

Analysis on the Poetical Originality of Emily Dickinson---- Take Because I Could Not Stop for Death as an Example

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Abstract: Originality is a key element in creating a classic poem. Emily Dickinson is one of the most original modern American poets, therefore acknowledged by Harold Bloom one of the 26 classic and canonical writers of all time. Death and immortality are the reoccurring themes of Dickinson's poem, and her "death" poems has been so originally beautiful and philosophical that they has inspired and influenced readers of all time. This essays endeavors to analyze in detail the originality of Dickinson's poetical features in various aspect including literary devices and theme in the example poem: Because I Could Not Stop for Death, which is one of the most famous and celebrated poems of Emily Dickinson.

Keywords: Originality; Poem; Emily Dickinson

1. Introduction

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was an American poet. She lived an isolated and solitary life in Amherst, Massachusetts, a town rich in religious influence. She was recognized as an oddball by the townspeople for her preference for white clothing and her reluctance to greeting visitors, and she rarely left herself room even in her latter years. Due to her unconventional disposition and personal experience, Dickinson's poems are of great originality for the era in which she wrote; they featured by short lines, typically without titles, and the often utilization of offbeat broken rhyming meter, dashes and arbitrary capitalization, which build up her whole organic poetical system of originality. Both empiricism and transcendentalism were important during Dickinson's day. Emily Dickinson was greatly influenced by Emerson who advocated that metaphorical language was derived from the meaning of nature, and that the metaphors are derived from the imitation of nature to convey spiritual meaning, to represent the natural world as well as being the guidance of human mind.

Though she was not recognized during her life, she is widely acknowledged as a standout among the most unique nineteenth Century American writers. The power derived from her isolated and unconventional life and her literary voice, all donates of Emily as an ineffaceable poet who continues to be discussed today.

In Emily Dickinson's remaining 1775 poems, a third is about death. Henry James once comment that her poetry was the landscape of the soul. In 1862, Dickinson's beloved married clergyman, Charles Wordsworth, left New England for California. Therefore Dickinson went through a relationship crisis, during which she wrote a number of poems, pondering the meaning and destination of life, the famous because I Can't Stop waiting for Death is one of them.^[1]

According to William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard in *A Handbook to Literature*, poetry is a term applied to the many forms in which man has given a rhythmic expression to his most imaginative and intense perceptions on his world, himself, and the interrelationship of the two (1952: 516)^[2]. Originality, I argue, is the key element for stimulating a poet's rhythmic expression and the most imaginative and intense perceptions. This essay tries to analyze the originality manifested in the poetical images and devices in the poem Because I Could Not Stop for Death.

2. Specific analysis on the originality of the poem

2.1 The unconventional image of the Death-- a suitor

In the first stanza, The poet's persona meets the personified Death, who is a refined and courteous gentleman who "kindly" stopped for the poet's persona. It is the most innovative and original creation of the poet in this poem. I argue that this originality in

innovating the the image of the personification of Death in Dickinson is actually much greater because that Dickinson wishes to shape Death more than a gentleman, but more as a suitor. Here are two reasons for my interpretation.

First, given the experience of her life, which is the lack of romantic relationship with men. She combined her religious belief and personal feelings and originally creates this image of Death, a image that has personal meanings that death is the fulfillment and completeness of love. Furthermore, linking to the background of the poem, Dickinson is experiencing the emotional lost and it would be her unconscious self-comfort to depict the death as a suitor image.

Moreover, in the fourth stanza, the clothing of her also verifies this interpretation that Death is actually regarded by the poetess as her suitor, since these are all typical wedding dress:

Or rather – He passed Us –
The Dews drew quivering and Chill –
For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –

Apart from that, the sudden turn of tone-- from calm to a little fearful is just like the change of mood of a bride on the wedding day. In essence, Religiously she believed death is a process towards eternal happiness and peace, so in form, she imagined her version of the Death would be a kind gentleman, a suitor, who would fill in the emotional deficiency of her life.

Second, Her religion belief makes her to view death as a gentle and mild process that towards eternity, therefore, she chooses to completely subvert the traditional terrifying image of the Death who haunts people everywhere to take their lives. Instead of forcing and haunting people around, her version of Death kindly invites people to take on a peaceful journey, and even devoutly tended her, using his civility to put her into peace, giving his generosity and love to her, and all other people, which is a classic image of a ideal suitor, and this subversion of traditional image of Death lies the massive originality of the poet. Furthermore, I argue that Dickinson wished to break with the traditional terrifying Death more thoroughly, by depicting it more than a gentleman, but more personally oriented, more intimate: a suitor, which will form a much sharper contrast with the traditional Death to express her originality. Therefore, Dickinson unprecedentedly describes death as a polite invitation of a gentleman and the Death himself is a suitor of the persona. The suitor image is the most creative and distinctive feature of the poem which shows great originality of Dickinson' poetical design.

2.2 Theme: Optimism: in the opening line and the Enjambment

2.2.1 the puzzling opening line

When first reading the first line of the poem, almost everyone would be bewildered by the inability of the poet's persona to stop for death, because this unexplained statement was undoubtedly puzzling. However, after finishing reading and contemplating on the poem' theme, I give the interpretation that the statement that " I could not stop for death" is a covert exclamation for the optimistic attitude towards death. She cannot stop for death because to Dickinson, people could not determine the time we meets with Death, not simply because they do not have the ability, but because they are too overwhelmed to care, since there are so many splendour and beauty happen in this life, therefore they should be unable to stop for Death they are supposed to lead towards a optimistic attitude towards this life: enjoy yourself, do not seek for Death, let Death come for you. This kind of optimism is so original as it is rare to occur in the themes of death poems.

2.2.2 The Use of Enjambment

Though the subject here is death, this is not a dark interpretation. In fact, Emily Dickinson uses Death as a gentleman suitor. "The utilization of the dash in the each line of the poem makes the reader to ponder before going into the monosyllabic prepositional expression in which there is a greatness that suggests the grave's absolution."^[3] . One of the originality of Dickinson is vividly shown in her unique use of dash and enjambment. It means, as I interpret it, the passing of time in this specific poem. Each dash symbols stop, and each stop or pause represent the passing of time. " 'tis Centuries- and yet fells shorter than the Day". Here the capitalization and " century" and "day" also proves Dickinson's emphasis on the length of time passed during the journey. And each dash and each enjambment is like a pause during the poet's calm narration about her experience of the process of death, which embodies the tranquility and serenity of the poet's state of mind. Maybe is the companion of the third party immortality who assures her that eternity is a consequent destiny that only comes in delay of time instead of right away. She is so assured and calm that she do not think the process is intolerably long but short like a day. Death is, in fact, her poetic statement. Emily Dickinson was skillful and variable in portraying death. In other words, through this variation and poetical pause, she was able to form her own special method in sketching this original and optimistic theme.

2.3 The defamiliarization realized by metaphor

Stanza 4

We paused before a house that seemed
A swelling on the ground;
The roof was scarcely visible,
The cornice but a mound

In this stanza, it is considered that the word 'house' has metaphorical meaning. "Strangeness, as I keep discovering, is one of the prime requirements for entrance into the Canon." ^[4] Harold Bloom in his *Western Canon* affirms her canonicity as a result of her excellent defamiliarization that reaches the accomplishment of the sense of strangeness in literary work. And this is precisely what Emily Dickinson shows unintentionally here: instead of directly indicating "grave", she chooses to first refer to it as a house, adapting the description "swelling of the ground with the roof that scarcely visible", which is such a bizarre metaphor that is almost comparable to the metaphysical conceit as John Donne. By defamiliarizing the image "tomb" into a common image "house", Dickinson tries to show that the poet's persona is not shocked or afraid to know that she is going to die since house can represent the comfort place to have a rest. This novel usage of defamiliarization is another distinctive manifestation that demonstrate vividly the originality towards her readers. She quietly and uniquely expresses her amazing peace of mind in the face of death with such a subtle and mysterious metaphor, which shows great originality in the most unique and quite natural way she chooses to convey her tranquility towards death.

3. Conclusion

"Literary originality achieves scandalous dimensions in Dickinson, and its principal component is the way she thinks through her poems." Emily Dickinson's originality is undoubtedly shown in her poem *I Could Not Stop for Death*, in the optimism of theme, defamiliarization of metaphor to convey her tranquility towards death and the creative use of enjambment to indicate the passing of the peaceful time, as well as the unconventional suitor image of the personification Death to satisfy both her emotional and religious belief and fantasy. All these elements in her poem express her unusual and thought-provoking view of life and death. And the originality it shows will always be a literary classic and a display of a wise and beautiful human soul.

References:

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- [3]Shambhavi Tiwari, October 2016, *International Journal of English: Literature, Language & Skills*, Celebration of Death in Emily Dickinson's *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*
- [4]1994, Harold Bloom, Harcourt Brace & Company first edition, *Western Canon*, p292