

The Theme of Death in Emily Dickinson and Percy Shelley's Works

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Abstract

In literature, the subject of death does not appear in a single form; instead, it is depicted in various ways across different genres and cultures. Death can be portrayed as a key, symbolizing the opening of multiple doors behind which its different interpretations can be found. Regarding the human experience, death can have a psychological impact on life, either through thoughts about its inevitability, such as fear and anxiety, or by prompting reflections on life's meaning. Throughout history, authors' different interpretations of death have created entirely new worlds. Among those who explored this theme, Emily Dickinson and Percy Shelley stand out as particularly significant. While both showed interest in the subject, with notable exploration especially in their poetry, their views and approaches differed. This paper aims to demonstrate how their perspectives offer distinct representations of the theme of death. Two poems from each author will be analyzed as primary examples to better understand their visions of death and how these are expressed in their work.

Keywords: death, inevitability, decline, power, afterlife

Introduction

The field of literary research presents itself as a vast world, which offers multiple approaches. It could begin with studying the author's works, progress to literary criticism, and conclude with exploring new teaching methodologies for literature, using tools such as digital resources or narrative laboratories. The theme of death found its roots in this field, with multiple interpretations from different authors. As for this research, it began with documentation on the theme of death, leading to the discovery of two authors who conducted similar studies, although their respective points of view differ. To provide a more specific frame on this aspect, an analysis of two poems will be taken into account to understand the origin of the author's points of view.

1. Emily Dickinson's writing and the theme of death

Emily Dickinson is considered one of the leading 19th-century American poets, yet it was only well into the 20th century that other leading writers,

including Allen Tate, Elizabeth Bishop, and Hart Crane, registered her greatness. Only ten of her nearly 1800 poems are known to have been published in her lifetime. Devoted to private pursuits, she sent hundreds of her poems to friends and correspondents while apparently keeping the greater number to herself. She was dedicated to the employment of verse forms. Her unusual off-rhymes have been seen as both experimental and influenced by the 18th-century hymnist Isaac Watts. Her writing was innovative, as she freely ignored the usual rules of versification and even grammar; regarding the intellectual content of her works, she proved to be exceptionally bold and original. Her verse is distinguished by its epigrammatic compression, haunting personal voice, and enigmatic brilliance. For modern readers and scholars, Dickinson's poems are engaging and lyrical, but, on a deeper level, they are regarded as incomprehensible. The natural employment of verbs and connecting words is dropped by the author, whose metrical mastery of the language results in words and sentences that resemble more melodies than speeches. The complexities of Dickinson's poems reflect the nature of the emotions and feelings that were the subjects of her life's works, such as romantic love, unconditional compassion, and empathy.

Among the themes developed in her works, particular importance can be attributed to death, which left its impact on all her thinking and gave its tint to the majority of her poems. As for Emily Dickinson's own definition of death, she depicted it as an incessant presence in her life, being always conscious of its nearness and inevitability. Dealing with the subject of death allowed her to gain more profound knowledge on themes as religion, love, nature, and immortality. The theme of death is a constant in her writings, as evidenced by the more than five hundred poems written on the subject. In all these poems, death is depicted in different ways: it is represented as a king, a lover, a murderer, a frost, a coachman, and many other examples.

1.1. Because I could not stop for Death

Because I could not stop for Death is a lyrical poem by Emily Dickinson first published posthumously, in 1890, in *Poems: Series N 1*, a collection of Dickinson's poems assembled and edited by her friends Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Initially, the poem was published with another title, *The Chariot*. Dickinson's work was never authorized to be published; consequently, it is unknown whether *Because I could not stop for Death* was completed or abandoned by the author. According to Thomas H. Johnson's variorum edition of 1955, the number of this poem is "712". This poem was a huge success, so it was set to music by Aaron Copland as the twelfth song of his song cycle, *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*.

Because I could not stop for Death

Because I could not stop for Death – He kindly stopped for me – The Carriage held but just Ourselves – And Immortality.	Or rather – He passed us – The Dews drew quivering and chill – For only Gossamer, my Gown – My Tippet – only Tulle –
We slowly drove – He knew no haste And I had put away My labor and my leisure too, For His Civility –	We paused before a House that seemed A Swelling of the Ground – The Roof was scarcely visible – The Cornice-in the Ground –
We passed the School, where Children strove At Recess- in the Ring – We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain – We passed the Setting Sun –	Since then- 'tis Centuries – and yet Feels shorter than the Day I first surmised the Horses' Heads Were toward Eternity –

Because I could not stop for Death represents one of Emily Dickinson's attempts to delve into the theme of death in her poetry. It is one of her most celebrated poems. The main character, identified as a female speaker, tells the reader about a special meeting with Death itself. This latter is personified as a "kindly" gentleman, who takes her for a ride in his carriage. This ride appears to take the woman into different stages of life, before coming to what seems her own grave. The poem has two different levels of reading, as it can be interpreted both as the anticipation of a heavenly Christian afterlife or as something bleaker and more down-to-earth. Much of this poem's power comes from its refusal to answer life's most significant question: what happens when people die?

Regarding the form, the poem is written in what it is called "common meter", a poetic form defined by alternating four-beat and three-beat lines. The use of this particular metrical form places the poem within a religious context, as this standard meter is often found in church hymns. Consequently, the consideration of Death seems explicitly based on the question of the presence of a Christian afterlife. The lines are assembled into quatrains (four-line stanzas) with a loose ABAB rhyme scheme. This structure contributes to creating a lyrical flow, fitting the idea of a journey and making the poem's exploration of Death more approachable. Like Dickinson's poem, "*I heard a Fly buzz – when I died,*" the poem's opening statement seems to come from the woman's past, before the main events unfold. In the final stanza, the poem seems to reach the woman's present state, in which she appears to speak from beyond her own grave, thus taking the reader into an atmosphere of uncertainty and mystery.

James Reeves shared his opinion on this poem:

This is one of the best of those poems in which Emily Dickinson triumphs over Death by calmly accepting, civilly, as befits a gentlewoman receiving the attentions of a gentleman. It is an essay in death-in-life.

Figures of speech are seen as tools employed by the writer to make the language of the work stylish and persuasive. Among the literary devices used by Dickinson in this poem are personification, antithesis, metaphor, simile, anaphora, synecdoche, and alliteration.

In verse 2, there is a first instance of personification, as the poem states *He kindly stopped for me*. Death is personified as a kind gentleman who kindly stopped the carriage so that the woman could climb in. In verse 4, there is a second instance of personification, with *Immortality*: although it is not clear if this figure stands for a kind of chaperone or an abstract figure, its presence is ambiguous: it could support the Christian idea of the afterlife, or it could be ironic, hinting at the permanent nothingness that awaits in death. Finally, in verse 13, Emily Dickinson personifies the Sun by giving it a human quality: "He passed us."

As for the use of antithesis in this poem, Emily Dickinson provides an example in verses 21-22: *Since then- 'tis Centuries-and yet Feels shorter than the Day*. Though she has been in her own grave for centuries, this amount of time was perceived as less than a day. The author wants to demonstrate how, after death, as a person enters into the realm of eternity, the notion of time is completely lost.

An instance of metaphor can be found in the first stanza, with *The Carriage* driven by Death. It is not literally a carriage, but rather can be considered as a metaphor for life's journey towards the final destination, which is Death. Another example is provided in verses 17-18: *We paused before a House that seemed A Swelling of the Ground*. Through the use of metaphor, the house is depicted as a grave, the woman's permanent residence from now on.

An instance of a simile can be found in the previous verse, where the house they stopped at seemed like a swelling of the Ground, meaning a house that resembles swollen ground, such as a mound, more specifically, a burial mound.

Anaphora's examples can be found in verses 9-12: *We passed the School, where Children strove, We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain, We passed the Setting Sun*. Anaphora consists of the repetition of the first part of the sentence to achieve an artistic effect in writing.

In the final stanza, specifically, in the last two verses, Emily Dickinson portrayed an instance of another figure of speech, identified as synecdoche: *I first surmised the Horses' Heads Were toward Eternity*. In synecdoche, a part of something represents the whole, or a whole can represent a part. In this case, *Horses' Heads* does not refer to the actual heads; instead, it refers to the horses

that are moving toward Eternity. Thus, the Head is a single part that refers to the body, which is a whole.

The last figure of speech is represented by alliteration, the repetition of consonant sounds in the same word or words. In this poem there are many references to the use of alliteration: in stanza two with *He, haste, labor, leisure*; in stanza three with *School, strove, Recess, Ring, Gazing, Grain, Setting, Sun*; in stanza four with *Dew, drew, Gossamer, Gown, Tippet, Tulle*; finally, in stanza six with *Horses, Heads, Since, Centuries*.

Emily Dickinson employed many symbols in this poem, starting with the Carriage, which symbolizes the journey from life to death. The woman admits that she was never going to stop for Death on her own; he had to come to her. The carriage is a kind of vessel for the woman, mirroring her body, which can be considered as the carriage for her soul. Just as the woman must eventually disembark from the carriage in order to enter her future house, so must her soul depart from her body.

In addition to that, the carriage's wheels, though never explicitly mentioned, summoned the idea of circularity: their circular shape embodies life and death's coexistence in a circle. The *Ring of Children* hints at this circularity, as if the wheels on the carriage and the features of the landscape are mirroring each other.

The presence of the Sun is essential, as it symbolizes the end of life. The woman's sun is setting, as she is leaving her earthly existence in order to enter in another world, surely depicted as obscure, a place where it is always night.

Another symbol is identified in *The Fields of Gazing Grain*. The grain symbolizes adulthood and maturity. During the journey, the woman passes by the school, a symbol of childhood, and sees the field, a symbolic image of growth. There is an unusual employment of Gazing, as grain is not usually described in these terms. This seems to relate to the strangeness of the woman's perspective: just as the sun passed her, the grain appears to return her searching look. The mystery she perceives in the outside world reflects upon her, reinforcing the poem's general atmosphere of ambiguity.

Finally, it may be stated that *Because I could not stop for Death* is an exploration of both the inevitability of death and the general uncertainty that surrounds what happens after death. In addition to exploring the mysteries of death, this poem reflects on the nature of life, depicting it as a journey from birth to death. In the final stanza, the reader sees the woman's plausible grave, perceiving that the reality of death has arrived. However, on the one hand, the reader knows that the woman's life has come to an end; on the other hand, the poem is charged with the knowledge that the world will carry on as it has done before. Subtly, the poem suggests an interdependence between life and death, forever united in this intrigued and perplexed relationship. Emily Dickinson

manages to put into images the complexity of these thoughts, intentionally leaving the reader with questions unresolved.

2. Percy Shelley's writing and the theme of death

Considered one of the major English Romantic poets, Percy Bysshe Shelley was one of the many authors who could not see fame and recognition in his lifetime. After his death, he gained recognition for his social views and radical poetry. He later became an essential member of a close circle of visionary writers and poets that included John Keats, Leigh Hunt, Lord Byron, and Thomas Love Peacock. Shelley's contributions to literature and his impact on subsequent generations of poets cannot be overstated. His poetry encapsulates the spirit of Romanticism, imbuing his verses with rebellion, hope, and a profound belief in the transformative power of the imagination.

Percy Shelley frequently explored the theme of death, both in his poetry and prose. Death was viewed as a transition, a release, or as a part of a larger cycle of nature, rather than a complete annihilation.

2.1. Ozymandias

Ozymandias is a sonnet written by Percy Shelley, first published in *The Examiner of London* in 1818. It was included, the following year, in Shelley's collection *Rosalind and Helen, A Modern Eclogue; with Other Poems*, and in a posthumous compilation of his poems, published in 1826. This poem is considered one of Shelley's best works, and it is included in many poetry anthologies.

Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land,
 Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
 Stand in the desert...Near them, on the sand,
 Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
 The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
 And on the pedestal, these words appear:
 My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
 Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
 Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
 The lone and level sands stretch far away".

Ozymandias describes the ruins of an ancient king's statue in a foreign desert. All that remains of the statue are *Two vast and trunkless legs of stone* standing

upright and a head half-buried in the sand, along with an inscription describing the ruler as *the king of kings*. This inscription stands in ironic contrast to the statue's decrepit state, underscoring the ultimate transience of political power. The sonnet implicitly critiques such power by suggesting that both great rulers and their kingdoms will fall into the sands of time.

Regarding the structure of the poem, it is a sonnet that combines elements of both Petrarchan and Shakespearean forms to create a unique structure. It is a 14-line poem written in iambic pentameter. While loosely following a Shakespearean rhyme scheme (ABAB CDCD), in this poem, Shelley introduces variations, particularly in the final lines, which contribute to the poem's overall sense of fragmentation and decay.

As for the title, Ozymandias is the name of the Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses II, an influential and crucial figure, considered one of the greatest in the history of ancient Egypt.

This poem shows the reader the pharaoh's statue and the desolation, the utter nothingness that surrounds it, as both the supposed greatness of the statue and the man after whom the statue was sculpted have fallen away. The power that Ozymandias once possessed had been reduced to nothing, due to the endless march of the sands of time. By alluding to an actual ancient empire and a true king, the author aims to make the reader aware that History is full of the rises and falls of empires; no power is permanent, and even the King of Kings may one day become a forgotten relic of an *antique land*.

The entire sonnet is devoted to a single metaphor: the shattered, ruined statue in the desert wasteland, symbolizing the fallen and destroyed dream of the powerful and ambitious ruler. It also shows that the sand has eroded the actual shape of the statue, representing the destructive power of time.

Finally, it may be stated that the sonnet *Ozymandias* prominently features the theme of death, portraying it not as a literal event, but as a metaphor for the ultimate decay and insignificance of human power.

Conclusions

After having pictured an accurate frame regarding the theme of death in Emily Dickinson and Percy Shelley's works, a conclusion may be drawn. Although both authors explore the theme of death in their poetry, they use distinct approaches. Among the similarities, the first is represented by mortality and the end of power, as both "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" and "Ozymandias" grapple with the idea that all human beings (and their respective ambitions) are subjected to the passage of time and decay. In addition to that, both poems emphasize death's inevitability and the loss. Another point in common is the focus on the decline, as both poems depict a decline, whether it is the woman's journey towards death in Emily Dickinson's case or

Ozymandias's crumbling statue in Percy Shelley's case. As for the passage of time, both poems emphasize its relentless nature and its power to erode even the most enduring monuments, whether physical or symbolic. A vital contrast can be found, specifically between human endeavour and nature: both poems contrast human achievements (the carriage ride in *Because I could not stop for Death*, the crumbling statue in *Ozymandias*) with the power of nature and time, which ultimately prevail.

Among the differences between the two poems, the first is in tone: in "Because I could not stop for Death," Emily Dickinson uses a contemplative and reflective tone to depict a woman's journey, portraying death as a natural and even welcoming part of life. On the other hand, in *Ozymandias*, Percy Shelley tells the story with a more elegiac and ironic tone, emphasizing the folly of human pride and the destructive power of time. Both authors use personification in their poems, with different meanings: In "Because I could not stop for Death," Death is personified as a character. In contrast, "Ozymandias" uses the personification of the statue and its inscription to convey the central theme. As for perspective, "Because I could not stop for Death" is narrated from the first-person perspective of the deceased. In contrast, "Ozymandias" is narrated from a third-person perspective, describing the ruins of the statue. Regarding the setting, in "Because I could not stop for Death," Emily Dickinson uses a symbolic carriage ride through life and eternity, while in "Ozymandias," Percy Shelley portrays a desolate desert landscape in order to emphasize the ruin of a once-mighty king. Finally, both poems depict a central theme: in *Because I could not stop for Death* Emily Dickinson focuses on the inevitability of death, it's a personal meditation on death and the plausible existence of an afterlife, in which death is presented as a natural transition, depicted as a welcoming presence, rather than a terrifying end. On the other hand, in *Ozymandias*, Percy Shelley portrays a more public reflection on the rise and fall of empires, showing that even the most famous and powerful figures may eventually fade from human being's memory, their legacies may end up being reduced to ruins and fragments.

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