

EMILY DICKINSON'S PERCEPTION OF ETERNITY IN SELECT POEMS

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Abstract

With close to two thousand different poems and one Thousand of her letters to her friends that survived her death, Emily Dickinson showed that she was a truly dedicated writer. Emily Dickinson could be read as if she is a contemporary poet who is voicing our voice or representing our time. Not all can put forth their thoughts and emotions which arise due to doubt and confusion as Dickinson did, due to which readers and critics together give much attention to her. Most important reason is that she did not write for publication or to impress others. All her poems are authentic and genuine impressions and expressions of her experiences, opinions and imaginations. Dickinson wrote poems on myriad human encounters. Her understanding of life and afterlife haunted her very much. She was obsessed with the thought of death whereas she was fascinated by the thought of eternity. Dickinson's perception of eternity is not the same as that of other poets of her time. It was different at the same time unique. Her poems are proof for her belief in eternity and her perception was not confined to the clutches of her time.

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Introduction:

Poets and writers, down the ages, have mainly sought to capture in their works the surviving moment of realization through the sense of consciousness of time and made their work eternal. Emily Dickinson, the poet, is the one who has expressed her sense of consciousness in her poems and probed into many aspects of life and presented them in different themes. As an analyst, Emily Dickinson constantly explored her inner self, trying to find inferences and articulating those intellectual experiences in her poetry. As a poet, Emily Dickinson deals with various themes such as love and life, nature, pain and sufferings, death and immortality, God and religion, spirituality and renunciation, artistic philosophy and universality and so on. It is difficult to search the exact themes of her poetry as it is packed with multiple layers and multiple themes in a few lines of the same poem. But to see Dickinson at her best, most characteristic and most profound, one can find a remarkable range of introspection on the idea of eternity found in her poems. The thoughts are hard, bright and clear. Her symbols, metaphors of which she could be prodigal have much clarity and transparency.

The problem of eternity and immortality haunted her mind throughout her life. Her religious perception was quite ambivalent as she was almost split between the orthodox view of eternity and her own interpretation of it. When she openly refused to accept to be among the 'saved', she became rebellious in the matters of religion. Dickinson believes that there is an afterlife which she confirms in many of her poems but not sure of what it entails. Whatever it entails, Dickinson had her own imagination and perception was entirely distinct. But at the same it cannot be disregarded that she was without fear on the harsh reality, death. Her mind was filled with terror at the thought of death, but at the same time tried to rationalize with the thought of eternity by rejecting the orthodox view of it. It is a drama in the mind as Lawrence Kappel observes, "Emily Dickinson's commitment to privacy and the internal drama of consciousness is the fundamental principle of her poetry" (33). She thinks it is blunder to estimate eternity, for she knew about it though virtually which she expresses in many of her poems. To Emily Dickinson one need not go to some far-off place to find eternity. Heaven or eternity may be invisible, but can be heard as music. The thought of it beckons and baffles. Dickinson is not ready to believe that this world would be her final place of rest, which is sullen and morose. She believes that there is a station beyond this world where certain species exists which is eternity. She never bothered about proof or reason about the existence of eternity and she felt that no one around her could give her satisfying answers and concrete proof of eternity. She also believes that eternity could be found here itself.

Emily Dickinson reminds one that it is a blunder to estimate eternity as something of the future in another world after death in Poem 1684, “The Blunder is in estimate”.

The Blunder is in estimate
Eternity is there
We say, as of a station-
Meanwhile he is so near
He joins me in my Ramble-
Divides abode with me-
No friend have I that so persists
As this eternity.

Eternity to Dickinson is not a station somewhere far off. She feels that it is so near to her; he walks with her as a companion on her walk around her garden and further he shares her residence. As Eternity always stays with her as a loyal companion, she finds no other faithful friends other than Eternity. Here, again Emily Dickinson speaks of finding eternity, just as her heaven and immortality here in this world itself. In her mind she is able to imagine eternity that it appears so real and near to her. She is convinced of the rare happiness she gets in the west loyal company of ‘eternity’. Dickinson lost her loved ones and her close friends at a very young age and could not bear the loss and the empty space created by these people. Speculating on the void created by these people she created a space for these people in her mind. Initially it was very difficult for her accept this harsh reality, but she had work hard on her mind and psyche to keep it poised and balanced and after a long struggle with the self she found solace. Slowly but steadily, she started accepting the fact and, in her mind, and imagination she believed that to die is not go on doom’s consummate chart, rather it is just a journey to eternity where all will meet one fine day. Death is just a phase to be crossed or passed to reach eternity where there will not be any doom for anyone. As Suzanne Juhasz contends, for Dickinson “eternity is the goal of the journey” (133), however her goal of eternity is as associated with Earth as it is to Heaven, which are the basis of faith and doubt. This life in the lasting company of ‘Eternity’ becomes clear when Dickinson says in Poem 1295.

To die is not to go-
On doom’s consummate chart
No territory new is staked-
Remain as thou art (9-12)

To the real being we go back as we must return Home, where we came from. ‘such a return’ is also possible during this life, the individual is willing to turn away from the outer world and contemplate his inner being. Human life is the term, between

eternity and immortality.

Death is the end of life. A life stands beyond this life after doom's day which is believed in Christianity, Islam and Jewish religion. Her belief in immortality is strong than the belief in the bible or the sermons in the church. Emily Dickinson also defines immortality in terms of changelessness, motionlessness, and finally timelessness and it spreads perpetual light. This idea is expressed in the There is a Zone whose even years (Poem 1056).

There is a Zone whose even Years
No Solstice interrupt —
Whose Sun constructs perpetual Noon
Whose perfect Seasons wait —

Whose Summer set in Summer, till
The Centuries of June
And Centuries of August cease
And Consciousness — is Noon.

Dickinson through this poem expresses that immortality and eternity is endless and all the seasons like summer and centuries of June and august or in general, months have ceased to exist. What exists is the bright light of daytime that Dickinson expresses as noon, as noon has brightest of light and eternal life is full of light. At the end of the poem Dickinson equates noon with consciousness. At noon brightness is at peak and to know and realize anything clearly and fully one need to be conscious. It is very important for anyone to retain one's consciousness at any point of time. To feel, realize and to enjoy anything, consciousness is important. Dickinson was always conscious about things around her and understood things on her own. At any point of time, she does not want to lose her consciousness. Being conscious is enough to understand what lies beyond this world and immortality to her conscious mind is a bliss, even, perpetual and perfect. Her life on earth was not a perfect life. Her mind and consciousness soar so high that he felt a unique kind of spiritual awareness and her consciousness was enlightened at the thought of immortality and eternity. Since some stunning occurs when a wonderful image is found in the faculty of mind, the mind feels elated. Dickinson was attracted to such sublime feelings based on the process of the imagination which repeatedly tries and at times fails to produce the image required by reason. Lyotard, a French philosopher and literary theorist states in such situations, the "obligation to which the imagination is subjected by reason does not only leave the imagination terrified, but gives it the courage to force its barriers and attempt a 'presentation of the infinite'" (151).

Conclusion

In Emily Dickinson's poetry one can see very clearly that there is no boundary between life here and life hereafter. Death and immortality haunted her mind all through her life. Emily Dickinson's deep inquiry of the unknown to be known are reflected in her poems. Her poems prove and qualify her to be truly introspective poet. Exploring unknown world and pondering on its existence based on the knowledge which she acquired through the scriptures and her own convictions made Emily Dickinson write hundreds of poems and umpteen number of letters to her friends and cousins. Emily Dickinson through her poems have a penetrating quality and challenging at the same in expressing her views boldly which makes the readers wonder and speculate on her poems.

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