

THE CONCEPT OF DEATH IN EMILY DICKINSON POEM “BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH”

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Abstract

Throughout the history of human kind, many try to discover the essentials of death. Some perceive it as the end while some believe it as the new beginning. Similarly, some feel frightened to hear the word while others perceived it as a release. In accordance, this study is aimed at explaining the influence of Emily Dickinson's life background in relation with the concept of death found in her poem entitled “Because I Could Not Stop for Death”. Specifically, this study addresses two main points: how does the writer's religious background influence perception of death and how does the writer past experience contribution to her perception of death.

Key Words: Concept of Death, Emily Dickinson, Because I Could Not Stop for Death.

INTRODUCTION

Everyone has their own way to improve their knowledge. Reading is one of the activities to improve knowledge. There are a lot of information that we can get from reading. There are a lot of reading materials, and one of them is literary work such as poem, novel, short story and drama.

The literary works mentioned above are products of creative compositions of an author. Every author that produce a certain literary work has their own reason and a different life background. The author may be a person from high class, middle class or even lower class.

According to Rene Wellek and Austin Warren “the main reason of literary work given birth is the composer himself or herself namely an author. That is why the explanation of personality and the author's life is the oldest and established method in the literary work study”. Furthermore, it is also said that biography explains and clarifies the truth composition process of literary work (Rene Wellek & Austin Warren, 1977:82). This statement clarifies that the life background of an author will influence the literary work that the author composed. The author wants to show to the readers that there is an influence of author's life background on the literary work that they created.

Emily Dickinson is one of the great female poets in America in nineteenth century. She grew up in a well known and educated family. Calvinism, Transcendentalism, and Puritanism influenced the environment where she lived. Even, her family was adhering strictly to one of them called Calvinism. The environment around her absolutely give big impact during her life.

Almost in her whole life she spent it for writing a lot of poems. Most of her poems are about love, nature, and death. One of her poems is “Because I Could Not Stop For Death”. Her poem “Because I Could Not Stop for Death” was inspired and influenced by such aspects mentioned above. She was also inspired on the concept of death from her past experience when she found the person close to her died one by one. Emily Dickinson wrote this poem and drove the readers to realize that death is not frightening just like what in their mind.

Although Emily Dickinson had not experienced death yet at that time, she tried to write down her expression dealing with death through her poem. In accordance, by analyzing Emily's poem the reader will get a message that any feeling and happening at a certain time in

someone's life can influence and inspire the process of one's creative composition. Therefore, this study explains the influence of Emily Dickinson's life background in relation with the concept of death found in her poem entitled "Because I Could Not Stop for Death". Specifically, this study addresses two main points: how does the writer's religious background influence perception of death and how does the writer past experience contribution to her perception of death.

METHOD

According to Hudson, in Frederick's book, he said that to read and understand literature means to know and understand the author's social, cultural, and intellectual background (Juliana, 1988:4). While, Sylvan Barnet and William E. Cam state that the really good biographies enable us to return to the literary texts with a deeper understanding of how they came to be what they are (Sylvan Barnet and William E. Cam, 2003:113).

From the description above, it means that biography also plays a role in a literary work including poetry. Some people who like reading, understanding, analyzing, and interpreting literary works need to know and understand the author's life background if they feel that analyzing a literary work particularly poetry is not enough just by reading and analyzing it. As a result, the biography of the author or the poet becomes one of the sources of the appreciated literary work.

Furthermore, there is a statement of biographical approach according to Christopher Russel Reaske. In his book, he mentions that in biographical approach we examine the poem in relation to what is known about poet's life (Reaske, 1966:54).

Often a particular poem is subject to this kind of analysis simply by nature of the material. Emily Dickinson, as most people know, spent most of her life inside the privacy of her family home in Amherst, Massachusetts. She had a lonely and quiet childhood and life; her years were filled with many hours spent in absolute isolation. This kind of information about the poets' life helps us to understand her poetry.

Our familiarity with Emily Dickinson 's private world and with her lifelong tendency to reflect in poetry the self chosen isolation of her soul, her in most self, enables us to read this poem with a thorough understanding. In other words, biography can often be of great use. But we must not assume that this is always true; if a particular poem seems to have absolutely no personal element behind it, we will not understand it any better knowing the biography of the poet if the poem's statement is very clear, we may not wish to investigate the poet's biography. The hardest decision is deciding when to use and when to avoid the biographical implications (Reaske, 1966:54-55). The references above show that we may use biographical approach or biographical criticism for our deeper understanding of a certain literary work.

There are two definitions of biographical criticism found from different sources, as follows; firstly, a biographical criticism is an approach that begins with the simple but central insight that literature is written by actual people and that an understanding of an author's life can help readers to more thoroughly comprehend the work. Hence, it often affords a practical method by which readers can better understand a text. However, a biographical critic must be careful not to take the biographical facts of a writer's life too far in criticizing the works of that

writer, the biographical critic "focuses on explicating the literary work by using the insight provided by knowledge of the author's life. Biographical data should amplify the meaning of the text, not drawn it out with irrelevant material" (<http://home.olemiss.edu/~egjbp/200/litcrit.html>).

Secondly, biographical criticism is an approach to literature, which suggests that knowledge of the author's life experiences can aid in the understanding of his or her work. While biographical information can sometimes complicate one's interpretation of a work, and some formalist critics (such as the New Critics) neglect the use of the author's biography as a tool for textual interpretation, learning about the life of the author can often enrich a reader's appreciation for that author's work (http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/literature/bedlit/glossary_a.htm).

Concept of death

Eternal does not exist in the dictionary of Human being in this Earth. Humans start their life from baby, kid, teenager, and adult then grow to old age and finally have to face the death. It is certainly natural thing that every human has to face although many of humans have a big desire to avoid it. Death comes to every human being unpredictably and unavoidably, no matter who you are and how old you are. It is useless to be afraid of death. Sad is a natural feeling of human that always comes when the death comes, moreover when the death comes for our close people. Body is a home for soul, but when the time comes, the soul will leave the body behind and it is the end of the life in the earth.

Humans are afraid of death because humans do not know how to be death or have the feeling of death, where humans will go and what things wait for them. Humans describe death as something painful and full of sadness. Because of this humans try to follow and take religion or faith that each of them believes to make them a little bit ready to face the death. Every religion or faith has their own understanding about death. Some believe that death is the end of life, but others believe that there is an afterlife or life after death.

From general description about death above, there are some views of death according to the three religion movements, which are well known during Emily Dickinson's life when she wrote her poems.

Calvinism

Calvinism are religious movement that believes that a life exist after death where the soul will continue to have new experiences. In Calvinist belief most of the souls will be banished to Hell, which is defined as continued separation from God. A few souls will be rewarded after death with an eternal existence in Heaven of communion with God (<http://www.uuofscv.org/injustice-of-universalism.htm>).

Puritanism

According to Henry Warner Bowden, Puritanism was a loosely organized reform movement originating during the English Reformation of the 16th century. The name came from the efforts to purify the Church of England by those who felt that the reformation had not

yet been completed. Eventually, the Puritans went on to attempt purification of the self and society as well. In the 17th century many Puritans immigrated to the New World, where they sought to find a holy Commonwealth in New England. Puritanism remained the dominant cultural force in that area into the 19th century (<http://mb.soft.com/believe/txc/puritani.htm>).

Just like the other religious movements, Puritanism had some beliefs. According to Stannard, the Puritan worldview included the thirteen following beliefs; Puritans regard that the earth is positioned at the center of the universe; the world is infused with design and divine purpose. Then the beliefs that related to the existence of God, they believe that God is omniscient, and the course of every man's life is predestined, God is inscrutable.

The next beliefs are death is inevitable, and it is God's punishment for the original sin of Adam, children are born with and imbued with this original sin, they also mention that evil spirits and evil men occupy the earth, death is a reward, at least at the chosen few and upon death, the soul is released from its earth and bound world.

Then, for the four last beliefs, Stannard mentioned that the millennium is at hand, whether one takes it to mean the apocalyptic Day of Judgment or the thousand years reign of Jesus prior to the Day of Judgment, the most glorious purpose to which a Puritan can espouse is to work to "bring God's Kingdom home", some will receive eternal salvation as a gift bestowed by God, but most face eternal damnation. Hell is a place of unspeakable terrors and it is impossible to know with confidence that you are among the saved. The best you can do is to examine your life constantly and maintain faith in your own goodness and God's. Determination (<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/2003/2/03.02.01.x.html#d>).

In the information of Puritanism presented above, there are some general beliefs of Puritanism. This study will present the only beliefs, which are related to death, such as; Death is inevitable, Death is a reward, and upon death, the soul is released from its earth and bound world.

Transcendentalism

The view of death according to transcendentalist of transcendentalism: On "A Week" an optimistic book in its treatment of Death written by Thoreau, he presents death not as an end but as part of larger natural and universal processes. Death not only results in the reabsorbing of the body into the earth and into nature, but also in the transition of nature and the human soul into the infinity of the universe. The 'seed' imagery throughout the book suggests constant regeneration even as individual lives pass away. The decay of Indian bones provides rich soil in which the food of later men may be grown. Thoreau's discussion of friendship in "Wednesday" ends with the confident assertion that "Friends have no place in the graveyard." A friend who dies will live on in the memories and hearts of those left behind.

The transcendentalists said that death is never to be feared, for at death the soul merely passes to the over soul, but the orthodox tried to get people to feel bad about death and said that death was the wages of sin. One product of Emerson's conviction that we can find God directly in nature was a profound optimism. God is good, and God works through nature. Therefore, even the natural events that seem most tragic pestilence, death, disaster can be explained on a

spiritual level. Death is simply a part of the cycle of life (<http://www.concordma.com/magazine/sep0ct00/transcendentalism.htm>).

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the study focuses on the influence of Emily Dickinson's life background on the concept of death as described in her poem. The discussion alters two points; the first is her religious background and the second is her past experience. Then, the concepts of death described in the poem are analyzed in relation with the concepts of death based on the three religious movements (Calvinism, Puritanism, and Transcendentalism) described in the previous chapter. In addition, the influence or the contribution of the poet's past experience to her poem is also discussed.

Analysis of the Poem

The poem written by Emily Dickinson entitled "Because I could not Stop for Death" contains six stanzas. In every stanza there are four lines. In order to know the concept of death, the analysis of each stanza is presented below:

*(1) The first stanza:
Because I could not stop for Death----
He kindly stopped for me----
The Carriage held but Ourselves
And Immortality.*

In the first stanza, the poem begins with "Because I could not stop for death". The first line also becomes the title of the poem because this poem does not have any title. This line shows to the readers that the speaker or the poet wants to tell about death. The object of the poem is death. Dickinson stated that herself has no ability to stop or to avoid the death's arrival.

The second line "He kindly stopped for me", he refers to death. It means that the speaker personified death as a man, to be exact as a gentleman as it is stated by Fiwel found in one source from internet. The arrival of the kind gentleman is something that is unexpected. The speaker regards the gentleman as really kind so that he is willing to pick up the speaker. It means that the death is very kind to give a reward to the speaker. Next, "The Carriage held but Ourselves" shows that actually, the gentleman asks the speaker to ride a carriage (a vehicle which usually has four wheels pulled by horse or horses for carrying people). The carriage is ridden by the speaker, the death and the immortality as it is in the final line of the first stanza "And Immortality" (immortality means the state of being immortal). This line shows that the carriage will take them into a journey which the speaker does not know where the destination of the journey is. She just knows that the journey will be a new experience for her.

(3) The third stanza:

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring---
We passed the Field of Gazing Grain
We passed the Setting Sun---

In stanza three, it begins with “We passed the School, where Children strove”. This line tells the readers about the stage of life that is childhood. The speaker recalls and wants to tell about her childhood stage, she often tries hard for a long time to obtain or achieve something). Next, “At Recess—in the Ring” means the break between classes at school in the ring, the place to hold competition. She spends her childhood competing for what she wants. The second line “We passed the Field of Gazing Grain”, presents the second stage of the speaker’s life when she grows into youth or maturity. The drive symbolizes her life cycle from birth to death. She progresses from childhood to maturity (the “gazing grain” is ripe).

At the end of this stanza, it is written “We passed the Setting Sun”, the setting sun presents the final stage of life. It is the stage where the time comes to the end of life. The speaker mentions dying implicitly in this line by using the phrase the “setting sun”.

The word “passed” is repeated four times in stanzas three and four. They are “passing” by children and grains, both are the cycles of life. They are “passing” out of time into eternity. The sun passes them as the sun does everyone who is buried. According to Fiwier, symbolically, this stanza presents three stages of life: firstly, childhood, youth or maturity, and the last stage is the dying stage represented by the setting sun. The speaker feels that the journey of life is short.

(4) The fourth stanza:
Or rather --- He passed Us---
The Dews drew quivering and chill---
For only Gossamer, my Gown---
My Tippet--- only Tulle---

In stanza four, line one “Or rather --- He passed Us” the speaker presents and tells the existence of the death (he refers to the death). He passed Us means that the death is the last part of the speaker stage of life. This line is still related to the previous stanza. It is connected with the phrase of “setting sun” (dying/death).

In the second line of stanza four “The Dews drew quivering and chill”. The speaker changes her topics (stage of life) to the new topic. On the way of her journey, she feels that the journey becomes so far and the weather becomes so cool. Her body becomes quivering and chilling by the dews (tiny drops of water that is formed on cool surfaces outdoors when the air is damp, especially at night). (Usually, a death body is cold; it means that the speaker is dying).

Furthermore, in the next line “For only Gossamer, my Gown” lines three and four in this stanza illustrates the reason of her coldness. The speaker is worn in a light Gown, it is Gossamer. Gossamer is any soft light delicate material. ‘My Tippet--- only Tulle”, this line also mentions the reason of the speaker’s coldness.

Besides wearing gossamer, she also wears Tulle (it is a kind of soft fine silk or nylon material like net especially used for veils or dresses) as her Tippet (a long piece of fur worn by

a woman round the neck and shoulders with the end hanging down in front). In the 19th century, when people died they were usually attired with this kind of dresses. Because the speaker does not prepare her journey, she is just dressed such clothes.

From this stanza, the writer can interpret that when death comes, we will bring nothing. In other words we will leave our worldly materials. After death, we are only a soul which has a spiritual quality (For only Gossamer, my Gown---My Tippet--- only Tulle---).

(5) The fifth stanza:

We paused before a house that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground---
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice --- in the Ground---

Stanza five shows that they have arrived in the journey's destination, "We paused before a house that seemed". At the end of the journey the poem's speaker arrived at a new place. The speaker describes the place which looks like a house (represented by the word house). But, the house mentioned is not like a common house.

She furthermore describes the characteristics of the house on the next three lines. The second line "A Swelling of the Ground", the third line "The Roof was scarcely visible", and the last line "The Cornice --- in the Ground". The speaker sees that the house is A Swelling of the Ground, it means that the ground becomes larger around. It has a Roof but it is scarcely visible. If it is a real house, the roof will be clearly visible. But, the speaker says that it is invisible, it means that the roof is underground. Then the last characteristic is that it has a Cornice (an ornamental border, for example; in stone which is round at the top of the outside walls of a building) but it is beneath the Ground.

Based on the descriptions above, the speaker tells the readers about a graveyard as it is described by Iqbal (21120). It means that the speaker or the poet is buried down the earth. A death body will be buried down the earth. The speaker explains that the graveyard becomes the new house where she will spend her time after the journey ends.

In this stanza, she does not mention the existence of the gentleman or the death. It means that she is alone. Nobody accompanies her. As the death comes to people, they have to face it by themselves.

(6) The sixth stanza:

Since then ---'tis Centuries--- and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses Heads
Were toward eternity.

In the final stanza, from the first line until the fourth line, the speaker does not mention about the death or the gentleman as she mentions in the previous stanzas anymore. Line one and two "Since then ---'tis Centuries--- and yet" and "Feels shorter than the Day" means that

after the journey finishes or ends or after death leaves, the speaker feels that the time runs quickly. It is not like when she is still alive in the world.

The next two lines “I first surmised the Horses Heads” and “Were toward eternity”, firstly, when the speaker begins her journey, she does not know where the destination is. She only surmised that she does a common journey. Actually, at the end of her journey she realizes that her journey is toward eternity (endless life after death/ time without end). In this stanza, the speaker has moved into death (toward eternity) where she will stay in a better place far away.

This poem has a mixed tone. It means that Dickinson or the poet changes the tone in each of the stanzas. In the first three stanzas, the tone is joyous and happy. The stanzas mentioned above show that Emily Dickinson feels so happy and pleased with her journey. Then, in the fourth stanza, the tone becomes contemplative; it shows that the poet is confused about her existence in the world. She is still doubtful whether she is still alive or she has already died. Finally, in the last two stanzas, the tone used by Emily Dickinson is a sad tone. The poet perceives the reality and becomes calm when she realizes her destiny that is death.

The Concept of Death found in the Poem

After the poem is analyzed, there are some concepts of death found in the poem. The concepts are as follows; Death is unavoidable and unexpected Death naturally happens to everyone. It is a natural fact of life. Everyone will face death although they still do not want to die. Death cannot be stopped by anyone; although we try hard to stop it. We can do nothing about the fact of death. Because death happens to us we have to prepare ourselves facing death. We must not ignore and deny it; but always remember it as long as we live that someday death will come unexpectedly.

Death is not frightening

Most people in the world are afraid of death, but actually “death” is not to be afraid of. When death comes we do not have to be afraid of it. Death is a natural process. It is mentioned in <http://www.stephenknapp.com> that death is not an enemy; it can be like a friend who is very generous, kind, helpful and gentle to us. Death will deliver us gently through the journey of immortality.

Death is believed to give freedom, joyful, peace and happiness to the dead. So do not be afraid of death. Believe our faith, develop our spiritual quality, never deny the existence of death as long as our life, and believe that God will take care of and protect us. Those are the ways to dispel our fear for death.

Death is not the end of life

Death appears as the start or the beginning of eternity. Stephen Knapp stated that after death, we are going to a bigger and beautiful home (<http://www.biblehelp.org/feardeath.htm>). It means that when we die we are going to a better place far away that is believed to be the place full of joy. It is a bigger and more beautiful place for us than the one on earth.

The process of death will take us to the way where we become closer to attain freedom from this worldly place and from the dictates of the senses, the service of the body, and the impression in the mind. Although we have died, our spirit or our soul remains alive; it can go anywhere, to the material or spiritual world.

Death stops our worldly desires

Whenever death comes to us, there will be a complete and final separation of the soul from our body. Our body will have no soul or spirit anymore. Without it, our body is useless. We cannot do anything in the world after we die. We have to leave our worldly desires. All of our willingness to fulfill our needs such as material and love will end because of death. People in the world have done many things in their life. After they die, there is nothing to do anymore. Whereas, while we are still alive, everything we have accumulated in this life, have to be left behind. All activities, all relationship, all material possessions, even our talents and skills which are temporary in nature are left behind.

Death is the learning process to come closer to what we really are

As it is explained by Stephen Knapp that while we live in this material world, death helps alleviate and release us from our accumulated attachment positions, and superficial desires (<http://www.biblehelp.org/feardeath.htm>). It means that death shows us what is not important, and makes us give up those things which can no longer help, or which keeps us on understanding what we really are. Even though we are here to experience the innumerable aspects of material existence, if we are completely engrossed with the earthly affairs, we will never understand our spiritual identity. Furthermore Stephen Knapp mentioned that thus, death is an assistant, which forces us to come to grip with what is temporary, and to give it up. It is another step in the learning process to come closer to what we really are.

Death is a reward

“Death is a reward” as it is believed by Puritanism and Calvinism means that many people regard death as the most miserable thing in their life. But actually it is not true. If we believe and trust God, we have to feel that when death comes to us it means that God loves us. Our soul is one of the souls which is chosen by God to go to a better and eternal place.

The Influences of Emily Dickinson’s Life

In the previous, the analysis of the poem has been presented. Next, the similarity of the concepts of death found with the general belief of death found in the three religious movements; Calvinism, Puritanism, and Transcendentalism will be analyzed. Besides that, the past experience of Emily. Dickinson which gives contribution to the perception/ concepts of death on her poem will also be discussed.

Influence of Calvinism

As it is mentioned in one source (<http://www.uuofscv.org/injustice-of-universalism.htm>), Calvinism believes that after death, our individual souls continue to have new experiences. This belief is also found in Emily Dickinson’s concepts. She describes death as a journey which

she feels that it will bring her to a new experience. Then finally, her journey's destination is a better place far away.

The second belief of Calvinism is; a few souls will be rewarded after death (<http://www.uuofscv.org/injustice.of.universalism.htm>). This belief is similar to Emily's perception that death gives her pleasure and happiness; it means that when death comes to her, she feels that her soul is rewarded by God as a chosen soul.

Influence of Puritanism

Puritanism believes that death is inevitable and death is a reward (<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/2003/2/03.02.01.x.html#d>). Inevitable means that it is impossible to avoid or it is certain to happen. In Emily Dickinson's poem, the writer also found that there is a concept of death that death can not be avoided or it is unavoidable. She was picked up by death without any preparation. While death is a reward, it has similar concept with Calvinism's concept of death. In Emily's perception, death treats her as an honorable or respected woman; it means that it is a reward for her from God

Influence of Transcendentalism

According to Henry David Thoreau, a greatly famous transcendentalist and a writer, in his book entitled "A Week"; he stated that death is not as an end but as a part of larger natural and universal processes. While Ralph Waldo Emerson, a Transcendentalist and a writer too, he mentioned that death is simply a part of the cycles of life. Both concepts of death above have a similar general view about death that death is a natural fact of life or a stage of our existence in this world.

In Emily Dickinson's poem, the concept that sees death naturally happens to everyone is also found. It is a natural fact of life. She mentions three stages of life; childhood, adulthood or maturity and the last is death (the setting sun). It means that everyone or even every living creature in this world at a certain time will face death. In her poem, it also shows that when she is in the final stage of the journey, she arrives alone in a place which is like a house. There is nobody accompanying her there. Furthermore, transcendentalists said that death is never to be feared (<http://www.concordma.com/magazine/sepoct00/transcendentalism.htm>).

This concept is also found in the poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death". In the first and second stanza of this poem, Emily presents her happiness. She is taken away in the carriage and death takes her into a journey. The death gives her happiness and joy and not misery/sadness. This poem tells the readers that death is not frightening just like what they imagine it. But the other way around, she wants to show the joyful moment of the journey toward eternity. She describes death as a pleasant event.

The Contribution of Emily Dickinson's Past Experience

When a poet writes a poem, it may be influenced by his / her feeling and situation. In line with this sentence, in Emily Dickinson's biography, it is told that since 1874 she spent her life in mourning because of several deaths. Emily's father died in 1874, Samuel Bowles died in 1878, J.G. Holland died in 1881, her nephew Gilbert died in 1883, and both Charles Wadsworth and Emily's mother died in 1882. For over those few years, many of the most influential and precious friendships of Emily's passed away (<http://www.edwardslys.com/dickinson.htm>). The

situation that happened to her absolutely influenced her feeling. Then, it may give her a way to the more concentrated obsession with death in her poetry. As human in general, the death of the people close to her certainly makes her depressed and sad. She must have thought that she could not stop death that took away the people she loved. Death easily took them away unexpectedly. To express her depression, she wrote poems with the theme of death. In her poem, she believes that the people who have died will go to a better, an eternal place and find many pleasures.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis in the previous chapter, the writer can conclude that there is influence of Emily Dickinson's life background on the concept of death found in her poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death". The poem is influenced by the poet's life background as follows; Her religious background includes Calvinism, Puritanism and Transcendentalism give influence to her perception of death. First, Calvinism believes that after death, our individual souls continue to have new experiences and a few souls will be rewarded after death. Second, Puritanism believes that death is inevitable and it is a reward. Last, Transcendentalism believes that death is not an end but it is a part of larger natural or universal process, it is a cycle of life and it is never to be feared. Next, her past experience giving contribution to her perception of death is the deaths of her dear and close relatives (her father, mother, and nephew) and the deaths of her dear and close friends (Samuel Bowles, J.G. Holland, and Charles Wadsworth).

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