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A Biographical Study of Emily Dickinson's Preoccupation with Death

V. Vasanthi, Ph.D.



Emily Dickinson

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emily_Dickinson

Introduction

The anthology of a poet is often supplemented with the biographical details of the poet in order to throw a thorough insight into the philosophy of the poems. Sometimes it becomes necessary that we get to know the personal life of the author for a better understanding of that force which had provided impetus for the creation. Every individual has a unique perception

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and the poems invariably reflect the predominant thought of the author. The study of this peculiarity is inextricably bound with the study of the author's biography.

Emily Dickinson's Preoccupation

For example, Wordsworth was highly preoccupied with nature and Ted Hughes wrote about animals. Similarly, Emily Dickinson's preoccupation with death as revealed through her poems can be reasoned out by analysing her biography closely.

This paper recalls her biography and works and analyses the reasons for her preoccupation. This study maintains that there were three different factors which brought about the thought of death to the poet. They are: nature, religion and love. Each of these has been discussed in this research paper. When news of death is heard, the listeners pay heed for a while, grieve, empathise and resign into indifference for such is the nature of death that can hardly be reasoned for or felt about. There are many writers like T.S. Eliot who had been preoccupied as Emily Dickinson was. This obsession was her merit and demerit.

Biography



Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts on December 10, 1830. She entered the Amherst Academy and graduated in 1847. Her father, Edward Dickinson was a lawyer and Treasurer of Amherst College. It is obvious that a rich social and intellectual life was available to her but she chose something else. Her life was controlled by many factors of which the Puritan movement of New England was one, which had an adverse influence on her and kept her in austerity. Her biography is not very clear but some events of her life were approximated logically through her letters. She secluded herself to a great extent. Conrad Aiken says, "It is apparent that Miss Dickinson became a hermit by deliberate and conscious choice". (Sewall 10)

In the letter written in the year 1853, addressed to T.W. Higginson, she revealed her reluctance to go to Boston but wanted him to come to Amherst. The relationship was a tutor-student one and the only important literary connection in her life. Another important connection in her life was that with Benjamin F. Newton. Emily Dickinson found him a gentle and grave preceptor for he taught her what to read and admire. He died in the year

1853 which should have been the strongest of all impacts that fell on her pertaining to death and immortality.

Her girlhood was a normally social one and she was always high-spirited with a good sense of humour. A careful study of her letters shows that she suffered from a psychic injury that grew deeper with time, thus paving way for her mystical poems. The poet, who had been writing for herself, gave the poem, 'Success' to the anthology, 'A masque of Poets' of Helen Aunt Jackson who was a poetess. Only seven of her poems were published during her life time.

Emily Dickinson's best productive period ranges from the year 1860 to 1865. It was about then that her retirement from the public world had become marked. From the year 1860 to her death in the year 1886, she had suffered from pangs of apparently death like episodes which affected her psyche. In 1882, her mother died and her journey to the immortal world was at last destined for May 15, 1886 in Amherst.

Conrad Aiken and Allen Tate were the first to take Emily Dickinson seriously as a poet. Yuor Winters came out with 'The Limits of Judgement' which analysed both the merits and demerits of her poetic skills. George F. Whicher praised the inherent humour in her. Henry wells appreciated her romantic sensibility and Donald E. Thackeray, her choice of diction.

Works – Categories of Contents

Emily's poetic subject may be subdivided into the natural description and the definition of an experience that is both moral and personal. Though she was unique among her contemporaries, she had something in common with them. Her motive for writing was entirely different from that of her contemporaries. She wrote for herself where as Walt Whitman wrote for the American mass. She existed in a vacuum, where only her ideas were with her. Some of her poems have a tinge of Emerson's transcendentalism even though she shut herself from the world where the ideas of Emerson could have or could not have reached her.

When Emily Dickinson's poems were collected and edited, many corrections were made and the informalities were corrected and hence we do not have the correct version of many of her poems. Until 1955, the world did not know of her greatness. The story of publication of her poems is also equally interesting. Mabel Loomis Todds and Higginson stood first among the people who brought her poems to the readers by publishing three volumes of poetry and a collection of letters.

'The Single Hound'(1914) was published by Maratha Dickinson Bianchi who also edited, 'The Complete Poems' (924) which contained almost all her poems. Further, there was a compensation when two books namely 'The Unpublished Poems' (1935) and 'Further Poems' (1935) appeared. The last important event was Thomas H. Johnson's publication of a three volume edition in 1955 and some letters. It was only after the publication of 'The Single Hound' that Emily Dickinson's reputation gained stability and importance which remain

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undisturbed till this moment. Her poems were thoughts watered flowered and ripened all in a moment. All the poems distinguishably stand as invaluable pearls. They were an autobiographical record which did not follow any poetical rules. She struck various notes on the piano of her poetry which deal with an uncountable number of themes of which the theme of death gains a special glance owing to its treatment.

Emily Dickinson and the Theme of Death

Emily Dickinson's attitude towards death was astonishing. She reacted to death with less horror as one can see in the poem, 'Because I could not stop for death'. She is supposed to have written to a friend whose father died on her wedding day thus: "Few daughters have the immortality of their father for a bridal gift." (qtd. in Sewall 12)

These lines justify her attachment to death. She believed that human being was mortal and had a strong faith in life after death. She commented on her father's death thus: 'I am glad there is immortality but would have tasted it myself before entrusting him' (qtd in Sewall 28)

Death was a central problem of her life which she faced throughout. She saw it all around herself. Her father died in 1874 which caused a deep impact on her; he was always supposed to have restricted her from reading her favourite writers - Long Fellow, Kavanagh, Keats, Dickens and Browning. He had asked her to read the scriptures and instructed Austin, Emily and Lavinia to grow up into good women. Lavinia was her sister and Austin, her brother.

On one occasion Emily explained why her ideas were rather dark. She said, 'I have just seen a funeral procession go by, of a Negro baby and if my ideas are rather dark you need not marvel' (qtd. in Saradhi 24). Most of these death scenes were not things that she happened to come by, she was by force of habit drawn to see the dying and experience death.

Emily had written to Higginson and testified her early awareness of death thus: "Death gave me awe for friends striking sharp and early for I held them since is a brittle love of more alarum than peace" (qtd. in Saradhi, 24). Hence we find that the death of her friends did upset her and her seclusion is a result of her preoccupation with death. One of such friends whom she lost was Sophia G. Holland. On the lady's death, the poet had felt a penetrating anguish. Emily Dickinson had not convinced herself by relying on immortality. In one of her letters to Albiah Root in 1846, she wrote thus; "I often get thinking of it and it seems so dark to me that I almost wish there was no eternity." (qtd. in Franklin 10)

Factors Which Influenced Emily's Preoccupation with Death

There were three big factors that influenced her preoccupation with death and they were:

1. Religion
2. Love
3. Nature

Love

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Among these three factors, it is love that gains more attention biographically. Her niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi informs in the preface to 'The Single Hound' that she had several love affairs. Her brother Austin said on a similar interrogation that was not attached to anybody to a great extent.

The identification of Emily Dickinson's lover, if only she had any, still remains an open question. Several young men have been suggested as the possible object of her affections. Chief of them are Benkamin F. Newton, Henry Vaugham Emmons, Samuel Bowles and Reverd Charles Wadsworth. Her tutor Benjamin F. Newton was the first young man in her life. Henry Vaugham Emmons, a bright student of Amherst College, was supposed to be Emily Dickinson's friend and it is said that their friendship had blossomed into love and the failure had led her to a complete seclusion.

Emily Dickinson next met Samuel Bowles who was the editor of 'Springfield Republican' for more than two decades. She praised his vivacious personality and greatly admired him. When Bowles was recuperating from an illness, she sent a note saying that although she cared for him, something bothered her and she could not meet him. The real cause for this withdrawal is not known. But she concluded the letter by comparing herself to the Marchioness in Charles Dicken's novel, 'The Old Curiosity Shop' and Bowles to Dick Swiveller who later married the marchioness. That it had not only been love that had paved way for her preoccupation can be accentuated by reasoning widely on her attitude. Conrad Aiken says, "She enjoyed being a mystery ad she sometimes deliberately and awkwardly exaggerates it" (Sewall 12). Thus it can also be said that she suffered from an unhealthy vanity in her life which made her poetic theme deliberately weird.

Though it is not important to know whom she loved, it becomes important to analyse to what extent her love contributed to the preoccupation. Her love was unconsummated and that is too obvious from these lines:

Sufficient troth, that we shall rise
Deposed, at length, The Grave -
To that new Marriage, justified
Through Calvary's of Love' - (There Came a Day at Summer's Full- lines 25-28)

Emily longed for a union with her lover in the heaven which could have been impossible on earth. That whether it was a love for a human being or for god is a very important question. If Emily Dickinson's love had been purely spiritual she would not have referred to her lover's death as a severe loss in the poem, 'I never lost as much but twice'. That she had surely suffered from the pangs of physical separation cannot be substantiated and it might have also been the moral and intellectual company those great men provided. But Emily Dickinson looked at death as a mystery and cruelty which made her think more on it and she had

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eventually fallen in love with death itself. She portrays death as a gentleman in her famous poem.

We slowly drove, He knew no haste,
And I had put away
My Labor, and Leisure too,
For his Civility.(Because I could not stop for Death- lines 5-8)

Emily's poem, 'The Way I read a letter is thus', explains her unmistakable femininity and the search for a lover occupied her mind to such an extent that she was obsessed with nature and often adored the harshness of nature and found a masculinity in it. The following lines suggest this idea:

And made as he would eat me up
As wholly as a Dew
Upon a Dandelion's Sleeve-
And then I started too (I started early took my dog- lines 13-16)

Similar attraction to the stronger power had influenced her thoroughly. In this regard, Sylvia Plath's words, 'Every Woman Adores a Fascist' in her poem 'Daddy' can be remembered. Her preoccupation with death started as she recognised her vulnerability.

It would also be more appropriate to infer that though Emily Dickinson did not have any companion in her life, she had fancied love within her chambers. The poem 'Going to her' depicts an inexperienced love which is too complicated to be understood. But quite contradicting she says:

'For I have but the power to kill,
Without the power to die-
My Life had stood a loaded gun-lines(23-24)

Religion

In the period during which Emily Dickinson lived, the old religious values were fast disintegrating and were replaced by new values. Up to this time Puritanism had a strong hold on the minds of the people of America in general and New England in particular. The poet was forced to accept the Puritan beliefs. The more the ideology was thrust on her the more she changed mystic. The consciousness of the background and culture of her age remained very much in her which she questioned.

That she accepted the ideologies of her religion can be substantiated as follows: She respected and loved God which is evident from her casual address to God as 'The Burglar,

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Banker and the Father'. She was religious enough to say that she was waiting for death when her spirit would be intermingled with that of Jesus.

It will be ample time for me -
Patient- Upon the steps- Until then-
Heart! I am knocking - low at thee (Just so Jesus raps- lines 9-11)

Two perceptions arise from this aspect of religion and its influence on her poetic theme. The first one is that Emily Dickinson was preoccupied with death as a consequence of her religious knowledge. It is more relevant to support this point of view as the influences of the religion are the earliest in human beings.

We also gain a second perception that Emily seemed to have her own perception of religion or spiritual experience, apart from the established Calvinistic approach to religion in her surroundings. A freedom from established religion, while hanging on to the Biblical foundations is strong and significant in her poems through metaphors, potent theological expressions, etc. seems to be the undercurrent in her poems.

Nature

Since Emily Dickinson was secluded from the society, she had been admiring nature through her windows. While she kept her indoors, away from the human companionship, she was drawn close towards nature.

Her preoccupation with death was intensified through the apprehensions by nature. She communicated with nature which indicated the impending death in her life.

She associated nature with death and poetised this association in a unique way. According to her, human life gained significance only after death by blending with nature. She describes it thus:

Safe in their Alabaster chambers,
Untouched by morning
And untouched by noon
Sleep the meek members of the resurrection
Rafter of satin and roof of stone. (safe in their alabaster chambers - lines 1-5)

Conclusion

'It is finished can never be said of us', said Emily Dickinson (qtd in Sewall, 5). Though the poet's life had come to an end, the analyses of many of her poems have not been started yet. She had written on various themes but with a morbidity that was inherent in her nature.

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Since her poems were posthumously published, it can also be understood that she wrote for herself and these poems can be taken as autobiographical details, which had led to different speculations about her preoccupation with death. Emily has a unique place among other great writers of English Literature.

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Volume 12 : 5 May 2012. ISSN 1930-2940. Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D. 12:5 May 2012. Ambreen Shahriar and Habibullah Pathan. Coherence and the Role of Cohesion in Coherent Texts. For example, one may have to collaborate with colleagues from various geographical parts of the nation or the world, receive customers or guests from across the Globe, periodically visit different places for various purposes etc. Only on acquiring the necessary command over GE, the learner is encouraged to move ahead with TE. LANGUAGE IN INDIA Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow Volume 12: 9 September 2012 ISSN 1930-2940 Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D. Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D. Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D. More information. LANGUAGE IN INDIA Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow Volume 10 : 12 December 2010 ISSN. Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow, 12, 332. has been cited by the following article: TITLE: The Most Difficult Basic Skill Faced by Learners of English in First Year Undergraduate Classes at UEA/Bukavu, DR Congo. AUTHORS: Ct Buhendwa Rubango Jeff. KEYWORDS: Most Difficult Basic Skill, Learners of English, UEA. JOURNAL NAME: Creative Education, Vol.10 No.2, February 28, 2019. ABSTRACT: This article pursues three objectives: firstly, it aims at identifying the most difficult basic skill faced by learners of English in first year undergraduate classes at UEA, one of the major univer