

*Dialogic Conversation in Emily Dickinson's Poems*  
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## **Dialogic Conversation in Emily Dickinson's Poems**

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### **Abstract**

*Emily Dickinson one of the greatest poets of America who belonged to the nineteenth century has written poems under themes innumerable. Though she proves to be great in all her themes, she proves her individuality in poems that deals with death and eternity. Dickinson since her childhood was always engaged in the thoughts of death and her mind was preoccupied with death-related scenes. She was believed to be obsessed with the thought of death and throughout her life, her mind was perpetually engaged in conversation with death which she pours in the form of poems. More than hundreds of her poems deal with the theme of death and eternity, wherein she expresses her doubts and faith at the same time and also willingness and stubbornness in accepting or rejecting the harsh reality of life. One of the reasons for her obsession with death seems to be her seclusion from the external world and her reclusive behavior. Apart from this, she lived in a house which was adjacent to the cemetery from where she happened to view death funerals very often. Another reason for her death obsession was the deaths of her near and dear ones which made her to probe into the undiscovered continent. No two poems of her in the same theme have similar views. At times it is contradictory, and many a time perplexing. Dickinson did not have any particular theory and specific rule for her poetry. Her poems have no title as well. The first line of her poem is taken as the title of the poem. Most important thing to be noted about Emily Dickinson is that, she did not write poetry to impress her readers or for publications. All her poems are a genuine expressions and impressions of her own perception and understandings, which make her unique among her contemporaries.*

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## **Introduction**

Death is inevitable to all and it is one of the harsh realities of life. Man has to encounter it willingly or unwillingly in whatsoever condition he is, with no option left. Almost all have a kind of fear, not knowing what exactly it is and how exactly it would be. Some even fear to have a discussion about this topic and some consider it as inauspicious. All we know about death is through religious scriptures, books, and hearsay apart from death which we see around us. Many poets down the ages have written about death, treating it as a theme or as a subject. As we delve deeper into this theme or subject, we find that poets mostly have interpreted death as an entity to be despised, unwanted, feared, escaped, ruthless, ominous and in short, have given a negative picture about it. Why these poets have been so obsessed with death and treated it as a subject? It is a matter of speculation.

Poets who were religious and those who had a different opinion about religion too had expressed their views on death based on their own understanding. Death has no connection with religion, though religious renderings have greatly influenced people and their beliefs. Apart from religious scriptures, poets have written about death based on their own interpretation and understanding of it. Some poets have applied their own sensibilities to the social ideals of an earlier age. Poets' prediction and depiction of death and the predicament of their beliefs are not the same as that of Dickinson. Dickinson's attitude is wholly different. It is the confrontation of a keenly perceptive and intensely sensitive mind with the mystery of death. In many of her poems, there is a kind of mystery of existence, trying to explore the life after death. Her mind seems to engage in conversations with whatever doubts she has. She did not confide in anyone and to her, the best companion was her own mind. Her conversations, her doubts, her convictions all paved way in her poetry. In hundreds of poems, she explores the nature of death and eternity. Although her obsession with death seemed to destroy her life, it allowed her to express her true genius through poetry this was the time when she created her greatest works (Sewell, 15).

Dickinson's poem 'Death is a Dialogue between' expresses her views on death and the afterlife. She was of the opinion that death is not the end of life, it continues in the form of spirit and lives an immortal life till eternity. As her mind was always engaged in thoughts of death, it engages in conversation with death and tries to convince herself with the arguments which ensue in her mind. In most of the poems, death is personified, and in this poem, death argues with the body and the body affirms its belief of the body's transformation into spirit.

Death is a Dialogue between  
The Spirit and the Dust.  
“Dissolve,” says Death — The Spirit “Sir  
I have another Trust” —  
Death doubts it — Argues from the Ground —  
The Spirit turns away  
Just laying off for evidence  
An Overcoat of Clay.

Dickinson at any cost is not readily accept that death is the end of life. She strongly believed in afterlife. In this poem when death says to dissolve, the spirit of the body is not ready to accept its order to dissolve or to perish forever. Dissolve also connotes consciousness and Dickinson were very particular about her consciousness which she never wanted to lose. Dickinson seems to show no fear or panic when she encounters death rather, she is bold enough to say that she has another trust. When she says that she has another trust, this shows that she has more than one trust. When analyzed deeply about Dickinson and her biography from her poems and her letters one can find that her belief and faith in God and scriptures were not the same as their contemporaries or even their family members. Dickinson spent a lifetime aware of the thoughtfulness required in religious belief: “She comprehended more fully than most people in her day how much the human mind contributes to the process of belief” (Lundin 3). She believed in God but not as depicted by the scriptures. She believed in afterlife, but did not believe in hell. Her belief was only going to heaven not to hell as preached in the churches. According to Christianity, all damned souls will be doomed to hell and all blessed souls will go to heaven. Christians are divided into sinners and saved and they believed in the ‘original sin’ which Dickinson was not ready to accept. Dickinson never wanted to believe in angry God, her perception of God was kind and merciful who will take her to heaven and that alone could be a promise of God. So, her trust here could mean both in God and in heaven.

‘Death doubts that’ because after death, the body has to become dust and then it has to be resurrected and eventually it has to face the Judgement Day where all the souls will be judged based on their deeds and then sent to heaven or thrown into hell. As this is a long process, death argues from the ground that the dead cannot have trust, only living beings can have trust. As Dickinson was very particular about not losing her consciousness, and her trust in going to heaven was equally strong, she never had a second thought of other things, believed by other people of

her time. As an evidence, her spirit leaves her overcoat of clay turns away. This last stanza shows her conviction about her trust in an afterlife which is eternity. This line is also a proof of her uncompromising spirit which is not ready to succumb to the prevalent ideologies and practices of her society and her religion. She never had a second thought about hell, sin, damned or doomed souls, punishment, etc. Her one and only belief in the afterlife is eternity and to her death is just a gateway to eternity.

Death is considered to be a cruel thing by most of the people, but in this poem, Dickinson seems to be quite nonchalant and casual. It is not that Dickinson was not afraid of death, but it was her encounters with death scenes and her deep contemplation on this morbid theme that made her to have a dialogic conversation with death in her mind. Her imagination does not stop with the conversation with death, it rather continues. The concepts of good and evil, life and death, and where you go when you die turned into an obsession with Emily which led her to spent a lot of time worrying about it and writing about it as her life slowly went by instead of enjoying life and living it to its fullest (Sewell, 12). Whenever death is discussed, what happens next, where will the dead go, and such similar question to arise. Dickinson too pours her doubts again in the form of conversation in her mind which could be seen in another poem.

Is Heaven a Physician?  
They say that He can heal—  
But Medicine Posthumous  
Is unavailable—  
Is Heaven an Exchequer?  
They speak of what we owe—  
But that negotiation  
I'm not a Party to—

This poem shows her belief in God, heaven, and Christian conception of the same. Though she belonged to the nineteenth century when women were not seen to be so much articulate about religion and their choice of practice, Dickinson seemed to be very bold and articulate about her contradictory views on God, church, and its sermons. She always ridiculed the sermons and priests and she stopped going to church at the age of thirty. It was her own choice, as she was never enticed by the sermons and she never accepted Hell to be a permanent dwelling place for the sinners. It is not that she is an atheist, but her belief in God and His promises are not as preached by the Priest or as in the Bible. Her God and Heaven was entirely her own perception and conception. In the above poem, Dickinson engages in a dialogue,

where she questions about God, church, and heaven as portrayed by her society and the priests in the church. Heaven in the first line connotes God and Dickinson compares Him to a Physician as depicted in Bible. It is believed by Christians that God is a Physicians who alone can heal all the maladies, but Dickinson does not want to believe in such a God who will heal only after one passes away from this world or to say posthumously. Her mind was filled with so much doubt about hell, sin, damnation, redemption, and other uncertain certainties that she wanted to be answered by her God. But it was not available to her in this world and she had to wait for answers in eternity. In the second stanza. Heaven connotes Church but Dickinson goes to the extent of comparing church with Exchequer, which is a money-collecting department. Priests in Church during their sermons talk about what man owes, and based on the deeds in this world, He/She will be rewarded with Heaven or Punished in Hell which is the negotiation which they do in the church. As Dickinson was never in concurrent with this belief of hell and damnation, she says at the end of the poem that she does not belong to that party. During Dickinson's period, Puritanism has practiced ardently which was the order of the day. Though Dickinson had no qualms with the positive side of puritanism which talks about heaven and blissful life in eternity, her problem was only with the hopeless condition of mankind. According to Christianity and the sermons of the priest in Churches, all the sinners will be doomed to hell. These doubts and pervasive thoughts take the form of dialogues that engage in conversations.

In these poems, one can find some religious elements prevalent due to her cultural and religious background. Religious perception of Dickinson and her quest to know about the dark secrets pushes her to engage in conversation with it imaginatively. The doubts she had with regard to death and eternity are because she never wanted to believe the dark side of it, which talks about damnation and hell. The dialogues which ensue in her poems prove that she was very much bothered about death and eternity and also her poems give us a glimpse of her expectation and speculation on it. Charles Anderson states that her curiosity about the dark reality is a part of her environment which was engrossed in religious practices, "Christian belief in general, he says, "made crucial the dividing line between mortality and immortality, and the emphasis was doubled by insatiable puritan curiosity to know who are the Elect. In her old-fashioned village death would still prompt the customary questions" (231). With regard to literary influences, Chase avers that there was, "the poetic tradition of transience, the brief human calendar set against eternity" (234).

## Conclusion

Dickinson uses her poetry to express her feeling and as an exploration of her thoughts. The unique atmosphere in which Dickinson wrote and her lack of formal training makes her poetry honest and true. She writes what she thinks and believes; “for what did actually concern her- her prevision of death and her insight onto the spiritual life” (Blackmur,89). Her contemplation and her curiosity to know about death and eternity lead her to engage in conversation with it imaginatively which are poured in the form of poems. In these poems, she expresses her ideas which are complacent to her. Her dialogues and conversations in her poems show that she was never satisfied with the existing paradigm of beliefs, rather had her own conviction was unique and different. The dialogues and their reciprocations are very bold and at times unorthodox, that too in an era, when religious fervor was at its peak. She never bothered about her society and their reaction towards her belief and her practices. As she was a recluse and led a secluded life, she vented her emotions and feelings in the form of poems. Her mind was perpetually engaged in conversation with death and eternity. Whatever doubts she had which she expresses in the form of conversation, is answered by her own self, which is purely her own and not based on religious beliefs of her period. Her dialogic conversation with her obsession with death and the afterlife and immortality and eternity places her above other poets of all the ages. Her wonderful use of images and metaphor lend to the individuality of her creativity.

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