjoy the refreshing "death", but also let the readers feel the ambiguity of metaphors [9]. The speaker, personified as "I," enters into a romantic liaison with Death, symbolized by a carriage ride. Death transforms from a menacing figure to a courteous suitor. Dickinson's portrayal conveys an intimacy with death, romanticizing it, yet this embellishment also hints at a manifestation of fear. The poem's third section employs imagery like "school, field, and sunset" to symbolize life's stages: childhood, young adulthood, and old age. These symbols string together, instilling a sense of anticipation for life before death.

Although the poem concludes with imagery suggesting a tomb, "I" remains composed, unafraid. The realization that the journey with Death leads to eternal life brings surprise. The fusion of death and love in the poem culminates in "I" am accepting the marriage proposal of the deity of death, traversing to the afterlife. Life is only once, this is the source of life's bitterness, but it is also the precious place of life. If death is the bridge between this life and eternity, people would like to be reunited with their loved ones through death, but immortality cannot prove it. Religion is supposed to promote human well-being, but the existence of God is questionable when all people see is suffering and cruelty. Although she had doubts about religion and even lost hope, she did not despair, but continued to explore the meaning of this life through her work [10].

While many critics perceive the poet's longing for death as the poem's prevailing sentiment, a closer examination unveils her uncertainty and ambivalence toward it. This highlights her inner conflict between a yearning for life and the inevitability of death. What she describes is not the natural physiological phenomenon of death, but the duality of death and life and the deconstruction of death anxiety [11].

Dickinson's poems are replete with imagery that belies her profound inner world. She challenges norms, forging her own unique path and conveying this spirit through her work. Her success hinges on her distinctive perspective, shaped by life experiences and feminine insight, conveyed through vivid imagery. This ability to meld emotion and intellect, imagery and language, cements her status in American literary history. Readers must move beyond surface meanings, delving into deeper layers to interpret her works effectively.

5. Conclusion

The contemplation of mortality occupies a central position in Dickinson's poetic corpus, serving as a wellspring of creative inspiration. Wendy Martin aptly characterizes death as an enigma that Dickinson grapples with incessantly, an unsolvable riddle that nevertheless propels her relentless quest for its underlying significance. Through a meticulous examination of the representation of death in two of her poems, this study illuminates the nuanced evolution of the poet's comprehension of mortality and the eternal.

In "Because I could not stop for Death", Dickinson renders death as a serene and unobtrusive transition, portraying it almost as a reward for the departed. The journey towards death is depicted with an air of naturalness as if it were an inevitable facet of existence. Here, death becomes a tranquil passage to an alternate realm of life. In this poem, Emily Dickinson seamlessly intertwines death with notions of love and perpetuity. The preponderance of her death-themed verses, constituting a substantial proportion of her poetic output, diverges from a mere physiological explication of death. Instead, it reveals Dickinson's introspective exploration of the meaning of mortality. Evidently, her relentless contemplation culminates in an assertion—a realization forged through her pursuit of death's essence—that imparts a distinctive attitude towards life, one that is birthed from the profundity of death's embrace.

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