

Death Complex of Emily Dickinson's Poems

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Abstract

Death is a favorite theme for Emily Dickinson because she met with death in her early years. In the following years, with the series death of her friends and relatives, death is the same as a kind of burden in her life. From then on she has her own special complex on death.

Keywords

Reason; Immortality; Death complex.

1. Preface

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson, one of the greatest American poets, was born in Amherst Massachusetts, a prototypical New England village, on December 10, 1830. As a recluse, she turned her back on the world, both in her life and in her poetry. Dickinson wrote in a time when the form of poem was strictly restrained. However, she defied the literary norms of her time. Experimented with various poetic measures, and created the style of her own. She wrote many themes all her life, death was the favorite theme, because she met with death in her early years, in the following years, with the series death of her friends and relatives, death is a heavy burden in her life. From then on she had her own special complex on death.

2. The Description on Death

2.1. The Reason Why She Favored Death So Much

The Poet critics and biographers have frequently noted Dickinson's predilection for death. Charles R. Anderson found in *Stairway of Surprise* that "death and immortality were the two profound themes challenged her Poetic powers" While Thomas Ford indicates in *Heaven Beguiles the Tired* that "the idea of death was for her the overwhelming, omnipresent emotional experience of her life." [1] But why did Dickinson have such interest in the theme of death? Some critics gave their explanations to it. Inder Nath Kher thought the death poems were the result of the poet's general cognition of the world and the universe [2]. Thomas W. Ford believed that Dickinson's interest in death resulted from her consideration on the value and fate of the existence of human being. In my opinion, the fixation on death is not only the expression of Dickinson's own death complex but also has attributed several rational explanations.

Firstly, the New England Calvinism was part of her background and environment in which she was raised. Although she gave up church and religious dogmas in early years, she was affected by the religious tradition inevitably. Her long inheritance of New England Puritanism with its stern Calvinistic logic which stressed man's depravity, the imminence of death, God's wrath furnished her with concepts of Predestination, Suffering, Death and Immortality. These ideas formed part of her perception of the world. She could not shake them off. Therefore, she always retained a Calvinistic sense of the frightening coldness and indifference of the world and an awareness of the human predicament in face of it. This traditional heritage made her ponder the terror of death and delve into its mystery.

Then, before she reached maturity, she had experienced the loss of several young friends. Their death affected greatly and throughout her life. This factor contributed to her preoccupation with death and her doubts about fulfillment beyond the grave. So the terror and heartbreaks of death remained so deeply in her soul that she had to cry it out in her poems. Furthermore, she could hardly have avoided the funeral ritual because Dickinson orchard adjoined the burying ground where the final rites took place. Every funeral procession must pass by her house directly. If Dickinson turned away from the funeral cortege passing below her window, she could not shun the statistics about death in Amherst found in newspaper. As a result of these backgrounds, death became a kind of special complex in her mind. It was a usual and domesticated performance so familiar to Dickinson. She admitted that it was a power "so huge and so hopeless to conceive" and remained all too real to everything in the world. Namely all things have to die and sooner or later. In this situation Dickinson wrote many poems about death with her own special complex on death. Those poems were a deep need for the poet to probe the philosophical puzzle of why death is or explore the psychological problem of what death is. The purpose for her to understand the nature of death is to relieve her own doubts about it.

2.2. Two Aspects on Describing Death

In Dickinson's poetry on death she describes death in two different angles. For one aspect the poet concentrates on the dead or the scene of deathbed. The other describes the pain of the living persons, which comes from death and how to get used to the life for them. In a poem "I like a look of Agony" Dickinson describes the body's change when a person on the verge of death.

I like a look of Agony,
Because I know its true-
Men do not sham Convulsion,
Nor simulate, a Throe-
The Eyes glaze once- and that is Death-
Impossible to feign
The Beads upon the Forehead
By homely anguish strung. [3]

When people will be on the verge of death, the expression on face must be so sorrowful. However the poet wrote, "I like a look of Agony" because "I know it's true." After a while, "The Eyes glaze once" and death comes to the person. During the process of the scene of deathbed, we can find that people is tortured not only on body but also in heart because "the Beads upon the Forehead and by homely Aguish strung." Through the depiction of the change of the dead on body, it is clear that death is authentic and it is "impossible" to feign". So the theme of this poem reflects poet's eulogizing for genuineness, sincerity and authenticity in the world, and disgust for people's hypocrisy. In Dickinson's mind, there is full of real feelings, true love around here and there, hypocrisy should be gotten rid of completely. On one hand it shows Dickinson's beautiful wish to pursue happiness and true love. On the other hand the poet does not fear death any longer. On the contrary she begins to confront and describe in detail directly. Facing a Dying Eyes, Dickinson also describes the dead through their eyes. So she wrote, "I've seen a Dying Eyes, Run round and round a Room". In this poem the dead looks around a room eagerly and fearfully as if it seems in search of something. Maybe he wants to look for somebody or inform something important because of his leave from the world at once.

At this moment the mood of the dead becomes calm and he does not feel so terrified. After this stage the eyes of the dead are obscure again as if there is full of the fog in his eyes. Then he has to close his eyes and it seems that his eyes could not open forever. The dead already has been in the desperate state because he still is eager to live in the world. In a word, through the

changes of eyes the poet has described several stages, which the person is in the process of death. In addition to the description of the change of the body and eyes of the dead, Dickinson also pays attention to a dead woman's face. In this poem, the poet tries to eliminate the distortion for death.

These- saw visions-
 Latch them
 These- held Dimples-
 Smooth them slow-
 This---addressed departing accents-
 Quick- Sweet Mouth- to miss thee so-
 This---We stoked-----
 Unnumbered Satin-
 These- We held among our own-
 Fingers of the Slim Aurora-
 Not so arrogant- this Noon-
 These- adjust- that ran to meet us-
 Pearl- for Stocking- Pearl for Shoe-
 Paradise- the only Place
 Fit for Her reception- no---[4]

In general, the dead will be imagined so terrible and ugly whatever how pretty or not during the lifetime. Dickinson recovers the dead woman real face. This dead woman has a sweet mouth and her face is smooth just like the Satin. So we stroked it continuously. Meanwhile her fingers are so slim the same as Aurora. However she is not arrogant and runs to meet us. At this moment her stocking and shoe are dazzling as if there are full of peals. In the poem, the eyes, face, mouth, hands and feet of the dead woman are adjusted to the best state. Although she has already been dead, she still looks so calm and beautiful. In the last stanza, the best place for her has been prepared. It is the only palace in heaven---Paradise. It is a perfect picture that the poet described for the dead. In this picture the dead is full of vigor in order to pursue happiness. Finally she has gone to the Paradise. Here, Dickinson describes the dead in detailed and pays attention to the dead not only one part of the body but also the whole part. Besides this aspect on the dead, the poet concerns on the scenes of deathbed in her works. Poem "I heard a Fly buzz--when I died" is a successful works because of vivid description of these. In the first stanza Dickinson describes the background of this poem, which she lays in bed. At the same time there is full of stillness in the room. It reflects a kind of gloomy atmosphere of death. Two kinds of opposite images have formed. One is the race of a fly and the shadow of death. The other is the stillness on the room and the drone of a fly. The poet, here, uses a special image and skillful metaphor to symbolize the tranquility before the rainstorm. This metaphor is so meaningful. Although there is only two lines, the pain of deathbed and sorrow of the living person are recorded in it clearly. The metaphor of rainstorm implies the great pain of losing caused by death. In the second stanza Dickinson concentrates on the sorrowful relatives and friends who witness how a living person to become the dead. So they cried until their eyes had been dry. They only can hold their breaths firmly to wait death's coming quietly. In next stanza, the poet's attention is also on the dead herself. She began to imagine how to send her keepsakes to the people in the world. Meanwhile a fly interposed and attracted her attention. The quite mood of the dead is interrupted. In the last stanza of this poem, a fly lingers between the light and the dead with a kind of grieved buzz. Then the dead could not see as if the fly fends off the light, which is from the window. This is the poem that described the experience and the process of death. Poet places herself in the place of death in order to experience what feeling of death is. It

proves that Dickinson's rich imagination on death and the strong desire to explore death really means. Then the poet used two images "Color" and "Sound" skillfully. Blue color symbolizes a kind of gloomy atmosphere. While the sounds of a fly buzz is the same as people's grieved cries. Through the two images Dickinson described the person's indistinct mind and confused state before death. So this poem is the typical description of the scene of deathbed in New England of America in the 19th century. For the orthodox Christian at that time, the discourse and expression on face of the dead indicated their souls' fate after their death. In the second stanza the sorrowful people sat around the dead solemnly, observed her expression and listened her discourse respectfully.

The Eyes around- had wrung them

And Breaths were gathering firm

For that last Onset- when the king

Be witnessed- in the Room-

In the poem, light symbolizes a kind of wish after death. However there is still a despairing tone:

I willed my keepsakes-signed away

What portion of me be

Assignable- and then it was

There interposed a

with Blue- uncertain stumbling Buzz-

Between the light and me

And then the Windows failed- and them

I could not see to see-...[5]

A fly in poem has already hindered not only the light that came from the window but also the light that befell from the heaven. The fly also hints that the body of the dead begins to corrupt and death will be coming necessarily. In the last line the dead could not see, maybe she has entered the kingdom of death. From the whole poems we can find Dickinson's mood toward death has become calm gradually. In this calm mood Dickinson thinks over the death and describes it in more reasonable way. So death is described as a kind of finished feeling in this poem.

3. Pursuing Death and Immortality

Through a series of struggles, Dickinson's mental state toward death becomes calm. However, death still happened like an enduring shadow and haunts Dickinson's life. Because of this reason, she keeps wondering what can become the way to overcome the plague of death and ceaselessly attempts to wrestle with the question to get the answer. It is an inexhaustible theme for her. As Conrad Aiken said, "she died all her life, she probed death daily." [6] She does not allow herself to steep in sorrow but attempts to confront the mystery of death and challenges it with extraordinary intensity, uncompromising, directness and unfailing courage. At the same time, the poet is not willing to exist as the ego because of her unfailing courage replaces the ego during the process. The superego is the mortal censoring agency, the repository of conscience and pride. It is, as Freud says in "The Anatomy of the mental personality", "the representative of all moral restrictions, attributes the development of the superego to the parental influence that manifests itself in terms of punishment or what society considers being bad behavior and reward for what society considers good behavior. So the superego is dominated by the morality principle. We might say that the id would makes devil, the superego would have us behave as angels or as creatures of absolute social conformity and it remains for the ego to keep us healthy human beings by maintaining a balance between these two opposing forces. For the poet, death occupied her heart early when she was young. At the beginning the fear of death surrounded

Dickinson just as a nightmare. It results and the advocate of the impulse toward perfection. In short it is as much as we have been able to apprehend psychologically of what people call the 'higher things' in human life" [7]. Acting either directly or through the ego, the superego serves to repress or inhibit the drives of the id, to block off and thrust back into the unconscious those impulses toward pleasure that society regards unacceptable, such as overt to aggression, sexual passions and the Oedipal instinct or Electra Complex.

In order to overcome or exceed death, Dickinson has established a theology of her own. The centre of which is the firm belief in "Immortality" of the soul. She learned the world "Immortality" in the Bible being of great value from her religious inheritance and found one passage to her. "For this corruptible must put on and this mortal must put on immortality." But for Dickinson she has incorruption injected the meaning of her own [8]. In her letters and poems, she constantly mentions this word. Is immortality true? I believe that it is true- the only reality- almost; a thousand times truer than mortality, which is but a semblance after all. This "Flood subjects" has been examined and reexamined searching all her life. When her father died, she told her friend,

"When I think of my father's lonely life and his lonelier death, there is redress-
Take all away-
The only thing worth larceny
Is left- the immortality--" [9]

Facing death, Dickinson translates grief and loss into moving visions of immortality. Her faith gives her the power to transmute her agonizing sorrow.

4. Conclusion

Yet although she -was tortured by loss and death, she still kept on probing into this problem in calm mentality. Finally she established her own theology. In her theology she also absorbed some views of the traditional Christianity and adopted some terms from the Bible. The center of her theology is the belief and pursuit of immortality. In fact, Dickinson's perception of immortality is the extension of death.

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