Visualization of Death and Actualization of Identity in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry

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ABSTRACT: This paper considers the visualization of death and actualization of identity in Emily Elizabeth Dickinson’s (1830-1886) poetry and analyzes the relation between them. It is argued that many of Dickinson’s poems have the theme of death-immortality to confirm another world beyond death and a new life of the soul. Some other poems deal with identity and the power of the soul. She mostly visualizes death by external incarnations and signs, as an actual experience happened to her. Dickinson presents death not as something destructive which anybody cringes away in terror, but something gentle, and constructive. She is so hopeful about afterlife that this feeling helps her to be in quest of independency, and to realize her own identity. She was a follower of the doctrine of ‘self-reliance’ which later appeared as self-actualization for psychologists. Satisfaction of common needs, like hunger, makes man to feel a demand for satisfaction of higher needs, like independency and self-actualization. This self-actualization refers to one’s abilities and skills to achieve the meaning of life as much as she/he can possibly achieve. The doctrine of self-actualization from Abraham Harold Maslow (1908-1970) and Carl Gustav Jung’s (1875-1961) points of view on death, spirituality, and afterlife are used in this paper. Two theories are used to show self-actualization along with visualization of death in Dickinson’s poetry, which develop this idea that she, as a spiritualist and a self-actualized person, consciously chooses her way of life and subject of poetry.

Key Words: Death, Visualization of Death, Spirituality, Identity, Self-reliance, Self-actualization.

INTRODUCTION

Almost many poems, which use the death as subject, imply the identity as well. Most of them refer to death of a person with specific identity and discuss what will happen to identity after death. In many poems, poets focus on death as a way reaching immortality and being everlasting. There are same points of view about death in many of Dickinson’s poems; in some poems, she introduces death as a way to reach immortality and she is eager to do that. Travel to the world of death is a journey in which Dickinson realizes her own identity and reaches self-actualization. During such a journey she feels free from all the boundaries and such freedom lets her decide consciously, choose her way and reach her wishes.

Since everybody likes to have freedom of choice, and nobody has control over death, thinking to it may result in getting unpleasant feeling toward it. According to Carl Rogers, individuals, even by thinking of death, can feel free to be more and more satisfied with life after death if they do not reject their inner experience and their social circumstances as well. These people are fully aware of what is going on in their inner world and what is going on in their outer world.

Dickinson was such a person who was aware of her internal and external world as well. As Rogers counts the characteristics of self-actualized people, he explains that the productivity of these people comes from this feeling of freedom. Freedom is so important and plays an important role in their lives, Dickinson states that freedom is richness and those people who do not search for freedom are poor.
MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper explains, clarifies and analyzes Dickinson’s poetry considering psychological approach. It aims at showing how Dickson uses the image of death in her poetry, how this image shapes her personality and how this new personality forms a new image and new characteristic of death as well. The doctrine of self-actualization from Abraham Harold Maslow and Carl Gustav Jung’s points of view on death, spirituality, and afterlife are used in this paper. Jung is a psychologist who is concerned with death and Maslow argues self-actualization.

The concept of self-actualization was brought most fully to prominence by Maslow in his theory, hierarchy of needs, as the final level of psychological development. This concept can be achieved when all basic and mental needs are fulfilled and the actualization of the full personal potential takes place. The present paper relates this subject to Dickinson’s death poetry. The psychologist Maslow feels that, self-actualization does not determine one’s life; rather, it gives the individual a desire, or motivation to achieve budding ambitions. The same vision can be found in Dickinson’s image of death in her works by which she recognizes her identity. Reading Dickinson can reveal a plenty of her poems dealing with death and through which she meets an actualized self.

Maslow believes that self-actualization can give a person some qualities as independence, autonomy, a tendency to form few but deep friendships, a “philosophical sense of humor,” a tendency to resist outside pressures and a general transcendence of the environment rather than coping with it (1970: 169). The paper introduces such vision as Dickinson’s vision toward death. She may have been suggesting to her readers that “her experience of death” (Crumbley 242) would similarly unlock persistent mysteries in a manner satisfactory to her but do so in a manner inaccessible to them.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Nasim Zahedi Doostand Leila Baradaran Jamili, in their essay “Actualizing Identity, Self-Actualization in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry,” discussed that “Dickinson under the impact of transcendentalism and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s (1803-1882) philosophy regarding self-reliance, philosophy and theory of self-reliance moved toward formulating her identity, getting self-actualization, and finding her real identity” (337). Considering the transcendence of birth and death, the self-actualized person intuitively understands the meaning of birth and death, and he is not bothered by changes inherent in the life cycle. This person allows the law of moral and physical, to take its course free and independent and such a person continues his life steadily. This person does not worry about dying because life and death are not perceived as being contradictory occurrences. Maslow and Rogers, on the other hand, did not attempt to deal with questions concerning the meaning of life and death, for their concerns were those of secular psychology and psychotherapy, Maslow believes that man can find “peace with death” (1970: xx) and Rogers by the death of his wife started to think about the possibility of life after death. Jung believes that thinking of death comes from man’s desire for eternity. Man is hopeful to get another and a permanent life somewhere beyond death. Being hopeful gives man the power of moving forward and this is the first step of self-actualization. Hope underlies religious belief, worship and ethics.

Hope seems to be part of the drive lying behind human beings both in their self-consciousness and in their desire to survive. Hope sets itself against the despair of increasing numbers of people who are afraid of death. In and through ecology, individuals have found a new way of thinking about themselves, their lives and their world. Religious ideas can furnish one means of framing human identity and of thinking about life. In another sense, this perspective does echo a retrospective fulfillment of identity if people also see such a funeral as reflecting the way a person had lived, their life-values now being reflected in their death-values. Thinking of death during the history has been man’s thinking subject, Douglas Davies, in the beginning lines of his A Brief History of Death, asserts:

The history of death is a history of self-reflection. Who are we? Whence do we come, and whither go after death? If there is an afterlife, what is it like and how might we prepare for it? But if this life is the fullness of our time, how best might we live it, knowing we are going to die? For much of human history, popular myth and formal theology have rendered accounts of death’s origin and life’s destiny. (1)

One of the important keys of the emotional energy, which motivates the human to search for knowing more about the world, is the sense of hope. It can be defined as the attitude towards the future which looks forward to a greater knowledge and a wider vision. In religious settings hope often appears as faith while in secular situations hope expresses the human desire to flourish and has often been expressed in terms of spirituality. One can say that both hope and faith are to somehow similar aspects of life. Hope is the human reason of moving toward meaning; it is as like as a leader who helps producing the sense of transcendence in life.

Religion, philosophy, science and political ideology, engage in the processes of transcending, of moving from one level of knowing to another. One key element of the emotional energy motivating the human to search
formore knowledge about the world is the sense of hope, that attitude towards the future which anticipates greater knowledge and a wider explanatory vision. Hope comes from spirituality, motivates Dickinson to move forward and step by step starts to know herself and her abilities. Dickinson gets a good power of controlling subjects related to her, a sense of self-confidence, spontaneity, natural, and genius. She gets a philosophy of life and probably a mission in life, and uses her talent to combine two subjects, death and actualization of identity. In many of her poems, the reader can find these two subjects along each other. She had faith in her own divinity, so perhaps she was yet more certain of God. The inner freedom afforded her hope, genius and feeling of independency; this was rare for a woman of her time. This confidence fed her poetry sumptuously, and gave it popularity.

Many of Dickinson’s poems are also labeled by the subject of death and identity. She establishes the intricate relationship between memory and identity. While noticing the speaker in her poetry, she reveals a strong sense of independence to society and a kind of awareness as well. Some of her poems begin with ‘I’ more than any other words and since they are lyrics they attempt to celebrate self. On the other hand many of her poems have the subject of death and identity. In many of her poems the reader is invited to identify herself/himself with the speaker who recites a story in which she travels through life to death, and through death to afterlife, and during this journey she realized her identity and her own self.

Death and Identity in “Because I Could not Stop for Death”

Although a number Dickinson’s works are a reflection of selfhood, autonomy and self-realization, a great number of these poems reflect a picture of death. Already any of her poems which offer power and completeness of self and questions embodied death as a theme. “Because I Could not Stop for Death” (BIC) one of Dickinson’s most famous poem can be counted as one of these poems:

Because I could not Stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality.
We slowly drove—He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For HIS Civility—
We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—In the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Gram—
We passed the Setting Sun—
Or rather—He passed Us—
The Dews drew quivering and chill—
For only Gossamer, my Gown—
My Tippet—only Tulle— (BIC, lines 1-16)

A general look to the poem attracts the attention to death as the main theme of this poem but as the reader reads the poem he/she can see ‘I’ is the center of this poem; it means the subject of this poem is not only death, but also identity. The poem clearly talks about death and narrates a story of speaker’s death but this subject, that the story is happening to a person convinces the reader to find the central narrator which is ‘I’.

As Dickinson tries to recite the story of death, she makes the speaker and her central character in the poem richly colored. She looks at her past and reaches present and her death. The reader of Dickinson may think that always thinking of her own death can be a psychological problem while the psychologist, Abraham Maslow can assure the reader that she is gifted with psychological health. He asserts that, a man should go further the conventions in order to find the answers of the problems in his/her mind and says he should “lift himself by his own norms that if man was to wait for conventionally reliable data, he should have to wait forever” (Maslow 1970: 149).

In Dickinson’s death poems the subject of death helps poet to show her talent and art of creating strange scenery from beyond the grave or the other world. In another poem, “I Died For Beauty— but was Scarce,” (IDB) like two previous poems, she calls the reader to hear a story of a dead person who is talking from behind the grave. There is a conversation between the narrator and a man laid in next tomb; she has died for beauty and he for truth. The man believes that truth and beauty are the same and in this way they two got one group. It shows that even if she was not concerned with art but she paid a great respect for art. She believes that the art is the same as truth, the only subject which human being is searching for and tries to get. Maslow believes that some values like “truth,
goodness, [and] beauty” (ibid xxii) are signs of psychological health, on the contrary with some critics who believe that Dickinson is psychologically suffering, such a belief shows her reader that she is psychologically healthy. Maslow shows that some of these values are self-actualized needs and dissatisfaction toward them may cause suffering for man:

To summarize briefly, the loss of the basic-need satisfactions of safety and protection, belongingness, love, respect, self-esteem, identity, and self-actualization produce illnesses and deficiency diseases. Taken together, these can be called the neuroses and psychoses. However, basically need-satisfied and already self-actualizing people with such metamotivational as truth, goodness, beauty, justice, order, law, unity, etc., may suffer deprivation at the metamotivational level. Lack of metamotivate gratifications, or of these values, produces what I have described as general and specific metopathologies. (1993: 21-22)

She asserts that she has died for beauty and this is to show that truth and beauty are important to her. It seems that Dickinson, in this poem is going to concern “the relationship between human mortality and the ideals of Truth and Beauty” through the death (Lieter 94) which recalls John Keats’ expression “Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty,” in “Ode On a Grecian Urn” (Keats 157). Both beauty and truth exist in Dickinson’s world but in this poem she defines them based on a dead woman’s words.

In the first stanza she starts to explain her death and to indicate how it was frightening to be adjusted in the tomb. The setting of the poem reveals the plot. Dickinson creates her death theme in this stanza and describes that she has died for beauty and explains that there was a man, died for truth, he has died before her and he was laid in the next tomb. Like every other death poem she starts to give the reader a picture of death in the very beginning lines of the poem. But the theme of beauty and truth gives the poem a new and different theme laid within death. Their conversation starts in the next stanza when they join each other in a discussion about the sort of life they have had and the reasons of their death which complete the theme of death in this poem. She is not explaining that how she and the next door dead man have died but exclaims that they are died of a special reason. The stanza shows two lonely souls which are going to associate with each other, this loneliness and dead bodies’ souls who separate the world and the other people to live alone for ever confirm the theme of death. She comes to this reason that truth and beauty are the same so the man and the speaker are died for the same reasons.

Souls talk and correlate with each other in a particular subject and philosophy, which reminds the reader of Jungian words that “a man may go about for many years with an inkling of something, but grasps it clearly only at a particular moment” (Jung 1964: 9). Not only has Dickinson grasped her idea of art, but she has also gone through a philosophical way and shows that she is a self-actualized philosopher.

The final stanza is uncovering a number of death pictures in the poem as well as two previous stanzas:

And so, as kinsmen met at night—
We talked between the rooms—
Until the moss had reached our lips—
And covered up—our names— (IDB lines, 9-12)

Two kinsmen met at night which represents the dark face of death. Two dead bodies, being alone, are now walking between the rooms like two close friends or two relatives. The tone of the poem is getting sad in the third stanza but hopeful at the same time.

Reading the poem from the beginning shows a sad situation of dying and adjusting in a tomb but in the next stanza Dickinson exclaims her happiness to have someone to share death with. They start to talk and accompany each other until their decay. Reaching moss to their lips symbolizes decay and death. Moss covers their names which are symbols of their identities; when their identities are covered, they are dead and disappeared from the minds and memories as well.

Dickinson’s “I Died For Beauty—but was Scarc,” has strong and clear theme of death. In the beginning of the poem the speaker says that she has died for the sake of beauty but she has failed. The poem offers lots of death pictures to readers as like as other Dickinson’s death poems. To her, truth was in nature, in that beauty she could see and feel God directly. Dickinson in “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church” (SKS) expresses such feeling and vision:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church—
I keep it, staying at Home—
With a Bobolink for a Chorister—
And an Orchard, for a Dome—
Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice—
I just wear my Wings—
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton—sings.
In this poem, Dickinson shows how self-actualized she is, like other actualized people she sees reality better and, as Maslow asserts in his Motivation and Personality:

the self-actualized person sees reality more clearly; our subjects see human nature as it is and not as they would prefer it to be. Their eyes see what is before them without being strained through spectacles of various sorts to distort or shape or color the reality. (156)

She puts away her “leisure” and “labor” (BIC, line 7) and gets ready for her final travel. She, in the third stanza of “Because I Could not Stop for Death,” creates a sense of separation to show that she has accepted death. She agrees to ride in death’s chariot and gets ready to die; this vision of death arises from Dickinson’s realistic sense which is the main feature of self-actualized people.

Killing False Identity in “I’m Nobody Who Are You”

Like the acceptance of separation in “Because I Could not Stop for Death,” the reader can find the same theme in “I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died.” The speaker in this poem is waiting for her death as well. She also shows her belief on herself in other poems like “I’m Nobody Who Are You” (IN). The poem was published for the first time in 1891 and was Dickinson’s favorite. It is considered as a biographical poem which is composed for Dickinson herself. She lived a quiet life and somehow unknown as a poet. Actually, she was considered as nobody and she felt no shame but proud of her identity. She celebrates her identity and rejects need of public measure for her success. Reading her poems shows and chronicles that she was trying to get a unique identity for her. She did not pay attention to public and it seems that public is an unpleasant word for her:

I’m No body Who are you?
Are you—Nobody—Too?
Then there’s a pair of us;
Don’t tell! They’d advertise—you know!
How dreary—to be—Somebody!
How public—like a Frog—
To tell one’s name—the livelong June
To an admiring Bog! (IN, lines 1-8)

In this poem Dickinson attracts the readers’ attention to being somebody by asserting that she is nobody. She, beautifully by killing her false identity given by people, and telling that she is nobody, catches a new identity which is the sign of her actualization. On the other hand she shows her hatred of being admired just for her name, and feels free of any admiration by the others, which is another feature of self-actualizing people.

Not only has the speaker exclaimed that she is “Nobody,” she also asks “Who are you? Are you—No body—too?” (IN, lines 2-3). In “I’m Nobody Who Are You?” when Dickinson defines herself as nobody and shows her happiness of being nobody because “somebody” is society’s favorite, she invites the readers to be nobody too. She tries to show how being herself is pleasant that worth the others’ admiration. She is going to help the readers to actualize their own identity. Maslow counts the characteristics of self-actualized people, and says that “self-actualized people are self-disciplined, active, responsible and self-governing than being paw and determined by the other people” (1993:161). Dickinson shows a great self-dependence in this poem and she as a leader tries to convince the others to believe her and invite them to follow her. Such a sense of power and leadership is just belonging to an actualized person.

Interpreting the poem under the historical view confirms such an idea that she feels a great actualization in her own self. A flashback to the nineteenth century reveals the condition of women under the law. Actually there were no rights before that for women; they count women as nothing. In such a situation Dickinson feels free of the other’s judgment and creates such a poem in which she puts the readers in a situation to answer her question yes, and asserts that they are nobody too as like as the poet. Such answering brings equality between the people in society that creates self-confidence for individuals. On the other hand the time was the age of spirituality and humanism, which was the base of the self-reliance theory. In 1891, when this poem was published for the first time the theory of self-reliance was accepted by a number of poets, especially Dickinson, as Emerson’s follower.

Dickinson in “I’m Nobody Who Are You” asserts that how difficult it is to be somebody because everybody in society asks you to repeat the norms of the society like a “frog” so she tries to grow her spirit and empower her
own self. She, in another poem, “Growth of Man—like Growth of Nature—,” (GM) again says that how difficult it is to grow her spirituality and self-dependence:

Growth of Man—like Growth of Nature
Gravitates within—
Atmosphere, and Sun endorse it
But it stir—alone—
Each—its difficult Ideal
Must achieve—Itself
Through the solitary prowess
Of a Silent Life—
Effort—is the sole condition Patience of Itself—
Patience of opposing forces
And intact Belief— (GM, lines 1-11)

Dickinson explains that reaching “ideal” is “difficult,” she shows that to get a perfect man we need to practice hard as she “strove it” in her life (Lieter 85). She celebrates her own self and believes that nothing is more important than it, as the critic Albert Gelpi observes that “the poet characteristically chose to emphasize the sphere of the self, rather than to acknowledge the reciprocity between world and self” (qtd. in Leiter 85). Although the poem does not clearly refer to the word of death, there are different pictures illustrating death like lonely and solitary. Actually death is an essential part of nature by which Dickinson has described the man.

Dickinson used her solitude to reach a real self and actualize her own self. Her own life was silent and for a long time Dickinson lived alone in Amherst. When she wrote this poem she had experienced so many deaths in her family and relatives and also she was familiar with loneliness and solitary well. From 1855 when her mother got ill she was forced to stay home and take care of her so she started a new way of life and “finding the life with her books and nature so congenial, continued to live it” (Habegger 342). The first half of the 1860s in which Dickinson created this poem she was largely withdrawn from the society and lived alone, it is possible to say that she experienced a kind of death during her life. These years are also featured as her most productive writing years as well. During these years she could find her own self and reach self-actualization and get more productive.

Dickinson, in the poem “Growth of Man—like Growth of Nature—,” shows her pride in her independence and she also insists on this point that everybody grows alone which shows her respect on individuals’ power. Noting how alone individuals are vision of this poem reveals such respect and belief in individuals. However the poem is suggesting self-sufficiency strongly, at the same time it suggests such self-sufficiency evolves an essentially cold and businesslike relationship to the world. Clearly coldness is a sign of death and every business finally will end. Dickinson used this similar view in “I’m Nobody Who Are You” by encouraging the reader to break from public and empower his/her self.

Dickinson says this is not worthy to be with public and say what they say, do what they do, and hear what they hear. She describes such a person as “frog”; a froglike person who follows that public and changes his face during his life. Actually, individuals are very important for Dickinson, like Corinthians in these two poems, she tries to show man’s individual power. In “I’m Nobody Who Are You,” she invites the reader to drive from public to solitary and in second poem “Growth of Man—like Growth of Nature—,” she describes the power of self which in solitary has reached self-sufficiency and self-dependence. As Dickinson was interested in Greek such attention to individuals reminds the readers of this famous Corinthians expression that “Man was first created a single individual to teach the lesson that whoever destroys one life, Scripture ascribes it to him as though he had destroyed a whole world; and whoever saves one life, Scripture ascribes it to him as though he had saved a whole world” (Parrinder 89).

“You’ll know it—as you know ’tis Noon” (YKN) is her first poem which represents her description of transformative experience of self-realization:
You’ll know it as you know ’tis Noon—
By Glory—
As you do the sun—
By Glory. (YKN, lines 1-3)

In this poem she uses a conversation by the nature which drives the reader to find something in common with transcendentalists. She describes a transformative experience of ‘Self Realization.’ Believing in individualism and divine authority of soul’s intuitions and impulses which one is based on identification of individuals’ soul with God helped the idea and doctrine of self-reliance.
“On a Columnar Self” is one of the poems of Dickinson written between 1861 and 1863 which “affirms her sense of inner rightness as a poet and independence from external judgment” (Lieter 156). This poem asserts the reality of human being and shows that the source of every human genius is internal “the domain of self-reliant” (ibid). In first two stanzas the notion of realization of identity is notable; this is an image of self as an unbreakable column. In the third stanza she uses an image for self-completeness and for showing the ways through which the individuals outrank the crowd.

CONCLUSION

As the readers of Dickinson will see that death in her poetry is not a vanishing term which goes to finish one’s life, but it associates Dickinson with actualization of her identity. Hope and death are connected to each other and it makes death a joyful subject to Dickinson. Many of her poems are about death but they try to actualize identity of the poet. Death is considered as gate to eternity and everlasting life. Dickinson uses death to actualize her identity.

Religion, philosophy, science, political ideology, and spirituality all helped Dickinson to find her identity, choose her way and create some works that show nothing is barrier in moving forward the actualization of identity. Leading man to believe that getting free from material and trying to be spiritual mean freedom for everybody, spirituality by itself helps man to transfer everything even death. Thinking to spiritualism gives man a great hope of survival not here in this world but in another place and in another world.

Dickinson’s works, as a spiritualist and follower of doctrine of self-reliance, reflect self-actualization. She, in many of her poems by visualizing death, shows such actualization in her works. Her frequent use of ‘I’ in her death poetry shows how much she believes in her own self and her inner power and ability. The picture of death in her poems is not a picture of vanishing but a journey to eternity and everlasting life in which man can find the hidden places of his inner power and abilities.

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