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報告題名

“First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –”:

Emily Dickinson’s Attitude toward Death

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“First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go – ”: Emily Dickinson’s Attitude toward Death

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Abstract:

Emily Dickinson, an American lyrical poet, who is placed an important position of the nineteenth century literature, the themes of her poetry usually focuses on Life, Nature, and Death which spurs widely discussion in later scholars — especially Death. Death is the most mysterious mystery and the key idea of Emily Dickinson’s poems. As Pamula Bennett writes in the introduction of *Emily Dickinson*: “she twists the strands of Puritan and sentimental concepts of God into a critique of both” (20). Through the theme, we see how she struggles between personal emotion and religion. How does she develop the idea of death, pain, to the imagery of religion, immortality? Her attitude toward death invites us to understand the changes of the silence woman poet’s inner world.

American literature in brief few hundred years has amazingly developed. Many great American literators nowadays are known of world. Their works brighten the literature field. In American female poets, there is a woman who has greatly affected the world and female literature — She is Emily Dickinson. The isolated little woman

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wrote 1776 poems in her whole life but only published seven. After she died, the poems she left were found and then enlighten the modern poetry. Since that, Emily Dickinson has become the milestone of American literature.

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (1830-86), was born in a distinguished family of Amherst, Massachusetts. Her father Edward Dickinson, a leading lawyer, was a strict man; however, she respected and truly loved him. She developed good relationship with her elder brother Austin and younger sister Lavinia. In her whole life, She lived in her father’s house until she died, never married away. She had not taken much formal school education, only reading extensively the books in her family library. In the Connie Ann Kirk’s *Emily Dickinson: A biography*, we read: “She was an excellent student who loved her teachers and learning; she read widely, teaching herself as much if not more, at home as she learned in a formal classroom.” She was the kind of studious person and her hard self-study was the key leading her into the beautiful literature world. Knowledge is power. Driven by the power, she found her destiny – to be a poet.

In her letters to Austin and her cousin Luise Norcross, we find Emily knew what she wanted in early. She mentioned continuously the joy of creation and revealed her determination to become a poet. In 1862, she sent some of her poem to Thomas Wetworth Higginson, a famous literary critic of the time, asking about his opinions. Unfortunately, he did not appreciate poems: “[her works] with some fracture of grammar and dictionary on the way. Often, too, she was obscure, and sometimes inscrutable...” he criticized, and thus discouraged her from publishing her poems. Since then, Emily only wrote poems in private. She withdrew back her inside world, staying away from crowd, and seeing only familiar people. From 1863 on, she seldom visited people and began to wear white clothes. When she was sick, she would not

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even allow a doctor to enter her room. The thing she only left was her numerous “finished, unfinished, fragmentary” works.

Although Emily frames her own social life, her poetry was not. In her isolation, she doesn’t worry about there are no subjects to write, intending, just like William Blake’s famous words in “Auguries of Innocence”: “To see a World in a Grain of Sand, / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower “ She explores her own tiny world, re-discovers the beauty of Nature, re-thinks about the value of human existence, and re-asks the everlasting human question of life and death. By close observation, she describes realistically in details the things in her daily life with a kind of strong emotion. She writes: “A Bird came down the Walk – / He did not know I saw – / He bit an Angleworm in halves / And ate the fellow, raw” (#328). In a few simple lines, she brings a vivid picture to readers, as if the bird were jumping just in front of us. Ignoring syntax and grammar, Emily uses a lot of dashes, chasms, and broken sentences to give her poems a sense of anti-convention which makes the traditional critics such as Higginson feel uncomfortable. “. . . if in Emily Dickinson’s work there is frequently no rhyme where rhyme should be, a subtle something, welcome and satisfying, takes its place.” as Todd indicated, fully and clearly explains Emily Dickinson’s situation in that time. Emily’s innovative “compression of imagery”, “undefinite”, “half-rhyme”, “ellipsis”, “disjunction”, and “syntactical doubling” shock these pedants. They are afraid of the little woman because she shows them the uncertainty and opportunity of poetry.

In the Emily great works which influence people the most are the poems talking about death. Death is always a big mystery and eternal question in her life which readers and scholars also want to find out. “She seems to have thought of it constantly – she died all her life, she probed death daily” said by Conrad Aiken,

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Henry Wells has said: “Death became for Emily the supreme touchstone for life”, and as Genevieve Taggard has said that “she saw Death’s value. He should be her focus; not her woe” Many critics agree that “To Emily, death ceases to be a mere theme or problem and becomes the key to art, to beauty, and to life Death becomes for Emily the mountain of vision Since for Emily, at least, death is symbol of reality, it becomes not the bitter dead-end of the grave – though on one level it remains that – but the gateway to reality and hence to life, joy, and ecstasy” (qtd. In Cooney 242). Why does Emily Dickinson meditate on “death” so much? On many occasions she reveals that writing poetry can relieve her of deep sorrow and fear. “I had a terror since September, I could tell to none; and so I sing, as the boy does of the burying ground, because I am afraid.” She wrote on the second letter to Higginson. On the third letter, she wrote: “...the verses just relieve.” She writes so much about death because she was afraid of it. She has been stricken by it several times. First, it takes away from her a sincere friend, B. F. Newton, one of her father’s employees. He initiates her poetic creativity. There have been rumors that Emily fancied about the gentleman. But one thing we are sure is that he indeed has played an important role in her life and thought. Nevertheless, he died. Those who are influential to her are mostly deprived by death — one by one — first her close friends, then her brother, then her father. Death inflicts indelible wounds on her mind. She persists in writing about death to figure out its meaning.

Emily can not walk out of the shadow of death through the religious comfort. She used to have strong belief in Calvinism. But after several deaths of beloved ones, she could accept no longer Puritan doctrines “election” and “grace.” The following little poem expresses her dissatisfaction with the strict God of Puritanism:

God is indeed a jealous God –

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He cannot bear to see
That we had rather not with Him
But with each other play. (#1719)

Emily is the only one who refuses to adopt Calvinism, while all the others of her family are pure Calvinists. In this traditional Puritan community, she must be under great pressure. still she insists. She cannot submit herself to God, when she questions Him; she accused God of being unfair because He deprives her of the ones she loved:

I never lost as much but twice,
And that was in the sod.
Twice have I stood a beggar
Before the door of God!

Angels – twice descending
Reimbursed my store –
Burglar! Banker – Father!

I am poor once more! (#49)

God takes away her beloveds without explanations. Puritans believe that God has His reasons, which humans couldn’t understand. Emily refuses the idea that what she can only do is obedience, and that the dead may not be able to go to heaven due to their pre-destiny. She is angry and sad. To “Death,” she has complex but can not find relief in religion. Again and again, her religious doubts are reflected in her poems. Does God really exist? Is her faith merely a self-delusion? She would not follow blindly enthusiastic religious fervor of the time. She concludes:

“Faith” is a fine invention
When Gentlemen can see

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But Microscopes are prudent

In an Emergency. (#185)

Obviously, Emily feels disappointed with religion. Frustrated, Emily is inclined to accept Deism, like her favorite philosopher Emerson. Death is a part of Nature and a kind of existential extinction. When people die, they are just gone. There is no eternity, nor life- to come. She bitterly sneers at the people who are waiting patiently for the promised rebirth, which actually will never come. She compares death to a long sleep:

A long – long Sleep – A famous – sleep –

That makes no show for Morn –

By Stretch of Limb – or stir of Lid –

An independent One –

Was ever idleness like This?

Upon a Bank of Stone

To bask the Centuries away –

Nor one look up – for Noon? (#654)

Death is conventionally associated with sleep. Jesus Christ is “asleep,” and he will recover. Ironically, death is not a sleep. The dead will not wake up one day. She sees them falling into “sleep,” one by one, but they never wake up. She sees grass climbing up to their beds, sees worms take home in their bones; sees and waits, but no one finally gets up. God is absent during their sleep; his revivification of them is like a big joke. Death is in fact not a sleep. There is only one universal rule: you live, and you die in the end. Nothing more, nothing less.

Furthermore, Emily treats death in terms of physiology. She tries to explain death by the senses. Pain, a natural human feeling, and she connects it with death.

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No more beautiful lies, she tells us the truth:

I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it’s true –
Men do not shame 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. (#241)

In this poem, there are not any signs about religion. She straight-forwardly describes death as a painful physical dissolution, nothing spiritual about soul at all.

Next, she describes death in more concrete imaginary:

I felt a Funeral, in My Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading – treading – till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through –

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum –
Kept beating – beating – till I thought
My mind was going numb –

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul

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With those same Boots of Lead, again,
The space – began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell
And being but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here –

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down –
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing – then – (#280)

The first stanza tells readers how the speaker “feels” that death is a funeral in her mind and how the senses leave her. In the second stanza, readers “hear” concretely the process of death. All of these show that Emily is considering the meaning of death to be a person who loses gradually the functioning senses. Finally her reason is gone, and she has no idea what the world is going to be after death, because she cannot feel any more. Emily tells readers that she thinks death as the loss of consciousness, and she questions whether God and the world-after-death exist or not. She reveals her confusion: What will continue after the mortal body dies?

After treating death in terms of the senses (body), Emily defines death more clearly epitome in the primary stage in another poem “After great pain, a formal feeling comes”. It gives an epitome of Emily’s philosophy of death:

After great pain a formal feeling comes –
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –

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The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
A Wooden way
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –

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The simple simile of “Freezing persons” completely illustrates the image of death. The whole poem reveals what Emily has always wanted to reject and deny – religion. No matter how hard Emily tries to get rid of religious influence, she knows that very well God’s every word have imprinted on her mind. This poem also shows her religious complex: she cannot solve the problem of death, which is universal and perpetual. Her problem is also the problem of all Christians in the world. We cannot stop believing and doubting. Resulted from the religious doubt Emily’s attitude toward death is constantly changing, or to be precise, is evolving. In other poems, “He” appears more and more powerful. In this poem, “He” means Jesus Christ, the symbol of sacrifice. This time Emily associates death with a different religious idea. The speaker here is no longer the speaker before who says “Then—” to express the unconsciousness after death. This time the speaker says “Letting go—,” implying that

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the speaker commits her soul to God’s care. To the speaker, death is not a conscious journey, but rather a kind of release from human body. Like what is said in the Bible: “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith” (Timothy 4:7), here the speaker unveils her religious aspect of death. In the three poems that are rich in religious atmosphere, death has a new meaning, that is, death is merely just a process. You have to let go and then you can reach the next stage.

Immortality has been the sweetest promise to all Christians, which is fully expressed in her most famous poem:

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain
We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He pass Us –
The Dews drew quivering and chill –

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For on Gossamer, my Gown –

My Tippet – only tulle –

We paused before a House that seemed

A Swelling of the Ground –

The Roof was scarcely visible –

The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – ‘tis Centuries – and yet

Feels shorter than the Day

I first surmised the Horses’ Heads

Were toward Eternity – (#712)

This poem uses strong words, such as “Immortality,” “Centuries,” and “Eternity.” Most critics agree that the death imagery here is essentially a journey of human life, or even toward the marriage altar. If death is seen as a journey, the speaker is sitting in a carriage driven by Death. Death in this poem is personified as a gentleman who comes to take the speaker out for date. On the journey they review scenes of her life, and then she is led to immortality. The speaker then realizes that she is dead already, but she is not scared, because Death is depicted as a kindly, thoughtful, gentleman. He is a guide who leads the speaker on her way to God. So the speaker takes her journey in peace because she knows God’s hands are taking care of her. Emily points out death that is just a process to eternity, not destruction. On the other hand, taking the poem as a marriage ritual, we see the speaker thinking of herself as a bride who is on her way to the sacred altar. Death is the driver taking her to her groom. The highly suggestive religious words make it hard to find out that her groom is actually the Almighty God.

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The speaker puts away her routines for the sake of God, because she does not need those secular things any more. Passing through the earthly life, the bride is baptized at the end of this journey. And in the eternal world she marries the Almighty God to become a part of the holy trinity.

From poem to poem, Emily questions about death and immortality. The death imagery changes in the different stages of her mental journey, typical of the religious doubts of all Christians. Many readers have pointed out that her poetic nature forces her to question her religion. Although she can’t give us an answer, but just like she says in the poem below:

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all.

And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.

I’ve heard it in the chilliest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me. (#254)

In her whole life, Death has bothered her, as religion which brings her great pain and relief. But her poetic nature desires to understand and discover. Finally, she finds out

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some question never have answer. The only thing we can do is “having kept the faith”: keeping the hope. Wait and see the last moment of all human being. Or maybe the changes in her attitude toward death actually indicate the meditation on her own death in the later years of her life? We don’t know. The one could tell us has walked into her immortal journey and kept silence.



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