



# The Familiar Stranger: Reimagining Death in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

Dr Vandana Singh

Professor in English, SPC Government College, Ajmer, Rajasthan, India

Received: 20 Jul 2025; Received in revised form: 14 Aug 2025; Accepted: 18 Aug 2025; Available online: 21 Aug 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Abstract**— This paper embarks on an exploration of the nuanced and evolving representations of death within 19<sup>th</sup> century American poetry with special focus on Emily Dickinson's poetry. The paper will incorporate historical contextualization shedding light on the broader socio-cultural landscape that influenced poetic expressions of death. Poetry is greatly influenced by the cultural and social background of the poet as well as his personal experiences. Dickinson lived a life of seclusion, where she rarely had face to face encounter with friends or acquaintances, as she preferred communicating through letters. Her seclusive lifestyle gave her ample time and space to reflect on various aspects of life. Dickinson's spiritual background is reflected in her religious beliefs, which forms the basis of her fascination with the theme of death. She lived incessantly in its presence and was always conscious of its nearness and inevitability. She uses concrete images to portray death and gives it human and nonhuman attributes as part of her quest to comprehend it. The present study aims to elucidate how Dickinson's portrayal of death diverges or aligns with the work of her peers.



**Keywords**— Life, Seclusion, Images, Life after death, Immortality, Transcendentalism

The exploration of death in poetry delves into profound philosophical and psychological dimensions, offering poets a canvas on which to examine the nature of existence, the human psyche and mysteries of mortality. Poetry serves as a vehicle for contemplating the philosophical nature of existence in the face of death. Poets throughout history have pondered over the transient nature of human experience and have used death as a thematic lens to explore profound existential questions and to dig into the complexities of the human condition. The portrayal of death in poetry goes beyond a mere exploration of mortality; it becomes a means to reflect on universal experiences, identity and meaning of life. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Death was a recurrent theme, and various motifs and symbols were used to explore and represent the complexities of mortality. These motifs and symbols were used by the American poets to engage with the profound and universal theme of death. They serve as a gateway to understanding cultural attitudes, individual philosophies, and provides the readers with a rich tapestry

of images and metaphors to contemplate the mysteries of life's end.

The Civil War and World war I are the two major historical events during the mid-nineteenth century. Because of the two significant events occurring around the world, people were following the events of the two wars very closely and were engaged in writing about them. Despite the fact, that this was a difficult time for the poets Emily Dickinson managed to connect with her audience. Dickinson, an enigmatic figure in American literature, often used death as a lens to explore existential questions. Her poetry has a subtle and sharp stabbing quality which disturbs and overthrows the spiritual ease of the reader. She crafted a new expression to free it from the constraints and experimented with a new type of persona for the first person. She created in her writing a distinctively elliptical language for expressing what was possible but not yet realized. Dickinson did not write to gratify the aesthetic sense of the reader, poetry for her was the expression of vital meanings, the transfer of passionate feeling and deep conviction. The

quality of her work is profoundly stirring, because it betrays, not the intellectual pioneer, but the acutely observant woman, whose capacity for feeling was profound. The experiences of the world of souls, was her special study, to which she brought a keen sensitiveness to irony and paradox.

Dickinson is one of the reclusive poets of American Literature and her poems seem to be the outcome of her personal experiences. She had witnessed the American civil war and was particularly affected by the death of her friend Sophia Holland in the civil war. This tragedy so early in her life not only affected her psychologically but also influenced her to draw different notions towards death. The disturbing events she witnessed in her youth are portrayed in most of the poems with theme of death. Her obsession with death can be justified by the loss of few close friends and dear ones in the early stages of life. These events pushed her into alienation from the world and she spent rest of her life being closed in the room writing letters and poetry. Death always haunted Dickinson throughout her life and she always tried to overcome it.

The secret of Emily Dickinson's poetic power is her intensity of spiritual experience. Her writings are the record of a soul endowed with unceasing activity in a world that is not material, but one with concrete facts. She was always alert and inquisitive to inner truths of life and isolated herself from the petty demands of social amenity. Poetry for Dickinson had a special definition. She had written to Thomas W Higginson that "If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?" (Johnson, 472-474)

Emily Dickinson was aware that many poets have made death as the central theme in much of their poetry, Thomas H. Johnson argues that "Emily Dickinson did so in hers to an unusual degree" (203) Death is a prevalent theme in her poetry. Critics of Emily Dickinson have observed the prominence of the theme of death in her poetry. George Frisbie Whicher, for example, states that Dickinson "recurred to it more frequently than to any other" (298). Emily Dickinson's unique treatment of death is remarkable in the history of American literature. She uses concrete images to portray death, which is an abstract force and gives it human and nonhuman attributes to find and comprehend her final view on death because death for her remains the great unknown mystery... Despite her relatively short span of life Dickinson shows a deep understanding of the spiritual values and religious beliefs. George and Barbara Perkins write that Dickinson is "incomparable because her

originality sets her apart from all others, but her poems shed the unmistakable light of greatness." (972)

Death is not an ordinary theme of Dickinson's poetry, it occupied her lifelong attention and has been mentioned frequently in her poems together with frustration, suffering, pain, sorrow and loneliness. Critics have pointed out that nearly one third of her poetry is concerned with the theme of death. This theme starts early in her poetry and persists late with her. The tone of the poems varied from elegiac despair to exalt and confident belief, to surrender before an unsolvable mystery. The thought of death was her constant preoccupation. As early as 1852 she wrote to Jane Humphrey- "...I think of the grave very often, and how much it has got of mine, and whether I can ever stop it from carrying off what I love; that makes me sometimes speak of it when I don't intend." In a letter to T. W. Higginson in 1863, she referred to her early awareness of death: "Perhaps Death gave me awe for friends-striking sharp and early, for I had held them since in a brittle love, of more alarm, than peace" (423) one month before her death she had written "There is no Trumpet like the Tomb" (Johnson 904) This preoccupation with death is indicated by her religious beliefs.

Although Dickinson is a religious person who believes in the inevitability of death and afterlife, but she is also a non-conformist as she is skeptical and curious about the nature of death. The most captivating aspect of Dickinson's poetry is her ability to present death in varying forms. She describes the different emotions that death brings on the human mind and soul and gives the readers a different perspective. Death with its horrible uncertainties, doubts about immortality- all these things have produced the sharp and intellectual works of Dickinson. She gives death an ambiguous meaning and gives the audience a choice to have their own interpretations about death. Investigating the theme of death gave Dickinson a panoramic view of the vital issues such as religion, God, Nature love and immortality. Her obsession about death seems to be motivated by the need to understand its nature and was partly influenced by the Christian teachings on life and death. Her notions about God, Eternity, Time, Immortality, seem to be responsible for her growing interest with the theme of death. She accepts death as a physical fact and as a material truth. Although she was not a religious person, but her obsession may be traced to her Puritan surroundings. Her obsession with death was brought about by the curiosity to determine whether the biblical perspective about life and death were true.

In her poems on death, Dickinson closely examines the sensations of dying, the response of onlookers, the struggle of the body, arranging for funeral and church services and

even the thoughts of the dead person. Her fascination for death can be seen in the fact that she even imagined herself dead with mourners walking past her. The death poems deal with an intellectual point of view, where death is like a culmination of human experience. In some of her poems Dickinson has contrasted the expectations of death with its realistic occurrence. In the poem "I Heard a Fly Buzz when I Died" she indicates:

And Breaths were gathering firm-

For that last onset-When King-  
Be Witnessed in the Room ( . )

The King remains an open question- is it God or death itself? Based on her religious background it may be concluded that the King referred in the poem was Jesus Christ, as the Bible indicates that human beings exist in eternal life as souls and Jesus takes the righteous souls to the heaven. But the ending of the poem does not suggest that it is God:

With blue, uncertain stumbling buzz

Between the light and me;

And then the windows failed; and then  
I could not see to see.

Dickinson is sharing the sensation and experience of the soul's departure from the body. The idea is that instead of having a glimpse of heavenly light, the dying person only feels the familiar world around her fading away and slipping. It seems that she is not talking about as a positive moment, but the poem is a satire on the traditional view of death as a peaceful release from life's pressures and glorious entry into immortality. Dickinson had terrible blows with the death of her intimate associates and her parents and young brother. This changed her former approach and realized that death also meant separation.

She narrates the events after death minutely-

I willed my Keepsakes- Signed away

What portion of me be

Assignable- and then it was  
There interposed a Fly-

In the end the poem depicts the dying man's ultimate effort to live on this earth. But he could not as his eyesight fails him, a barrier comes in front of his wish to continue living. This desperation and the ultimate surrender of the being is presented in this poem at its best.

One of the attitudes that Dickinson holds about death is that it is not the end of life. Instead, she believes that death is the beginning of new life in eternity. In the poem "I heard a Fly Buzz when I Died" Dickinson describes a state of existence after her physical death. In that state she can feel *breath gathering firm for the last onset*, implying that she is

still conscious although in a spiritual form. Onset refers to the beginning of something, and in the present case it refers to the beginning of eternal life. In the Christian teachings death brings the revelation and one continues to exist in a new form in heaven. In the poem "Because I could not Stop for Death" the poet describes the grave as a *swelling of the ground*, indicating about death but life continues even after the grave. Years and centuries after her burial, the poet still exists indicating that death is not the end of life.

One of the factors contributing to Dickinson's obsession with death was her isolation from society. Dickinson's concept of death as inevitable and something to be embraced finds best expression in the poem "Because I Could not Stop for Death," the speaker describes death as a life companion, who is with her throughout her life. Death is an intangible lover and a quiet intelligent courter whose main features are shyness, agility, cleverness and subtlety. She presents death as overpowering the poet by showing her passing the setting sun instead of sun passing by them. She also indicates that death is inevitable by stating that it was patient enough to wait for her when she was busy carrying her daily routine. Therefore, death is compared to a companion that accompanies everywhere, indicating its inevitability.

In the poem "I heard a Fly Buzz when I Died" Dickinson describes her helplessness in the face of death where the fly interposed between her and the light, in this case life. She uses fly as a symbol to indicate the process that the body undergoes when one dies. Death is described as the beginning of eternal life by Dickinson, and it indicates the process of putrefaction that occurs when one dies. (Yan, 2010) She explains that the room gets still when one dies, indicating that she is can still feel her surroundings. The speaker in the poem communicates beyond the grave, indicating that there is life after Th. death. In the beginning the speaker explains that she hears the buzz after she dies but can provide an account of the events that take place after it.

Emily Dickinson is known for brevity, using concise language to convey profound ideas. The poems succinctness forces readers to engage with each word carefully, extracting the meanings from seemingly simple phrases. The poem "Because I could not stop for Death" contributes significantly to the poem's meaning. The compact language, use of dashes and unconventional punctuations, enhance the thematic depth of the poems. This poem invites the readers to engage with the complexities of mortality and the journey toward the afterlife. The inherent tension in Dickinson's poem becomes apparent from its inception. Her portrayal of death as a "pleasant" and "benevolent suitor" highlights her

unique way of putting forward the ideas. The poem describes the poet's encounter with death as a personified figure. This entity is compared to a carriage driver stopping to pick up a passenger or a gentlemen suitor approaching a lady. The choice of language underscores the poem's exploration of the dramatic nature of death, where dying equates to fundamental act of "stopping materials".

In essence, Dickinson's heterogeneous portrayal of death supports interpretations that reject conventional views of life as a predetermined path leading to a specific destination, such as Heaven. Instead, Dickinson's vision suggests that Eternity is embedded within time, challenging traditional notions of death and afterlife. In the subsequent stanzas of the poem the departure is portrayed as a pleasant journey, and Death is depicted as perpetual existence throughout eternity, contrasting with the mortality of human beings. The journey commences slowly, with scenery reminiscent of various stages of human life, symbolizing childhood, adulthood, and old age.

In "Because I Could not Stop for Death" the concept of death as something to be embraced finds best expression. Life is portrayed as a momentary point detached from the temporality of eternity. Dickinson in this poem does not seem to be confirming to the conventional ideas of death as her poetic journey continues beyond death challenging the idea that death is the end of existence. The death is not the grave but a mere pause, suggesting futurity and continuity of the journey. She seems to be contradicting further that death implies destruction when she says:

"The Dews drew quivering and Chill – For only Gossamer, my gown – These lines suggest that the chill and dew, often associated with the onset of death, symbolize the light attire worn for a marriage, emphasizing death-as-wedding. She presents it as a joyful new beginning that expands and fulfills the being.

In the subsequent lines she talks about the image of a house that appears to be on the grave

"We paused before a House that seemed

A Swelling of the Ground- The Roof was scarcely visible,  
The cornice but a Ground. (17-20)

The most striking part of this poem is her companion's death-induced 'immortality.' Death transports her to immortality, freeing her from the sufferings of mortality for all the time. Dickinson's portrayal of the grave as a comfortable house suggests a pleasant and safe final resting place, highlighting the new life after death. The marriage with death suggests immortality, challenging the conventional idea that grave is the ultimate place for the human body. The poem literally depicts a person's trip to the final home, that is the grave. However, if we closely

examine, it also connotes an individual's voyage to a spiritual world, in which one destination by resting.

Death, according to Dickinson, is a pathway to eternity or immortality, even in death, her concerns follow her. She has expressed her thoughts on death in number of poems and the images of death in the early poems are not frightening. Most of these images are depicted through the person on the death bed. Death becomes more important to Dickinson in the poems written after 1862, as the themes are intense in nature. Personal losses her own sufferings and the Civil war casualties prompted Dickinson to write lot of death poetry in this year. All these poems convey that death is natural and inevitable part of human life cycle.

Therefore, it can be said that Emily Dickinson's idea of death is neither monolithic nor conventionally morbid- it is deeply nuanced, richly layered, and philosophically profound. Through her unique voice, she transforms death from a fearsome unknown into a subject of introspection, paradox and at times, even quiet acceptance. Whether, portraying death as a courteous suitor in "Because I could not stop for Death-," a moment of cosmic transition in "I heard a Fly Buzz-when I died-"" or a metaphysical threshold in countless others, Dickinson engages with the theme not to provide closure but to open avenues for contemplation. Her treatment of death is marked by ambiguity and contradiction as death is both end and beginning, terror and release. It is this complexity that reflects Dickinson's resistance to religious dogma and her embrace of individual spiritual inquiry.

In an era that often romanticized or feared death, Dickinson dared to explore it with fearless intellectual rigor and emotional clarity. Her vision continues to resonate because it acknowledges our deepest uncertainties, offering a space where readers can encounter their own mortality without prescribed answers. Thus, Dickinson's poetry not only captures the mystery of death but also affirms the enduring power of poetic language to give shape to the knowable.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Franklin R.W., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Harvard University Press, 2006
- [2] Higginson, Thomas Wentworth. "Letter to a Young Contributor" *Atlantic Monthly* IX(April 1862)
- [3] Johnson, Thomas H. and Ward, Theodora (eds.) *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. 3 Vols. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1955.
- [4] Perkins, George, and Barbara Perkins. *The American Tradition in Literature*. Boston: McGraw, 1999. Print
- [5] Whicher, George Frisbie. *This was a Poet*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938.