

THE CONCEPT OF DEATH IN EMILY DICKINSON'S *ONE DIGNITY DELAYS FOR ALL* AND *'T WAS WARM – AT FIRST – LIKE US*

Nihal TOPCU

Karabuk University

Abstract

This study primarily aims to scrutinise the concept of death in Emily Dickinson's "One Dignity Delays for All" (1859) and " 'Twas Warm – at First – like Us" (1862) in the light of New Criticism. Accordingly, this study also aims to analyse and interpret the similarities and differences between Dickinson's "One Dignity Delays for All" and " 'Twas Warm – at First – like Us" by closely reading two poems from the New Critical perspective, together with their figurative and literary language including their imageries, symbols, ironies, metaphors, similes, allusions, personification, tone, ambiguities, denotations, and connotations. The Introduction of this study provides a broad outline of the concept of death, Emily Dickinson's poetry and New Criticism. In this regard, the reality of the inevitability of death is highlighted in both poems even though "One Dignity Delays for All" portrays the funeral procession, and " 'Twas Warm – at First – like Us" displays the physical dying procession of a living body. In Conclusion, this study reveals that these two poems share some similarities despite their particular differences, and as the New Critical perspective illustrates, the meaning of death as a concept in these poems is enriched through repetition, diction, capitalization, punctuation, and literary devices, including figurative language.

Keywords: Death, Emily Dickinson, *One Dignity Delays for All*, *'Twas Warm – at First – like Us*, New Criticism

1. Introduction

Death is a concept that has an inseparably close connection to life itself, and hence the concept of death is one of the most common issues that poems, plays, stories or novels place emphasis on especially in terms of its inevitable nature. Regarding their perception of death, each poet, playwright or author undeniably addresses the concept of death by using their own

style of writing including diction and literary devices, including figurative language, such as tone, imageries, allusions, symbols, hyperboles, ironies, metaphors, and similes. Likewise, Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) as an American powerful literary figure and a woman poet pictures the concept of death as “the great dictator, the ever-present imperator, a force” to be respected, and “at least one-sixth” of her almost “fifteen hundred surviving poems” directly address the concept of death (McNaughton, 1949, p. 203). According to Martin (2002), Dickinson’s extraordinary poetic voice and form create contradictory and confusing interpretations by amazing her readers, together with her “stark style, her ambiguous punctuation and capitalization, her variant word choices and . . . multiple voices that perform various personae” (p. 3). Dickinson is also portrayed as an innovative, rebellious but an isolated young woman who is thought to be agoraphobic, and her poems speak most noticeably of “‘the Heaven of God,’ ‘the starkest Madness,’ or the ‘Infinite’ rather than of worldly events” (Martin, 2002, p. 2). Therefore, it can be deduced that Dickinson is a prolific female poet who cannot resist her fears of the crowds and surroundings. She seems to be, on the other hand, at peace with the concept of death.

Correspondingly, this study delves into the concept of death as the common theme in addition to the thematic, literary, figurative, and structural similarities and differences between Emily Dickinson’s *One Dignity Delays for All* and *‘Twas Warm – at First – like Us* from the New Critical lens. According to Tyson (2006), the only source for analysing and interpreting a text is the text itself rather than the life and time of the author in the New Criticism because the New Critics point out that certain “knowledge of the author’s intended meaning is usually unavailable” (p. 136). Likewise, a literary text is richer, more complex and meaningful than the author realizes or different from the author actually intends according to the New Critics. Tyson (2006) also states that the best way to analyse a literary text from the New Critical perspective is to carefully examine it as each evidence is given “by the language of the text itself: its images, symbols, metaphors, rhyme, meter, point of view, setting, characterization, plot” (p.137). Thus, Dickinson’s *One Dignity Delays for All* and *‘Twas Warm – at First – like Us* are closely read and examined in this study in terms of punctuation, capitalisation, repetition, diction and literary devices, including figurative language from the New Critical viewpoint by mainly focusing on the poems rather than the life and time of the poet.

2. The Concept of Death in Dickinson’s *One Dignity Delays for All*

In her poem *One Dignity Delays for All*, Dickinson reveals her perspective towards death as an honourable and noble afterlife journey that must be welcomed by everyone regardless of

their rank, wealth or position. Similarly, the first stanza praises death which each living creature including the kings, the queens or the ordinary would meet and cannot avoid, and she portrays death as something not to be feared. The first stanza compares death to the coronation – in other words, a ceremony to place the crown on the head of the king or queen as the sign of praising death and afterlife, which can be inferred from the symbolic words “dignity”, “crown”, and “purple”. The first line may also be ironical that dignity denotes deserving to be respected, and some people can have this dignity solely when they die:

One dignity delays for all –
One mitred Afternoon –
None can avoid this purple –
None evade this crown! (Dickinson, 1960, p. 48)

On the other hand, it is highly possible to interpret that dignity connotes death, and death is a ceremony blessed by the priest to crown the dead person irrespective of a king, a queen or an ordinary person in the commendable royal afterlife as it can be deduced in the second line in which the word “afternoon” is compared to a bishop who wears a sacred hat as both metaphor and personification. The third and fourth lines of the poem also emphasize that nobody can escape from this “purple” and “crown”. The word “purple” can be thought of as the symbol of royalty and wealth by implying that ordinary people can be also noble and regal when they die. Moreover, the colour purple can be interpreted as an example of imagery because it provides a vivid description of the royalty of death.

In the second stanza of the poem, the deceased’s coffin is carried on a coach as ‘the hearse’ by the footmen as ‘the undertaker’ regarding the customs of burying a person according to the society that is revealed in the poem. Furthermore, the bells ring in the village while the crowd is walking towards the cemetery, together with “chamber and state”:

Coach it insures, and footmen –
Chamber and state and throng –
Bells, also, in the village
As we ride grand along! (p. 48)

In the eighth line of the poem, the phrase “grand along” may symbolize the impressive and important journey to the cemetery – afterlife, and also can be thought to be an example of imagery because it reflects a picture of an honourable march and road towards the afterlife.

Likewise, the third stanza mirrors how the funeral is held at the place of the cemetery. A hundred of people from the state that symbolizes the high rank and the public who attend the funeral raise their hats while they are saying farewell to the dead person in the final salutation which is the moment when the coffin is put in the grave:

What dignified Attendants!
What service when we pause!
How loyally at parting
Their hundred hats they raise! (p. 48)

The words “dignified” and “loyally” in the previous lines are used to portray the people who attend the funeral. In this respect, it can be inferred that the attendants show their respect to the dead person by raising their hats during the burial. On the other hand, the phrase “hundred hats” may be an example of the irony in which such a crowd can be seen in an important person’s funeral but not in an ordinary person’s funeral.

The last stanza states that the “pomp” which denotes all the impressive clothes, decorations or music in the public ceremony turns into something much greater than the “ermine” which denotes kings or queens’ expensive white furs in the funerals by connoting that simplicity of the death journey surpasses the royalty of life journey. That is to say, the afterlife reigns over the supreme and becomes more honourable as well as noble than the earthly life. The fourteenth line pictures the funeral of “you and I” that are defined as “simple” in the poem, which symbolizes the equity of the regal and the ordinary regarding death:

How pomp surpassing ermine
When simple You and I,
Present our meek escutcheon
And claim the rank to die! (p. 48)

On the other hand, the fifteenth line asks the dead to present their “meek escutcheon” which denotes gentle shield with family sign but connotes their identity by symbolizing personality or individuality in order to claim their “rank to die” which also symbolizes deserving to start this honourable journey in which kings or queens possess the same rank as the poor and the ordinary. In other words, all the simple and meek turn into the noble when they die. The word “escutcheon” can be also regarded as an example of allusion as a reference to a coat of arms referring to each person’s identity regardless of being ordinary or regal.

Overall tone or mood of the poem can be concluded to be comforting as the portrayal of death as something not to be feared and praising death with the words “dignity”, “purple”, “crown”, “loyally” and “pomp” by denoting respected, royal, noble and honourable. The sad and serious mood can be also felt when the poem remarks that everyone will die sooner or later. Furthermore, the punctuations that are used in the poem like the dashes which may refer to the need to pause and the exclamation marks which may refer to the strong feelings as well as the capitalization of some words like “Afternoon” or “Attendants” which may be used to put emphasis on particular words seemingly enrich the meaning of the poem. On the other hand, the funeral procession in the poem can be said to be described through the first-hand knowledge, and the speaker appears to be the poet herself. Considering the number of the lines in each stanza, the poem can be inferred to consist of quatrains which mean “a stanza of four lines, rhymed or unrhymed” (Cuddon, 1999, p. 719), and the poem is seemingly blank verse which means unrhymed though second and third stanzas appear to consist of xbyb rhyming scheme. Regarding all the previous interpretations, the theme of the poem can be deduced that no matter whom you are – a king or queen or an ordinary person, it is impossible to escape from death which is the best indicator of the equality of all human beings and must be praised as a noble and honourable journey to the afterlife.

3. The Concept of Death in Dickinson’s *‘Twas Warm – at First – like Us*

In her poem *‘Twas Warm – at First – like Us*, Dickinson reveals how a warm living body referring to “us” turns into a cold dead body referring to “it” – in other words, a corpse. The chill and the frost in the first stanza cause a warm living body to turn into a kind of stone or ice beginning from the forehead, fingers, and eyes. The first line emphasizes the warmth of the body is the sign of being alive like every human being, yet the physical death of the body – in other words, the dehumanizing process, begins with the coldness of the body:

‘Twas warm – at first – like Us –
Until there crept upon
A Chill – like frost upon a Glass –
Till all the scene – be gone. (Dickinson, 1960, p. 253)

In the first and third lines, similes with the phrases “like us” and “like frost upon a glass” create vivid images to picture the warmth and coldness of the body. In the fourth line, a whole life with the memories and thoughts by referring to the scene is gone, and it can be

also inferred that the poem may include an allusion to the winter with the words, “chill” and “frost” in addition to their comparisons to the concept of death itself.

On the other hand, the second stanza of the poem pictures how a living body meets its death beginning from the forehead:

The Forehead copied Stone –
The Fingers grew too cold
To ache – and like a Skater’s Brook –
The busy eyes – congealed – (p. 254)

Moreover, the second stanza creates vivid images thanks to the metaphor in the fifth line, imagery in the sixth line, simile in the seventh line, and personification in the eighth line. The coldness of “the forehead” and the body is compared to a “stone” whereas the feeling of coldness and pain in “the fingers” is presented through imagery. On the other hand, the coldness of “the busy eyes” are compared to “a Skater’s Brook” through simile (and maybe a hyperbole) – brook means “a small stream” (Longman, 2010), which may refer to the frozen stream or river by also referring to the frozen eyes of a dead person. In the eighth line, “the busy eyes” that are personified through the word “busy” and compared to the living body itself turn into frozen solid things, which is also another sign of dying.

The third stanza portrays the cold dead body as indifferent to people and life but victorious in pride and determination, which the dead body can solely do in its compulsory circumstances:

It straightened – that was all –
It crowded Cold to Cold –
It multiplied indifference –
As Pride were all it could – (p. 254)

In the ninth and tenth lines, the body is portrayed as lying straight on the ground by getting colder and in the end becoming “it” rather than a person. The corpse stands still and seems dignified on its journey to the afterlife, that’s why the uncomplaining, silent and obligatory acceptance of the dead body. Similarly, the last stanza states through similes and imageries that the cold lifeless body lowers to the ground like “weight” and drops like “adamant” without making any signal and demurring.

And even when with Cords –
'Twas lowered, like a Weight –

It made no Signal, nor demurred,
But dropped like Adamant. (p. 254)

In the fourteenth and sixteenth lines, the dead body is compared to the “weight” and “adamant” with similes in which a vivid image is created how the dead body falls down as it is just a stone that has weight but no importance. The word “adamant” is an effective choice to picture a dead body, which means “the hardest metal, diamond” in Longman (2010) by possibly implying that a valuable living body turns into a lifeless and useless stone. The word choice of “adamant” may be also an example of the allusion – that is to say, a biblical reference to the prophet Adam by revealing that every living being will meet their death and turn into a corpse as the body of first born man, the prophet Adam met before.

Overall tone or mood of the poem can be deduced to be dark, unrelieved, worrying, and horrified especially through the words “chill”, “frost”, “ache”, and “congeal”. Repetition of the word “cold” puts emphasis on the coldness of death. Especially the idea of turning the living body into a cold stone or the eyes into frozen river creates frightening images for the readers. The punctuations such as the dashes and a comma for pause, a full stop for the end, and the capitalization of some words like “Us”, “Chill”, “Forehead”, “Stone” or “Cold” which may be utilized to emphasize particular words apparently enrich the meaning of the poem. On the other hand, the vivid description of the dying procession in the poem is seemingly portrayed by the first-hand knowledge, and the speaker appears to be the poet even though the use of “it” as a pronoun and “the” as an article before the words “forehead” and “fingers” may create a distance between the speaker and the body. Regarding the number of the lines in each stanza, the poem includes quatrains as *One Dignity Delays for All* does, and it is seemingly blank verse which means unrhymed although the first stanza begins with abab rhyming scheme, and the second as well as the third stanzas appear to consist of xbyb rhyming scheme, which means the stanzas lose the rhyme. Considering the entire interpretations, the theme of the poem can be inferred that every warm living body will inevitably turn into a cold dead body and fall down to the ground like a useless stone at the moment of dying, which may create frustration and terror in human mind.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, it can be highlighted that Dickinson’s *One Dignity Delays for All* and *’Twas Warm – at First – like Us* share some similarities especially in terms of the central theme and the use of vivid imageries despite their particular differences especially with regard to the use

of literary devices and figurative language such as tone and similes. The most notable similarity between the two poems is their central theme as the inevitability of death whereas *One Dignity Delays for All* describes the funeral procession and *'Twas Warm – at First – like Us* illustrates the physical dying procession of a living body. In both poems, the common theme is evidently the fact that death is an inevitable part of life, and each living body will eventually die sooner or later. In this regard, *One Dignity Delays for All* emphasizes the equity of all the human beings at the moment of dying, hence death is a concept that destroys all kinds of discrimination – poor or rich, ordinary or royal, man or woman. On the other hand, *'Twas Warm – at First – like Us* pictures how a warm living body turns into a cold corpse or stone in an objective manner. Both poems also share the similarity of telling the burial and dying procession in the chronological order through vivid images such as crowd, footmen, coach, chamber, throng, grand along, pomp or ermine in *One Dignity Delays for All*, and chill, frost, brook, cold, stone or adamant in *'Twas Warm – at First – like Us*.

In both poems, Dickinson masterfully uses the words and figurative language such as metaphors, similes, symbols, denotations, connotations, and imageries to mirror her perspectives towards death, funeral and corpse even though their diction – in other words, the choice and use of the words, differs regarding their purpose of conveying different meanings. In this respect, the words “dignity”, “crown” or “purple” can be given as the examples of the connotations and symbols of death as the process of setting off a noble journey in *One Dignity Delays for All* whereas the words “chill”, “frost” or “stone” as the connotations and symbols of death as the process of turning into cold corpse in *'Twas Warm – at First – like Us*. Thus, it can be deduced that the tone of the poems is different from each other – that is, the tone of *One Dignity Delays for All* appears more optimistic, comforting and praising whereas the tone of *Twas Warm – at First – like Us* seems more pessimistic, discomfoting and horrifying in the vivid descriptions of the physical death stage by stage.

The use of similes and metaphors in addition to the personifications is the next apparent difference between two poems – in other words, there appear metaphors and personifications including “mitred Afternoon” or “crown” but no simile in *One Dignity Delays for All* whereas several examples for similes such as “like Us”, “like frost” and “like Skater’s Brook” can be seen in *'Twas Warm – at First – like Us*. On the other hand, in both poems, speakers seem to be the poet herself though there appears a distance between the speaker and the poem in *'Twas Warm – at First – like Us*. Both poems can be said to be in the form of quatrain – each stanza includes four lines – and blank verse with their unrhymed schemes

though there appear abab or xbyb rhyming schemes which are not seen in the entire poems. Furthermore, some words are intentionally capitalized to most probably emphasize the importance of these words in both poems. It is also possible to see the uses of caesura as a moment of stop or pause that is shown by punctuation (!) or grammatical boundary (–), which may be used to break up the rhythm of a poem, to have the effect of a dramatic pause or an aesthetic choice. In this regard, it can be inferred that capitalization, punctuation, diction, and repetition in addition to figurative language are all used to create and enrich the meaning in both poems in accordance with the perspective of New Criticism.

References

- Cuddon, J. A. (1999). *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory*. England: Penguin Books.
- Dickinson, E. (1960). One Dignity Delays for All. In Johnson, T. H. (Ed.). *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company. 48.
- Dickinson, E. (1960). ‘Twas Warm – at First – like Us. In Johnson, T. H. (Ed.). *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company. 253-254.
- Longman (2010). *Advanced Dictionary of Contemporary English*. England: Pearson Education Limited.
- Martin, W. (2002). Introduction. In Martin, W. (Ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1-8.
- McNaughton, R. F. (1949). Emily Dickinson on Death. *Prairie Schooner*, 23(2). 203-214. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40624107>
- Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.