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## Emily Dickinson's Poetry

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### **Introduction**

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Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was born on December 10, 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts. She spent her entire life in her parental household in Amherst. Her father Edward Dickenson was a lawyer by profession. In her family she had her mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson; her elder brother and her intellectual companion, Austin and her youngest sister Lavinia. Her sister played a great part in protecting Emily from her social obligations and also was the mind behind the publication of Dickinson's poems that she thought to be the works of a genius. Dickinson's family was considered to be one of the most prominent families in Amherst area. In her early days she enjoyed both her family life and her social life; but by the time she reached in her thirties she chose to stay apart from her social life. She was considered to be "the Myth" in her hometown. But this seclusion of Dickinson was not for any disappointment she faced in her life; it was a chosen one. For a long period of about fifteen years she carefully maintained this recluse. There were many rumours about her seclusion but none had affected her mental serenity. Dickinson, in her lifetime, has written more than thousands of poems but she had never thought of making them available for public reading. A sense of estrangement and alienation that was prominent in her personality gets reflected through her writings.

The most prominent imagery that is to be found in her poetry is her portrayal of "Death". Death for her was the drive that consciously revolves her imagination. Apparently

because of the frequent use of the word “Death” in her poems, one could consider her to be a depressive poet but surprisingly in almost all of her poems she innately questioned the truth of “Death”. In some of her writing she visualised “Death” to be her kind companion and almost instantly imagined herself to be in the lap of death; thus experiencing the dead person’s psychological dilemma. She herself was a believer of afterlife and thereby she, in her poems, experiences a continuous battle in her mind between faith in God and consciousness to death. There was an unresolved dilemma that she faced in her life which was between her belief in immortality and her undying faith in the existence of God. Dickinson has focused in her life in “perspicacity” i.e. to look into the insight of things. She conceptualises the term as a process of self-understanding that is only possible when one tries to investigate about one’s identity internally. Dickinson belongs to the realm of those artists who wanted to cherish their “alone-time” for exploring their own self. She thought poetry to be a mode of private expressions that should not be shared with and thus it was her earnest wish to destroy all her literary creations without leaving behind any trace of it. So it is quite obvious that the question of her own existence “who am i?” haunted her to an extreme level. The foundational philosopher for this idea of perspicacity was Socrates who conveyed the message that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” The reason behind this self-identification is the purpose of one’s self-realization. To understand the nature of Dickinson’s poetry we need to focus equally on the forms as well as on the content of the poems. In her poems we can experience a kind of juxtaposition between form and content. If we make a deeper study into her poetry then we can find her use of words having a duality of meaning. For example in one of her poems she has used the word “hellish-heaven” which is a kind of oxymoron as she is not meaning exactly the same thing that she is referring to.

To certain extent Dickinson’s writing emerges out from the philosophical idea of transcendentalism. The term transcendentalism has been interpreted variously.

“Transcendence” means “beyond” or “above”. So a ‘transcendentalist’ is a person who ensures a faith in the divine world. The divine is referred to as “the over-soul”. Transcendental philosophy believes in “oneness” with man, nature and God. They have given stress on the worth of individual and ascribed a dignity to the human soul. The Transcendentalists varies from that of the Unitarianism with their reliance upon intuition. They are of opinion that, the soul of an individual is very much identical with that of the universal. Conrad Aiken has stated about Dickinson that, she was “the most perfect flower of New England Transcendentalism.” Dickinson from her transcendentalist point of view has observed the presence of the supreme creator in her slightest of hope. Death for her is a matter of continuous mystery that she always wanted to resolve. She observed death very closely in her life and considered it to be an inevitable part of human life. But the fascinating thing about her writing is her intuition. Her curiosity for knowing death’s reality binds her mind to feel death even more closely though being alive. She was a firm believer of soul’s permanence after death. This concept of the immortality of soul validates her notion with the thought of becoming one with the “over-soul”.

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### **Analysis of Selected Poems:**

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#### **Poem 1:**

#### **I Felt a Funeral, In My Brain...**

This poem is one of the most impressive and finest of Dickinson’s writing dealing with the phenomenon of death. Her approach towards death is mysterious and pungent. In

Dickinson's poetry death wages a continuous struggle with faith. Sometimes her faith wins the battle and overpowers the tyrant death and sometimes her faith wavers. "I felt a Funeral in my Brain" apparently speaks of the ceremony of funeral. So it is a rather disturbing portrayal of death. Here is a sense of metaphor lying inherently through the poem. This sense of metaphor implied within the description of a ceremonial act of death. There is an association of spirituality in her poem that alludes to the ceremony of transformation. Death always remained for Dickinson a great dictator but this death for her is purely physical not spiritual. In terms of physical death one's soul is released to mingle with the supreme spirituality. So in this poem also there is an inherent implication of spiritual openness. She is trying to create a space between spirituality with that of earthly life. The word "Death" is therefore the inherent loss of one's ego so that the true self comes out spiritually. The service of funeral is therefore a meditative state of mind that is coming through the "numbness" of brain.

"I felt a Funeral, in my Brain"

And Mourners to and fro"

The very first line suggests her observance of death from her own perspective. The word "I" is suggestive of the fact that she herself is dying and experiencing the ceremony of funeral. Now the apparent shock lies in the fact that if a person is dead then how is it possible for that person to experience the ceremony. So it brings forth the idea that she is talking about a numb state of mind which is synonymous to death. This numbness of mind can be studied both with the senses of negativity and positivity. The funeral itself signifies the extremity of pain producing a state of trance. This is a portrayal of a burial ceremony and the speaker is one who is having her own funeral. In the second line she confirms the idea of funeral using the term "mourners". She is suggesting the idea that the mourners are walking to and fro.

"Kept treading—treading—till it seemed

That Sense was breaking through”

The repetition of the word “treading” in the third line gives a rhythmic sensation. The use of capital “S” in “Senses” marks an emphasis on the emotion of pain. Sense was breaking through the consciousness and leading towards the unconscious state of mind. The two-fold meaning is prominent here as the mind is giving way to the sensations from numbness. This break denotes the struggle that is produced with the separation of body from the soul. The mourners walking beside the dead exposed body incorporates a tension of despair as no hope of revival is there. The oppressive atmosphere torments the brain of the speaker in such a way that the senses are heading towards a peculiar numbness. In the next stanza the mourners are waiting for the burial ceremony and then the drum starts beating. This beating sound of the drum reminds us of a typical Christian funeral ceremony. Here we can also notice the repetition of the word “beating”:

“And when they all were seated,

And service, like a drum—

Kept beating—beating—till I thought

My mind was going numb—”

This repetition again adds a rhythm in narrative of this poem. Relentless drumming somehow disturbs the mental stability. In one sense when she is saying that her mind is getting numb it reverberates the meaning that she is losing her normal senses but if we focus on the spiritual side of this, then this numbness of mind is very important to recreate the spiritual stability. Spiritually she is asking for a connection with “God”, and to achieve that one must be numb from all chaotic ambiances. With this, the third stanza is reached and she is observing a “box” in front of her.

“And then I heard them lift a box

A creak across my soul

With those same Boots of Lead, again,

Then space—began to toll,”

This box is the coffin by which the dead body is to be buried in the ground. The line, “With those same Boots of Lead, again” emancipates the idea that the experience is re-enacted over and over. Some part of her body is dying and affecting her aliveness. The space that she is talking about is the emptiness that one experiences within the death bed. This box therefore is leading towards the death of the physical existence. The space is a state of numbness and it helps the transition from one’s physical self to the spiritual one. Spiritually this space connotes the departure of one’s soul that can be achieved through the depth of thought that one is experiencing. Suddenly a bell starts tolling. This tolling of bell is very important as it brings forth the notion of her Christian religious belief. The tolling of the bell is the sound that is recurring in the mind of the protagonist. This ringing of the bell is related with the bell of the church. In Hindu philosophy the word “Om” is enchanted to create an ambience of serenity. This word has the power to rejuvenate the inner self. This works as a bell to our conscience toll through the universe and brings death to the regularities of physical life. Her inner “being” has become that “ear” to hear that sound, as she says:

“As all the Heavens were a Bell,

And Being, but an Ear,

And I, and Silence, some strange Race

Wrecked, solitary, here—”

The word “Silence” is capitalised and personified. Her loss of sanity is confronting with her regular senses. She, like a shipwrecked is searching for her own identity in a new place of spirituality.

“And then a plank in Reason broke,

And dropped down, and down—

And hit a World, at every plunge,

And Finished knowing—then—”

Dickinson beautifully portrays the final step of a funeral ceremony. The coffin is dropped into the ground with the break of “plank”. This break symbolises the break in the usual thought process. With this break her senses are dropped into the depth of darkness. This darkness is beyond the world of awareness. The death of her consciousness opens up a door of a new world. So the death explained here is the death of one’s physical being. The purpose of it is to give birth to the spiritual soul. The concluding line expresses the end with “finished knowing”. Knowing is continuous process. If it is stopped then we can assume one thing that she is in a state of transcendence where searching for her own self has completed and she has mingled with her supreme creator.

## Poem 2:

## The Soul Selects Her Own Society...

“The Soul selects her own society” is written in the year 1862. According to some critics, in this year Dickinson made her withdrawal from the general world. On a surface reading, this poem echoes the idea of living one’s own life on the basis of one’s own choice.

This apparently deals with the human habit of being selective about their life. Men are always decisive of making their own acquaintance with whom they wish to associate or not. But this general reading, though acceptable, opens up the scope for some larger speculations.

“The Soul selects her own society

Then--shuts the door

To her divine majority

Present no more”

In the first line of the poem, the word “Soul” is capitalised and personified. “Soul” is also attributed with feminine qualities as Dickinson is using “her” to designate the “Soul”. So “Soul” here is not merely a spiritual condition but also defined as a person, having the capability to choose her own social ambience. In the next line Dickinson focuses on the idea of shutting the door. Interestingly this closing of the door is meant for the “majority”. The word “society” is very much ambiguous. If we focus on her personal life she chose seclusion from the society and cherished to live within her own chosen circle. This seclusion somehow affects her poetic life too. From that perspective she decided not to join the society of divine elects, even though an “Emperor” is “kneeling” at her doormat.

Unmoved—she notes the Chariots—pausing

At her low Gate—

Unmoved—an Emperor be kneeling

Upon her Mat—

She ascribed a power to her soul to choose accordingly. Stubbornness on the other hand dictates the narrative from the point of individuality. It doesn't matter how many offers the

soul gets, it will always be conservative towards her decision. In this case the soul selects “One” on her own and becomes deaf to all other acquaintances like a stone. The “Valves” are closed for the others as if it has already found the “One” to live with.

I’ve known her — from an ample nation —

Choose One —

Then — close the Valves of her attention —

Like Stone —

The idea that the poem conjures up are images of “the Chariot”, “the Emperor”. Both these are related with the notion of domination and power. Theologically this power alludes to the power of “soul”. Plato in his “Phaedo” has stated the fact that the soul is immortal and imperishable. It has the power to recluse. Body on the other hand is perishable and subject to death. The soul completely opposes the construct of body. While defining this relation between soul and body Plato has given the notion of cold and fire as the opposite charges of a magnet. Dickinson emancipates the image of independence when she portrays the emperor at her doorstep. Emperor is the personified form of dominance and patriarchy who governs the land with his commands. Her soul remains “unmoved” and denies the entry of the emperor; this also means her independent spirit that ignores the ruling authority. This signifies her determination to stay in her own resoluteness. Therefore we can assume that this poem marks a very strong aspect of Dickinson’s personality. The “Soul” here is compared with a “Stone” as once the valves or doors are shut it will not open for any one. This society that the soul selects is therefore the circle of her chosen ones. The term “One” is very important in a sense that this “One” can be treated from different perspectives. Firstly, this one is the “God”; secondly, it is a friend; and thirdly, it is the “beloved”. If we take this “One” to be the God

then she is talking about her spiritual emancipation with the supreme creator. From a transcendentalist viewpoint the soul that she is focusing on is her inner self. It opens up to receive the touch of God and then turns into a stone to any other sensibilities. It is the oneness with the “Brahman”, if we consider the inner self as the “Atman”; then this journey is towards the “over-soul”.

**Poem 3: This Is My Letter To The World...**

It is a short lyrical poem of twelve lines only. This poem was published in 1890 and after its publication it has received great appreciation from the audience. It is a letter that Dickinson dedicates to the world. Precisely speaking dedicated to her world of audience. It throws light on the poetic creed of the poetess. She has written over one thousand poems in her life-time but never had any wish to come out as a poet. She told her close acquaintance to burn all the manuscripts after her death. But these were published posthumously. Dickinson is considered one of the most important poets in America for her complex patterns of writing poetry. She in her life was an enigmatic character and this poem presents a mark of this enigma. She considers her poems as her letter written to the world and to that world with which she is not connected at all. They were always little and filled with her personal emotions. The world that she is focusing on is referred to the Americans, as her audience. She wanted to convey the message to the world that she is weird. So through this poem she is requesting her audience to judge her tenderly and gently. She has written many poems but never received any appreciation for her writing among her close circles. She made an attempt to touch the world of her poetic exuberance which never touched her back. That is why she is saying:

“This is my letter to the World

That never wrote to Me—”

In the next part she is giving a message conveyed to her by nature. Now evidently, the “Nature” that she is referring is dealing with all about the concept of nature as she capitalises the “N” in the word nature. Dickinson is a great poet of nature and often belongs to the philosophical realm of transcendentalists next to Emerson and Thoreau. Her poetry is not only the stuff of nature as species only, but it is related to nature as a concept.

The simple News that Nature told—

With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed

To Hands I cannot see—

In this above mentioned lines she considered herself to be the messenger of Mother Nature. This message is towards her audience. The “Hands” that she fails to visualise are the readers who are reading her poetry at present. She suggested destroying all her works after her death so it was impossible for her to guess about the world of her future readers. The most important element in her message is her genuine commitment to her readers.

For love of Her—Sweet—countrymen—

Judge tenderly—of Me.

The world had never paid any attention to her works, it had always neglected her. In the first line she is making an announcement to the world and immediately after that in the second line she is making a complaint. She is using an exclamation mark instead of a dash as the last punctuation mark. This exclamation mark is the sign of her doubt. She was not certain about

her reception to the wider world of her American audience. So she is requesting her audience to judge her poetry with a tender approach.

**Poem 4: Because I Couldn't Stop For Death...**

“Because I couldn't stop for Death” is a poem published in the year 1890. It is a descriptive poem with vivid imagery representing the journey from home to graveyard. But the imagery that has been used by Dickinson is morbid and sumptuous. Dickinson is not a depressive poet rather she is an investigative one. She is asking an interesting question on death. Her purpose is to disclose the innate experience of being dead. Now the question that arises is that how is it possible for a person to experience death like this? Her answer to this is that she herself is experiencing death in her inner vision. Here she visualises death not as a terror but as a lover. Dickinson is the believer of afterlife and here she is playing with her visionary. To analyse this poem we have to focus on both the form and content. While discussing about the form the first thing that strikes in our mind is Dickinson's use of punctuation marks. The most prominent punctuation mark is her frequent use of dashes (—). Now the striking point is why she has used these dashes in the middle of her writing. The probable answer is that she wanted to give a pause in the sense as the poem is speaking of a situation related to death. It breaks the rhythm of the poem. The dash is therefore signifying a stop. It is like an end of breathing. It also represents a kind of dilemma as she is also in a confusion of the fact that what is going to happen next. And she is not sure of what exactly happens with a person when he is dead. She wanted to experience that feeling of dying through her vision. When she is saying that “I couldn't stop for death” it means that she didn't want to die rather her wish was completion.

“Because I could not stop for Death—

He kindly stopped for me—

The Carriage held but just Ourselves—

And Immortality.”

She imagines a chariot driven by death as its driver, so death is personified here. Everything about Dickinson is so precise. She is using the word “kindly” to characterise death. Her use of adverb adds a positive attribute to the workings of death. It is very unique and also very much surprising to characterise death as a kind persona which has always been considered as a tyrant.

We slowly drove—He knew no haste

And I had put away

My labour and my leisure too,

For His Civility—

In this stanza she explains the “motion” of the carriage in which she is a passenger. This “motion” or “speed” is synonymous with the thought of timelessness. The carriage is being slowly driven by death so that she will comfortably finish her final journey. This carriage is metaphorically associated with a carriage carrying dead bodies. Now most astonishingly she considers herself to be the rider of such a carriage and she is having “immortality” as her co-passenger. This fact is being emphasised with her use of the word “and” in the fourth line of the first stanza. The ease, the comfort that she is experiencing being dead symbolises the futility of hurriedness. The term “leisure” is very essential factor as it provides a kind of juxtaposition with the concept of death. The juxtaposition lies in the fact that if a person is

alive then only the thought of "leisure" comes into effectiveness. But as she is implementing the concept of a dead person then leisure bears no significance at all. Death is here personified with grandeur and the speaker is captivated with his charm. In most of Dickinson's poem death carries the message of terror. But it seems like she is mesmerised with the charm of death. During this period of journey she is portraying some images like "school", "gazing grain", "setting sun" etc. all these are images taking forward its reader to the stages of maturity.

We passed the School, Where Children strove

At Recess— in the Ring—

We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—

We passed the Setting Sun—

Dickinson is providing a vivid image about a journey. She is describing the outside scenario of the nature from the window of her carriage. She is starting with the School where the children's are playing ignorantly. This ignorance that she is referring about is the childish innocence of a starting period of life. Then she proceeds toward the gazing grains. This term "Grain" signifies the idea of maturity. The next scene that she is observing is the image of the "Setting Sun". This is a cliché referring to the end of life. So with these images it is quite obvious that she is describing the different stages of human life starting from innocence to maturity. The speaker is visualising or we can say that she is recapitulating the events of her life during her final journey. The "immortality" that she is referring to is the immortality of soul. In the next stanza she is concentrating on an image of a "House". This "House" refers to a graveyard. In this stanza she is clarifying the purpose of her journey as she reaches a house.

We paused before a House that seemed

A Swelling of the Ground—

The Roof was scarcely visible—

The Cornice—in the Ground

She is imagining a typical Christian graveyard. The “Swelling Ground” referred to here is the burial place prepared for her. The interesting thing is that she has chosen a complete alienation from the society for almost fifteen years so it is quite possible that she is writing this poem sitting at her room. The journey that she is completing stops at the gate of another house. Perhaps we can assume this journey as her final one. She is making the conclusion in the last stanza by saying that:

Since then—‘tis Centuries—and yet

Feel, shorter than the Day

I first surmised the Horses’ Heads

Were toward Eternity—

The ease that she is experiencing during her final journey being a dead person throws her into a trance like situation. This makes her forget the exact span of riding the chariot of life. It seems centuries have passed down but nothing is changed. She has surrendered everything in the hands of death. What remain with her are the memories of her life with her beloved ones. Since it is her last journey she wants to collect all her spare moments with that of her active ones.

This poem is a pure paradoxical one. Dickinson is trying to portray the image of “success” in its true sense. The very first lines of the poem refers to the contradiction to its utmost level when she exclaims that success comes out to be the sweetest one when tasted not by a successful person but by a person who has never became successful in his life.

Success is counted sweetest

By those who ne'er succeed.

According to Dickinson success is the sweetest thing for the losers not for the winners. Winners don't know anything about winning. It is the losers who really understand this. In the next lines she is using the word “To Comprehend”. This term “comprehend” means to appreciate. This comprehension means a kind of understanding for achieving the truth of success. This poem represents a dilemma of struggle between one who has received the success and the one who has never succeeded.

To comprehend a nectar

Requires sorest need.

Dickinson's use of this term “nectar” is an innovative effort to idealise the imagery of thirst and starvation. She explored a brilliant relationship between these two in her writings. She uses these two imageries metaphorically to present a broad spectrum associated with needs related to intellectual, spiritual and emotional. One can feel all the wonderful aspects of “nectar” if that person could apprehend the need for it. If a person is not thirsty water means nothing to him. But if we assume a person locked in a room for two days without water then the thirst that he will possess is something unbearable. Only this time he will understand the true meaning of water. Success is something like that. A person who is getting success easily

will never relate with the struggle that one makes to achieve that success. In the next imagery she is directly taking the reader into the situation of a battlefield. She also creates an attachment of the reader with the brutality of the battlefield.

Not one of all the purple Host

Who took the Flag today

Can tell the definition

So clear of victory

Here we have to consider one more thing that she is writing this poem during 1850s. This period is considered to be the black era of American history as the civil war was taking place. The “Flag” that she refers here directly alludes to the civil war. This flag is the symbol of victory and the owner of this flag is those who have won the battle.

As he defeated—dying—

On whose forbidden ear

The distant strains of triumph

Burst agonized and clear!

Dickinson being conscious about her position alludes to the imagery of “death” and “defeat”. There is the contrasting theme of material gain and spiritual loss. The winners are materially the gainers but spiritually they have lost their conscience. They have lost the understanding of the true meaning of victory. She conjures up the imagery of a dying person completely devastated on being defeated in the battlefield. Those who have won the battle and are busy in celebrating that victory will never know the meaning of life. On the other hand, one who is in a dying situation would understand the meaning of life in its exact form. The people who

got success in their life have never appreciated it. But those people who really lack in something knows how wonderful it is to taste the sweetest fruit of success. The word “agony” is very ironical as it simultaneously relates to victory and also the agony of the losers. This poem is the classic example of human desire. Dickinson is beautifully balancing between the two very homiletic points of “desire” and “despair”.

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### Conclusion

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Dickinson’s writing encompasses a vast field of variety as she has written her poetry on nature, God, fear, desire, despair, death, decay, religion and faith. Her richly romantic soul, found its existence in the simplest elements that she experienced in her life. She found the blink of eternity in human soul. Her belief in the presence of divine power has motivated her to rely in afterlife. She is a writer of human life and soul. The minute details of human soul are presented through her pen. There in her poetry emotions, hope and logic finds their voice. Hope is like that sweet little bird perching on human soul. Her poetry bristles with nature in many aspects and imbibed with her realistic presentation of natural elements.

“The Meadows— mine

The Mountains— Mine—

All forests—Stintless Stars—

As much of Noon as I could take

Between my finite eyes—

Her approach towards life is very elegant as she is concerned about the doubt working within mortality and immortality. She accepts death as a material and physical truth. This loss of consciousness in the form of death gives birth to a spiritual awareness within her. So what Dickinson is doing with her poems is that she is playing a game with the identity of death. We can substantiate the manifold presentation of death in her poems. Especially she deals with the physical aspect of death while personifying death in her own terms with an elegiac note of timelessness. She records the journey from doubt and questionings to an ultimate faith. As it was said before that she experienced within her mind a continuous battle between faith and ever surpassing death. In some courageous moments her faith wins over her fear for death. This faith changed her attitude towards religion and God. Her religious faith does not touch the level of orthodox dilemma but possesses a very interesting relationship with God. All of these traits in her poetry prove her to be a magnificent artist in the history of American Literature.

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