

Representation of Death in Poems of Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost: A Stylistic Analysis Because I could not Stop for Death

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Abstract

The focus of this research paper is to analyze two poems by Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost stylistically to trace the representation of death. Two poems because I could not stop for Death and A Soldier are selected for discussion. Certain aspects are covered while analyzing the poems through semantics, grammar, word choices, and phonology. Both the poems are based on universal theme of death. The present research is beneficial to get a thorough understanding of the structure and stylistics of the selected poems. Multiple stylistic devices are brought in to light as a result of this study. Moreover the present study focuses on the deep philosophy of the poets in a way to capture their identity.

Keywords: Stylistics, perspectives, themes, semantic, Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson

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 Grain--
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--

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

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

A Soldier

He is that fallen lance that lies as hurled,
 That lies unlifted now, come dew, come rust,
 But still lies pointed as it plowed the dust.
 If we who sight along it round the world,
 See nothing worthy to have been its mark,
 It is because like men we look too near,
 Forgetting that as fitted to the sphere,
 Our missiles always make too short an arc.
 They fall, they rip the grass, they intersect
 The curve of earth, and striking, break their own;
 They make us cringe for metal-point on stone.
 But this we know, the obstacle that checked
 And tripped the body, shot the spirit on
 Further than target ever showed or shone.

1. Introduction

The word style is derived from Latin “stylus” that means “anything to write with”. Style is the main feature of any piece of literary work that help a writer to represent his ideas through selection of words, vocabulary, literary devices, certain strategies to enhance the tone of his work. Arthur Schopenhauer defines stylistics “the physiognomy of the mind” that means that whatever are the word choices made by writer these all mark his personality. It contributes to establish the identity of writer, poet and novelist as well. Thomas Kane in his *The New Oxford Guide to Writing* defines, “Style is immediate and obvious. It exists in the writing itself; it is the sum of the actual words, sentences, paragraphs (1988:8).” Through stylistics an idea is represented with multiple dimensions. Therefore style is a medium through which writer gets identified through projection of his philosophy. Stylistics is a domain of linguistics with primary concern of different choices, words, structures and ordering of sentences in a piece of writing. According to Widdowson (1975) stylistic is “the study of literary discourse from a linguistic orientation”. He relates literary criticism with linguistics in stylistic studies. Style is present in verbal written text both but it gets more prominence in written form. The stylistics in these poems actually trace for the ideas that cannot be located apparently but are structured in the units of sentences through rhetoric, morphemes, phones, irony, metaphorical terms, symbolic devices. The themes are embedded deep down. Style to represent philosophy focus the true personality of writers as The Count de Buffon in his “*Le style est l’homme meme* (1753),” records as, “Style is the man himself”. Stylistics are interpreted differently by different scholars as Roger Fowler, a literary scholar interrogates stylistics in terms of relation of language with social, contextual aspects. While some other scholars as Stanley Fish and Barbara Hernstien Smith in late 90’s give focus to the logics contained by language of a literary text in stylistics.

1.1. Introduction of the Poets

Robert Frost (1874-1964), a poet, mentor, a scholar was born in San Francisco, California. He displayed his full depth intellectual knowledge of literary, scientific and historical ideas through his poetry. He did not write about the monetary or political problems of the modern age. He has written about social and philosophical issues of his society. He has profoundly reflected philosophical anxiety about matter of realities about life, death, humanity in his later poems. By wrapping these ideas in ambiguity he gives an insight of his own sensitive soul. According to him this universe is infact a triangle of God, nature and man, all interconnected in one way or other through spiritualism. Human make structures, nature launches seasons while God establishes universe and super universe. He believes on the duality of nature, as a maker, a soother and as a destroyer in form of unpredictable calamities. This very idea of nature being kind and cruel at the same time is found in Robert Frost’s poetry. His realistic approach towards nature is the result of his own working as a farmer under tough natural environment. Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (1830-1886) was born in Amherst, Massachusetts. She got due recognition after publication of Johnson’s third edition of Dickinson’s complete poems in 1952. She remade every philosophy according to her spiritual approach in her poetry. A major collection of her poems comprising of almost five hundred poems focus the theme of death. She gives a spiritual status to death that comes after God. According to her philosophy death is portrayed as immortal agent who never fades while human made world is meant to be mortal.

Emily Dickenson observed death from close as she lived in a rural natural environment experiencing seasonal changes, animals and their decay, plants with their life cycles. That was a time when a minor infection was enough to claim death of people due to lack of medical advancement. Theme of death came very naturally in her poems due to life was always accompanied by death in her rural environment. One of her friends Sofia Holland died and this tragedy over sensitized Emily while enhancing her anxiety about death.

1.2. Introduction of the Poems

A Soldier is a famous poem by Robert Frost taken from his collection *West Running Brook* published in 1928. Some of the famous poems from this collection are *West Running Brook*, *Devotion*, *A Peck of Gold*, and *The Freedom of Moon*. All poems of this collection reflect the command of poet to tie different emotions in single strand of poetry with certain profoundness. He uses multiple literary devices to enhance the aesthetic side of poetry along with projection of his philosophy. He genuinely uses metaphorical devices, similes, repetition, metaphor, symbolism and onomatopoeia. This poem *A Soldier* exhibits his absolute power of imagination that makes him one of greatest poet of time. Structure of the poem consists of lines, couplets, strophes and stanza. *Because I could not stop for Death* is taken from complete collection of poems by Emily Dickinson published in 1924. Her famous poems are *I heard a Fly buzz — when I died*, *Those — dying Then*, *This World is not Conclusion* and *I know that He exists*. In the poem *Because I could not stop for Death* she personifies death with a very gentle character. This poem comprises of twenty four free verse line scheme. She portrays death as a physical being who comes as kind fellow to take the protagonist to her final destiny i.e. death. Critics remark on her poetry in Emily Dickenson as “through bitterness we learn to appreciate the sweet” (2008:14). She carries the poem by using poetic devices like repetition, personification, metaphor, pun, irony, capitalizing letters and alliteration. It gives the message that while one is never prepared to meet death but one should happily face the fact that death is the real destiny of man.

2. Methodology

Themes of the poems will be explored by analyzing different poetic devices and sentence structure. The research will focus how the poets have represented the philosophy of death through style and structure of the poems.

3. Themes of the Poems

Theme of the poem *Because I could not stop for Death* revolves around issues of death, immortality, final destination, limited power of human beings and mysterious nature of death. Death is a mystery because it does not show any plans rather embraces one all of a sudden as narrator in the poem is busy in her life but death takes her away. It can come any time and catches any one it likes whether one is busy in merry making in this mortal world or busy in troubles. Immortality is ambiguous idea given by Emily that is left to multiple interpretations by reader, as it could be paradise, heaven, and hell or may be in between. The very title of the poem *Because I could not stop for Death* implies that one is too busy in worldly matters and does not have time to die even. Robert Frost in *A Soldier* is giving a tribute to soldiers and laments at the reality that how the sacrifices of soldiers are easily forgotten after their death. He is of the opinion that no matter physically a soldier is dead but his spirit is alive, it can never be dead. He gives full focus to soldier by dedicating the title of his poem to soldier. Poem rejects the misconception about soldiers that they are not important in a war; rather he projects the idea that they are important even after they are dead.

3.1. Incorporation of Theme of Death

Theme of death has been represented by Emily in the poem *Because I could not stop for Death* through the use of variety of words like “kindly”, “civility” and “paused”. These words used for death show that death is not a painful experience rather it is smooth. “Labor” and “Leisure” are used to describe the responsibilities along with happiness one enjoys in this world. It gives the idea that no matter how much man is indulged in mortal world he has to put away with its responsibilities one day to embrace death. In third stanza Emily draws whole life cycle from beginning, youth and death by words like “children”, “gazing grain” and “setting sun”. These words show that nothing is permanent in this world by realizing reader that every phase of the life has to pass. Emily reflects pessimistic approach when she portrays coldness of death through the words “quivering”, “chill”. She warns reader in a way to get prepare for death every time because it is unexpected always. Further she proceeds by referring grave to her eternal house that looks like ‘swelling’ of a ground. In the end she concludes by suggesting death as final, immortal destination by using word “eternity”.

A Soldier is about a soldier as title of the poem suggests. The soldier died in a battle like a weapon “fallen lance” that is laying the ground. The dead soldier gathers “dew” and “rust” with the passage of time due to negligence of others. The lance lies quietly while pointing towards some direction represents the idea that soldier is dead but still he is careful about his duty. Even after death soldier remains aware of his responsibility through his spirit, “And tripped the body, shot the spirit on”. The poet laments at the negligence of soldiers by people as “See nothing worthy to have been its mark”. Through description it seems that narrator is passing through a war ground. He gives the message that though death departs a soldier physically but he should be cherished in good memory of the people living in the world. Robert Frost does not blame people for their harsh approach towards dead soldiers rather he points toward their natural short sightedness “It is because like men we look too near”.

3.2. Poetic Devices

Metaphor

In the poem because I could not stop for Death, Death is portrayed as a lively physical character in form of metaphor to display the death as a process. The house is reflected as a “grave” in a metaphorical sense to show the willingness of narrator to die. Robert Frost shows a command in relating apparent meaning of language with the intended one through metaphor, as he himself admits it in Education by Poetry “Unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you’ve had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere (p 14).” Robert Frost refers a dead soldier metaphorically with a weapon that lies on earth without moving an inch. He is that fallen lance that lies as hurled (line 1).

Symbolism

When an idea is represented indirectly through symbols it is called symbolism. Emily Dickinson represents death symbolically by using word “He” for death where as “us” symbolizes human beings. Cold freezing weather symbolizes that death is bitter and cold. Grave is represented as “swelling”, with plane roof that symbolizes the smoothness with which these died ones are forgotten so easily in this world. “Civility” of death is symbolizing towards the liberation of a soul from this hard stricken mortal world towards one’s final immortal destiny. The narrator readily agrees to go with death because she got fed up of this bitter world and is impressed by “kind” and civilized death. The word “school” in third stanza stands for fresh start of life, while “grain” symbolizes the peak of life means youth, and “setting sun” is meant for end of life. The word “cornice” symbolically refers to the grave’s tomb. The words “spirit” and “rust” in A Soldier symbolizes life after death, and to the passage of time respectively.

Personification

We find personification of death in Because I could not stop for Death as it is shown as a person depicting humanly characteristics. “He kindly stopped for me (line2),” “We slowly drove (line 5),” “We paused (line 17).” Then she attributes humanly quality to setting sun as “He passed us (line 13).” The poem A Soldier personifies the weapon by giving it humanly qualities, “Lance that lies (line 1),” and “plowed the dust (line 3).”

Irony

Kindness of Death is ironically reflected by Emily that it is disturbing the narrator amid her engagements in worldly activities and taking some where unknown. Death even does not give her time to get prepare for cold weather, and she is under dressed. Death is portrayed “civilized” ironically because it has got power to achieve what it wants then no need to be forceful. Emily focuses ironically on the unexpected arrival of death in these lines as “ He kindly stopped for me—“. Irony in A Soldier is traced by the line, “That lies unlifted now, come dew, come rust (line 2).” The words “rust” and “dew” are used ironically to show the denied state of a dead soldier that in war when he is alive and performs his duty only then he is admired and after his death he is easily forgotten.

Capitalization

Emily Dickinson capitalizes the letter to make reader stop a while and lay focus on the word to interpret it from multiple angles. Like the words “God” “Death” “ourselves” and “Immortality” “Ground” are capitalized. Moreover the word “Stop” is used as a pun by Emily, it stands to warn the speaker to stop performing worldly activities. Robert Frost capitalizes words in the beginning of the sentence and then carries theme of the poem with the help of pauses.

Punctuation

Emily Dickinson in her poem *Because I could not stop for Death* deliberately uses certain techniques like dash in a sentence for a much needed focus by reader. For example in the poem *At Recess--in the Ring*—(line 10), *The Cornice--in the Ground*—(line 20) expect reader to pause a little longer here. Some critics call this style as a natural style of Emily Dickinson, while others argue it to be an adopted one. Paul Crumbley in *Inflections of the Pen: Dash and Voice in Emily Dickinson (1997)*¹ attributes the use of dashes, and divisions as the reflection of her personality through her poems. Continuity and pause is carried by Frost in the poem by use of comma and full stops.

Alliteration

Alliteration means when beginning consonant sounds are repeated. In poem *Because I could not stop for death* “recess ring (line 10),” “grazing grain (line 11),” “setting sun (line 12),” “gossamer gown (line 15),” “tippet tulle (line 16),” “horses heads (line 23).”

Repetition

The word “we passed” is repeated thrice in third stanza of the poem *because I could not stop for Death* to focus the attention of reader towards step by step process of journey towards final destination. The word “lies” is repeated in first three lines and the word ‘they’ in line 9, of the poem *A Soldier* to stress the reference it gives for body of soldier.

Paradox

Paradox is a self-contradicting statement that is used to enhance aesthetics of literary piece of work, it is infact used to motivate the reader to grasp the idea hidden deep down in structure. Emily Dickinson uses paradox in her poem as in following lines as,

Since then 'tis centuries, and yet each
Feels shorter than the day
I first surmised the horses' heads (lines 21-23).

A Soldier is a combination of figurative devices such as paradox is traced here in line 9 as,
They fall, they rip the grass, they intersect.

Imagery

Imagery is a sensual representation of an experience to help the reader to create an image. Emily Dickinson use imagery in the poem *Because I could not stop for Death* .e.g. In second last stanza creates a visual imagery of a grave by implying words like ‘cornice’ and “swelling”. Robert Frost creates imagery by to establish a bitter image of war in the line “They make us cringe for metal-point on stone”. *A Soldier* makes use of imagery as,

‘Our missiles always make too short an arc.
They fall, they rip the grass, they intersect (line 8-9).

Hyperbole

Hyperbole stands for exaggerated statement that is shown to focus intensity of thought being discussed. *Because I could not stop for Death* uses hyperbole when narrator shows intensity of her feeling about possibility of death as, “I first surmised the horses' heads were toward eternity.” (Line 23-24). The narrator says that there is gap of hundred years but it feels only less than a day.

Since then--'tis Centuries--and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
Robert Frost exaggerates about the unfailing spirit of a soldier through hyperbole as we see in lines:

But this we know, the obstacle that checked
And tripped the body, shot the spirit on (line 12-13).

Rhyme Scheme

The rhyme scheme is not as strictly followed by Emily as it is seen that second and fourth lines of all stanzas rhyme except third stanza. Rhyming scheme of *A Soldier* is ABBACDDCEFFEGG.

¹ Paul Crumbley worked on the use of punctuation in poems of Emily Dickinson and published his book in 1997

Conclusion

The two discussed poems because I could not stop for Death by Emily Dickinson and A Soldier by Robert Frost provide reader with food for thought for multiple interpretations of death. The poems represent death as a reality that needs to be embraced willingly. The stylistic discussion of these poems reveals that meanings are embedded deep down with the help of linguistic structure. Both the poems reflect the realities of life, death and what happens after death rather the harsh reality that death of loved one is easily accepted by friends, family or well wishers. Stylistic analysis of the poems reveals the personal philosophy of the poets about death.

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