

Emily Dickinson's Ambivalence about Immortality: An Analysis of "Because I Could Not Stop For Death"

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Abstract. Death holds special significance in Emily Dickinson's poems. "Because I Could Not Stop For Death", one of her most celebrated death poems, visualizes the dying process with symbolic images and tangible feelings. What is the destination of Death's chariot? Tomb or eternity? Is immortality attainable? Stirred by vague, paradoxical, and ambiguous descriptions, doubts begin to surface. Based on William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and detailed textual analysis, this paper attributes the ambivalence towards immortality to Dickinson's mental complexity, responding to Empson's call to look for a puzzle. Deeply rooted in Dickinson's uncertainty about theology, ambiguity is more than a typical poetic strategy. The conflicts between religion and empiricism enable her to believe and disbelieve in different circumstances, and this poem is the best representation. As many of Dickinson's poems exhibit psychological ambivalence and verbal ambiguity, this paper also strives to build an analytical framework equally applicable to them.

1 Introduction

Emily Dickinson is considered the leading American lyric poet of the 19th century. Her adherence to a secluded life at home, love for whiteness, use of elusive poetic methods, and exploration of abstract topics—all add a sense of mystery to her charisma. Perhaps, "five to six hundred" of her poems center around death according to Thomas H[1-3]. Johnson. In Dickinson's poetry, death is depicted as a myth, and the world after death is a "wonder":

The going from a world we know
To one a wonder still. (L907)

In one of her most representative poems, "Because I Could Not Stop For Death", the attitude towards immortality is ambivalent. My major argument is that Dickinson's ambivalence about immortality stems from the confluence of religion and empiricism, which allows her to seek solace from immortality but also remain skeptical and rational. According to William Empson, an influential English critic, ambiguity is a prevalent phenomenon in poetics, which contributes to a sort of aesthetic beauty and engages more readers in poetry[4]. It is not a deficiency of language, but a special skill in creating poetical beauty[5]. With his seven types of ambiguity as the theoretical basis, this paper will focus on the most salient types to decode Dickinson's mental sophistication beneath the semantic ambiguity[6-8].

2 The Ambivalence about Immortality and the Affecting Factors

At the beginning of the poem "Because I Could Not Stop For Death", Immortality is personified as a passenger in the chariot driven by Death, who is already there before the speaker. According to the Christian belief, after death, people encounter immortality through their existence in the afterlife. But here, Immortality and Death come together, which makes immortality more like a temptation used by Death to induce the speaker, who is not ready to die. After the speaker abandons everything in life, there is a sharp change in the environment. It suddenly becomes dark, cold, silent, and desolate, adding a tinge of horror to this poem. With a hint of irony, what awaits the speaker is not the expected Heaven, but just a tomb offered by Death—the "kind" gentleman. The speaker arrives at her final destination, still with an illusion that they are riding toward eternity. In the last stanza, "toward Eternity" indicates the speaker hasn't reached it and perhaps it can never be reached at all, as eternity has no end. If eternity is their goal, then Immortality won't be a passenger, who should have waited at the gate of eternity rather than coming to it. Immortality which is clearly stated in this poem thus seems to be ambiguous, and its existence becomes a riddle.

Empson ascribes one major cause of poetic ambiguity to poets' psychological complexity:

"Ambiguity" itself can mean an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a

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probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings. (5-6)

Hence, ambiguous language is rich in implications, carrying “much feeling and a delicate sense of style” (Empson 5). Dickinson puzzles over the world after death but ends up being less sure of her mind. In a state of indecision, cultured people, like Dickinson, do hold all the contradictory beliefs presented in poetry, believing they may “use them all in coming to decisions” one day (Empson 243). In this sense, Immortality can be interpreted as an accomplice to Death’s deception, which means Immortality is only an illusion.

The ambivalence about immortality can be seen elsewhere in Dickinson’s life. In a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Dickinson expressed her doubt, “I am glad there is Immortality—but would have tested it myself before entrusting him” (L418). By contrast, especially when consoling herself or others at the loss of beloved ones, Dickinson had a preference for the idea of “immortality” or “eternity”, and certainty dominated her tone. In a letter to Master, she said, “I used to think when I died—I could see you—so I died as fast as I could—but the ‘Corporation’ are going Heaven too so [Eternity] won’t be sequestered” (L233). When suffering from the death of her father, she expressed “I am pleased that what grieves ourself so much—can no more grieve him. To have been immortal transcends to become so” (L441). When the death of her nephew Gilbert shattered her, Emily Dickinson mourned, “The vision of Immortal Life has been fulfilled” (L868). In the darkest years, imagining the dead starting anew and suffering no pain in the immortal heaven was a way to free herself from the torture of bereavement. The uncertainty of horrible death and the comfort of blissful immortality occurred together. These two opposites expose what Empson calls “a fundamental division in the author’s mind” (192), where two incompatible ideologies, or “two systems of judgment”, in his words, “are forced into open conflict before the reader” (226). Now, Dickinson’s portrait as a split self has become clear.

Dickinson’s idea of death is shaped by a combination of religious and empirical concepts, and this poem best embodies their coexistence and confrontation. The former emphasizes the afterlife, while the latter focuses on reality. The dominance of faith presented in the first half of this poem gradually gives way to the overwhelming human senses, resulting in an ambivalent attitude toward death.

2.1. Religion: Symbols of Christian Beliefs

In a Calvinist household, religion plays an important role in her life. Like many New England households, copies of Isaac Watts’s *Christian Psalmody* and collections of *The Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs* were fixtures in her home (Lundin 158). Dickinson told her close girlhood friend Abiah Root that she was “almost persuaded to be a Christian”, especially after the conversion of her family members. With the revival of

1850, the Dickinsons’ church became “notably fuller and more solemn” (qtd. in Lundin 67):

How lonely this world is growing.... Christ is calling everyone here...., and I am standing alone in rebellion, and growing very careless. (Letter to Humphrey)

Such an intensely religious atmosphere in Amherst surrounded Dickinson and made her ponder over whether to become a Christian again and again. Although she rejected to join the church, she did seek inspiration from the Bible, hymns, and sermons, and reflected upon religious issues, such as faith and doubt, mortality and immortality.

Symbols with Christian connotations and biblical allusions thread through this poem, greatly enriching the content. Death and immortality are significant motifs in Christian doctrines. Physical death serves as the gateway to spiritual transcendence, where believers’ souls can enjoy everlasting bliss from God. After the speaker abandons her “labor and... leisure”, their first encounter with children symbolizes the circuit of life, with Children, the speaker, Death, and Immortality representing different stages of being but forming a closed circle:

One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh.... The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down...and that which is done is that which shall be done. (Ecclesiastes 1:4-9)

The school children would follow the speaker’s steps and continue the unfinished labor one day.

For the scenery along the journey, “Fields of Gazing Grain”, “Setting Sun”, “Dews”, etc. are also capitalized, indicating they cannot be understood literally and may contain metaphorical associations. According to the Bible, grain is one of the most important agricultural products in ancient Israel, and dew, an important water supply, frequently occurs as God’s blessing to Israel, while sunset symbolizes the time for rest. The first half of the poem centers around “in the Ring”, full of tranquility, which possibly implies the speaker’s satisfaction and a firm belief in God’s blessings. The capitalized Ring could represent God’s glory and favor, as in the Haggai 2:23:

“I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,” declares the Lord Almighty.

With its never-ending circular shape, the Ring could also symbolize eternity, echoing the last line.

In the fourth stanza, a negative symbol in the Bible—“Gossamer” turns up, foreshadowing the final disillusionment. “Gossamer” could be used as a pun here, meaning both the material of the speaker’s gown and the delicate cobweb implied. Job 8:13-14 KJV suggests some hope is as fragile as the cobweb:

So are the paths of all that forget God; and the hypocrite’s hope shall perish:

Whose hope shall be cut off, and whose trust shall be a spider’s web.

Because only God can provide true refuge and protection; there is none to be found in cobwebs. In the same line of this poem, “only” indicates Gossamer is not the proper material for a garment, at least also undesirable in the speaker’s eyes, which fails to protect her from physical and mental chill. Religious overtones

are thus encoded in the choice of words and images. Consciously or unconsciously, Dickinson's poems have been intertwined with Christianity, and perhaps it's one of her spontaneous responses to the dominant ideology of her era.

2.2 Empiricism: Suspicion after the Sensory Experience

At the same time, empiricism, one of Britain's greatest philosophical inventions, also influenced Emily Dickinson and other elites in America. Empiricists generally disbelieve in the existence of innate ideas and consider sensory experience to be more important than intellect in justifying knowledge. According to David Hume, "all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones" (11). Impressions, including what we hear, see, feel, love, hate, etc., play a key role in forming ideas and shaping the human mind.

Although death remains an unknown secret, Dickinson has been frequently involved in it indirectly, which qualifies her to examine death and death-related issues based on her sense-based experiences. Her experience of death comes from the deaths of others, which inevitably leaves a strong and persistent impression on her and her works. During her lifetime, she suffered a lot from the deaths of family members and friends, which makes her familiar with death. Just like what she claimed, "I have but two acquaintance, the 'Quick and the Dead'" (L206). After the death of her father, at least four persons close to her passed away from 1882 to 1884. The horror of death almost came without a stop and engulfed Dickinson. Apart from that, she was traumatized by the American Civil War. The war correlated with Dickinson's prime, as she perhaps composed nearly half of her poems from April 1861 to April 1865, including "Because I Could Not Stop For Death", which was an outward and visible sign of Dickinson's inner struggle and torment. When Higginson served as colonel of the 1st South Carolina Volunteers during the Civil War, Dickinson unleashed a pang of worries and anxieties about his safety:

Should you, before this reaches you, experience immortality, who will inform me of the Exchange? Could you, with honor, avoid Death, I entreat you—Sir—It would bereave. (L280)

For Dickinson, death is still a land of unconsciousness and uncertainty, resulting from the limited knowledge of death. Irritated by suspicion, Dickinson might have followed the steps of Hume's skeptical empiricism:

When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but inquire from what impression is that supposed idea derived? And if it is impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion. (12)

Based on but transcending experience, she carefully explored death and its process with empathy, close observation and vivid imagination as a sensitive observer.

While Christianity evokes a cult for immortality, Dickinson's experience-based reason keeps her skeptical. She carefully examined the faces of the deceased to detect any signs that they had shown a willingness to die. Likewise, she scrutinized the faces of her converted friends, and found precious peace, "radiant, holy joy" there. However, she failed to detect similar bliss or tranquility in her own experience, which "kept her from professing the faith as her own" and "cared less for religion than ever" (Lundin 69-70). This change of mind motivated her to turn inward, focusing more on her subconscious responses.

In a form of art, "Because I Could Not Stop For Death" records one awakening moment of physical senses. Dickinson immerses herself in feeling the imagined death tour, allowing vision and sensations to gradually dominate the mind. The chariot passes from vigorous children and warmth to the dim setting sun and coldness, setting Dickinson, as well as readers to perceive the cycle from birth to death with the speaker. Thus, the abstract and mysterious dying process becomes tangible, perceptible, and familiar with the features of this life. "Centuries—and yet Feels shorter than the Day" can indicate the loss of the sense of time. The speaker can keep nothing in this life, and perhaps gain nothing in the afterlife, which implies a sense of nothingness, rather than immortality. The change of environment indicates and echoes the change of mind. At first, relaxing and peaceful with the "comfort" of immortality. Later, the speaker senses something's wrong, and hopes to seek shelter from God's favor, only to find a tomb already prepared. When she (perhaps including Dickinson and readers as well) finally realizes to look for any impression that can confirm the hope for immortality, there is only anxiety and fear—the first impression we usually get at the thought of death.

2.3 Behind the Ambiguous Immortality: A Balanced, Unique Mind

To some extent, Dickinson synthesizes experience and religious faith through close observation and imagination of death, despite the challenge of truly reconciling the two. According to Richard E. Brantley, "she could mix experience and faith scarcely better than she could reconcile them. She could balance experience and faith rather more readily than she could subordinate the former to the latter" (33). This balanced state of mind enables her to rely on experience and faith respectively in different circumstances. Those two aspects co-shaped Dickinson's mind and complete each other. As Robin Peel believes, Dickinson's purpose here is not to challenge religion, but to use empirical observation, logic, and rules to approach "the unvisited worlds of heaven, immortality, and death", which are beyond the reach of science (184).

Semantic ambiguity not only exemplifies Dickinson's ambivalence in the mind, but also her distinctive poetic style. According to I. A. Richards, in a poem, the speaker's intention to express his thoughts, feelings, or attitudes "operates through and satisfies itself

in a combination of other functions” (176). Empson must agree. When Empson elaborates on ambiguity and indecision, he also saves a special part for ambiguity and poetic effect, arguing that what the poet conveys is not only meanings capable of analysis, but also a sort of poetic beauty sometimes unexplained— “a mood, an atmosphere, a personality, an attitude to life, an undifferentiated mode of being” (17). Based on this logic, apart from being a mirror of Dickinson’s complicated mentality, the ambiguity in this poem also enhances its mystique. Such obscurity has become part of the mysterious atmosphere, in accordance with the mysterious, inexplicable image of death and the afterlife. And all of this enhances the sense of mystery in Dickinson’s unique charisma, and makes her more charming.

3 Conclusion

To sum up, the suspicion of immortality has been reiterated in Dickinson’s poems and in her letters. On the one hand, influential Christians preached about the immortality of the soul. On the other hand, under the influence of empiricism, her own experience failed to verify it, and reminded her to keep skeptical about the illusion of immortality.

Empson comments that many works of art can give their audience a sort of relief by “fantasy gratification” and help them maintain mental equilibrium by strengthening self-awareness. It’s also applicable to Dickinson’s death poems, which gratify readers with abundant imaginative experiences and remind them of their attitudes towards death and immortality when opinions resonate or contradict.

“Because I Could Not Stop For Death” represents Dickinson’s ambivalent attitude toward immortality. She doubts whether immortality really exists, but still tends to seek solace by regarding death as a journey to immortality. With an illusory hope of immortality, death can be more peaceful and acceptable. It is a solace to both those who lost their beloved ones and who fear death, which can alleviate turbulent emotional suffering. Dickinson’s ambiguous language also invites readers to have their own interpretations of the poetic imagery, and figure out different layers of meanings beneath conciseness. Thanks to the immense potential and depth empowered by ambiguity, we readers can always find refreshing insights by reading her poem over and over again. In a sea of confusion, paradoxes and ideas, Empson’s theory of ambiguity acts as a beacon that guides readers through the text and into it. As ambiguous and opaque expressions characterize Dickinson’s oeuvre, the method this paper follows would also suit other poems written by Dickinson. Hopefully, Empson’s theory would continue to lead us to penetrate the lexical, semantic and even syntactic complexity, bringing us closer to Dickinson.

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