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Emily Dickinson's Obsession with Death

Emily Dickinson is one of the most outstanding and prominent poets of American Romanticism whose rather significant body of work employs themes and motifs characteristic of the movement brushing them off with her unique treatment of visionary nature. Her poetry revolves around several binary oppositions such as life and death, eternity and immediacy, earthly and divine, body and soul that undergo various speculations for Emily Dickinson approaches them as if she were an eye-witness, sometimes dragged into transcendental states and later sharing her persona's experiences with the reader. Three poems of Emily Dickinson were chosen for the analysis, namely "Death is a dialogue between...", "Death sets a thing significant...", and "Let down the bars, o Death!" which explicitly state the purpose of the analysis: examining the concept of death and its manifestation in works selected.

Working within romantic paradigm Emily Dickinson allows certain configurations within common structural oppositions. Her poems reflect the struggle between metaphysical and dialectical strategies of Weltanschauung. Taking into account these two propositions the first inference comes into place: poetess chooses one conventional opposition which expands upon the basis of two ambivalent notions and introduces the third member, which turns the metaphysical contrastive pair into a dialectic triad.

Let us apply a close reading technique to the first poem. The opening lines of the poem read: "Death is a dialogue between / The spirit and the dust". To the limelight comes classical binary opposition in structuralist sense – spirit::dust which is figuratively

immovable but adding the third element – Death – gives an impulse of eternal motion to the pair, where the spirit becomes a thesis, the dust – an antithesis and Death is a synthesis which signifies a passage from state to movement, from metaphysics to dialectics. The form of the dialogue corresponds to the above discussed scheme, for it presupposes the exchange between two entities and results in a movement of ideas in time and space, and Death is the substance for this dialogue.

The dialogue captures two different realities, equal in their importance: the life itself and the afterlife correspondingly where the Death is the personification of the latter. Death as represented in collective unconscious is something rather inevitable when it puts its foot down there is no way to fight it back. However, in the frame of the poem the Death is haggling with the vital Spirit; even though it uses imperative mood: “Dissolve”, commands it, the Spirit has a right to make a choice and parry with another blow: “Sir, I have another trust”, which is a polysemantic word meaning either “belief”, “hope” or “reliability”. Either way this synonymous range implies that there is a possibility of choice and nothing may force the Spirit make it rather than itself.

Moreover, moving on to the next stanza another important discovery is to be made: two different realities are clearly separated from one another and the margin is the ground from which the Death speaks. Speaking in contemporary terms the Death is quite discriminated because its word is underestimated and not to be taken seriously. The power of the Death is of verbal quality only and, what is more, it is delineated by spatial restrictions – the ground.

The poem here draws on two different modes of *Weltanschauung* – mythological and religious. Mythological is represented by the personification of the Death and designation of the place where its existence is possible; furthermore, three abstract notions taken in their full gamut acquire human features and physical characteristics: they can speak and reveal the

work of the second signaling system; they can also make choices. Religious component comes brightly into place by means of the last two lines of the poem: “Just laying off, for evidence, / An overcoat of clay.” Clay is a Biblical material from which man was made; it is also an evidence of the Divine Providence and a connection between human and his creator. However, clay as a sign of origin is also a constant reminder of mortality and nothingness, so the Spirit chooses to shake it off, to be free for good.

Mythological and religious modes thus come in appeasing symbiosis resulting in the personification of death, restriction of its authority and such diminution comes from substitution of the regular binary opposition with a triad of dialectics.

Yet another embodiment of death is found in Emily Dickinson’s poem “Death sets a thing significant...” where it becomes clear, how powerful and categorical its imperatives are. The opposition between life and death is vaguely represented by culturally accepted images of the former and implicit presence of the latter and does not appear that important as the opposition of life and afterlife. The poetess applies here characteristic of her style speculations of ability to be speaking from beyond the grave not being dead. Human life is manifested in the chain of labor activities all aimed at production of something new, or, in other words, leaving traces of one’s existence in a material form.

The poem begins from beyond the grave, and “a perished creature” that underestimated the significance of death, because its “eye had hurried by”, missed the moment of death in a rush, did not pay attention to it and, henceforth, was unable to leave anything behind in the world of living people. It is an appeal to all the humanity, and the message bids not to waste time and use skill to create some artifacts or at least regular things. The materials vary: “in crayon or in wool”; words “thimble”, “stitches” and “closet shelves” imply tailoring and sewing clothes. Although the message seems very reassuring and giving hope Emily Dickinson brings into play an almost transparent thread of finiteness for

everything a man creates in the course of his life falls prey to dust, covered by the mantle of oblivion. The creation is detached from its creator, there is no vital connection anymore, and the artifact becomes pointless and means nothing anymore. A parallel between God and man as His creation suggests itself, but it is rather inappropriate due to the fact that a man is a living being and never an object, therefore, may this suggestion be dropped for good.

Death brings a void into one's past by means of extracting the Spirit or the Soul out of it. However, the persona of the poem seems to find the way of keeping the deceased one's soul alive in life after death. This is a specific medium of a word – a book, where the remarks of the deceased friend are left “whose pencil, here and there, / Had notched the place that pleased him, – / At rest his fingers are.” Books and what is written there is one level of presence – the presence of the actual story, its plot and characters, to put it simply, the fictional world of literary text. On the other level there is reader's interpretation, his response to the text which reflects itself in underlining of certain places – another typical romantic strategy introduced by Friedrich Schlegel – the world is endless, there is no way to grasp it in its entirety, so fragments are only possible modes of approximation towards the Absolute. On the third level in the example lines there is another interpretation of the persona who says: “Now, when I read, I read not / For interrupting tears / Obliterate the etchings / Too costly for repairs”. The persona refuses to read and thus destroy the remnants of her friend's soul.

Remarkable of the poem is also a continuous movement from microcosm to macrocosm and back again. A perished creature (microcosm) sends its message to the humanity (macrocosm) and then it narrows down to the dialogue between the persona and her deceased friend (two microcosms) in the medium of literature as an integral and self-sufficient macrocosm. Interesting, nay, is the fact that each of these transitions has a specific margin – death in its various manifestations: “Death sets a thing significant” – is a statement of the fact that the person is dead; “industrious until” is an aposiopesis – a figure of

secondary denomination that results in a sudden break of a syntactic structure, or, in other words, a phrase remains unfinished leaving space for interpretations. Finally, a transitional line to the world of literature is “At rest his fingers are” which states that the person is dead but his spirit and probably soul are still present in the world of living beings by means of his etchings and marks left in the book.

Therefore, in this poem the Death has greater importance; it serves as a demarcation line between life and afterlife equal in their strength thus separating segments of the entirety of life cycle. The dialogue is also a part of the poem, however, it does not occur between the Death and life, spirit of whatsoever, but comes in two different modes: the first one involves a someone communicating a message from beyond the grave to the humanity, and the second one that is established between two people: one dead and another one still alive.

A new vision of death is presented in the last of the chosen poems “Let down the bars, O Death!” The image that arises as one has read till the end of the poem differs greatly from the first two. Death here is viewed as a liberator, someone who helps people to forget their worries and move to the quieter realm. Nonetheless, it cannot be said that the image is rather positive than negative, it is not charged by any polarity and remains neutral as a source of eternal tranquility.

Obvious becomes the circular motif of the poem: “Let down the bars, O Death! / The tired flocks come in” Here the Death has its physical territory which equals to the shed and people are, in Biblical terms, a flock (of sheep). Sheep come out of the shed in the morning, graze during the day on the pasture, and then come back to the shed to have rest overnight. Therefore, as a part of a parallel construction, it can be deduced that us, people, are born from the Death and drift not towards it but strive to come back where we belong. Death is nothingness in this case, but this nothingness is yet personified that constitutes a paradox and contradicts the postulates of formal logic. Nothingness is Death with human characteristics,

but people are spared any specifics, they are faceless, they are a flock. The only feature that pertains to human beings is tiredness, his “wandering is done”. This line implies that life is a rather negative and worthless struggle, and the only right thing to do is to come back to the place of rest. This takes the analysis to the archetypes of Karl Jung. The psychiatrist specified six main archetypes generated by the collective unconscious. They are Anima and Animus (masculine and feminine behavioral representations in female and male personalities accordingly), Sage Old Man and Great Mother, and Shadow (evil) and Self (identity). Self is the archetype Emily Dickinson’s poem evokes. It is usually described as a safe and sacred place where the embryo was before its birth taken metaphorically and literally. In the case discussed this place is the shed, the acres of the Death which totally changes traditional paradigm of thought.

Following the lead the analysis moves to the following stanza where the lines run: “Thine the securest fold; / Too near thou art for seeking thee” The reader now becomes aware of the fact that conventional religious paradigm where the flock seek the God in their faith, in their deeds but as it turns out death is what they all aspire to. Does that mean that the Death equals the God? No, Emily Dickinson is not trying to establish new pantheon, rather she is saying that the God in our view has always had the wrong image and understanding of who has the power, who is the power and the source, and in Dickinson’s terms it is the Death.

All of the poems are taken from the section “Time and Eternity” and present deep reflections upon the nature of our existence as opposed to being. The title of the essay is “Emily Dickinson’s Obsession with Death”. However, obsession should be viewed not in the negative sense as close to becoming a mania but rather as a subject of primary interest and coverage. The poetess openly addresses the questions that every one of us frequently and privately asks: what is there? What awaits me beyond the grave? Is there anything after I die?

Thinking about death does not necessarily mean that one wishes to die and advocates all possible means of passage to another world.

Emily Dickinson works within the literary-philosophical paradigm that presupposes asking such questions and handling them from different perspectives. Three poems chosen for the analysis present three mainly different ways to answer the aforementioned questions. One of them is a deliberate underestimation of death as an all-powerful and inevitable outcome of life. Its functions are narrowed down to bargaining and asking for favors, it cannot impose its point of view anymore. Death is weak; death is subordinate and restricted in its strength by topological limitations. In the second poem it transforms into a margin itself separating two spheres of the total cycle of being – life and afterlife. There are two different kinds of dialogue that involve micro- and macrocosms and death there is a mere margin. Finally, the third poem tinctures death as a liberator whose quiet realm offers tranquility and eternal peace. Moreover, death is also Self and God people believe in. It is the beginning and the end. Death is a totality.

Three different interpretations for what is death are offered by Emily Dickinson; many more are given in her other poems. She does not seem to be aiming at exhausting all the possible interpretations, for according to the romantic worldview, the universe is infinite and so no one is able to know it in its fullest. Her method is visionary; she sees or imagines things and then shares her revelations with the reader.

Annotated Bibliography

Bloom, Harold. *Emily Dickinson*. – Bloom's Modern Critical Views, 2008.

Harold Bloom is a renowned American literature and arts critic. His book is a complete dedication to the authority of Emily Dickinson. The essay discusses one of Bloom's points, and namely discontinued self through the lens of eternity.

Dauben, Miriam. "Emily Dickinson" – The Death Motif in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson. – Publish and Find Knowledge, 2010.

Miriam Dauber is a German scholar deeply interested in work of Emily Dickinson. Dauber's text is available as a seminar paper and focuses on three aspects: general characteristics of death, reason's for Emily Dickinson's interest in death and the relation between time and death. The final part of the paper is of crucial importance because Dickinson demolishes the category of time and applies eternity not only to afterlife but the life itself.

Dietrich, Nina. *Emily Dickinson's Death Poetry*. – Publish and Find Knowledge, 2003.

Nina Dietrich is a British scholar and literary researcher at the University of Kent. Her essay concentrates upon the theme of death in Emily Dickinson's poetry and in the course of her article she singles out three main approaches to treating the theme: denial, acceptance and embracement. These three categories allow variations and discuss personified images of death that intersperse poetess' entire body of work.

Ernst, Katharina. "Death" in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson". – MA: Winter Publishing, 1992.

Katharina Ernst is a German-born American literary researcher whose main focus is Emily Dickinson's creative work. A vast amount of her research is dedicated to the topos of death in her poetry. Death is the only point of reference that justifies an individual's existence and makes it of central importance; it is a background against a person's whole range of

physical and spiritual strivings. Death is also a place where things come in their true appearance and reveal their true essence.

Freedman, Linda. *Emily Dickinson and the Religious Imagination*. – Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Linda Freedman received her PhD for thesis “Emily Dickinson’s Life of Christ” in 2007. The scholar focuses upon the religious component of Dickinson’s poetry. Specifically in the book the notions of absolute and partial, fragmentary are discussed as applied to the poems. Words become incarnated, truths are embodied which falls under the pattern of exegesis and perception modes.

White, Fred D. *Approaching Emily Dickinson: critical currents and crosscurrents*. – Camden House, 2008.

Professor Fred D. White wrote a considerable book on Emily Dickinson in 2008. The chapter that was used for this essay “Scholarship on Archetypal and Philosophical Themes in Dickinson’s Poetry”, for it dwells upon major archetypes found across Dickinson’s work, given special attention to the archetype of the Self. Furthermore, the themes of life and death, existence and being as oppositions with shifted margins.