

The Sound of Death in Emily Dickinson's Poems

Zhengyi Jiang*

School of Foreign Languages, Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou, China

*Corresponding author: supcheese@qq.com

Abstract. Emily Dickinson's poetry involves in many aspects and the theme of death has been highly studied. This paper is a follow-up study of related research about the theme of death and mainly analyzes some related poems to explore the sound of death and exhibit the death aesthetic in Dickinson's poetry. The study of death sound in Dickinson's poems also can provide a new perspective to appreciate the death theme of Dickinson's poetry.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson; sound; death; aesthetic; poems

1. Introduction

Emily Dickinson has been known as an American lyric poet. Her poems involve in many aspects, such as nature, religion, life, death and so on. The mystery of death, as an important part of the mystery of nature, has attracted much attention from Dickinson. Out of some one thousand and seven hundred poems, perhaps some "five to six hundred" are concerned with the theme of death (Nesteruk, Peter 25). Studies on the death theme of Dickinson's poems emerge in endlessly since her unique perspective and bold imagination of writing. Scholars have studied these poems from different perspectives. First of all, some researches revolved around the immortality of death and the concept of afterlife implied in Dickinson's poetry (Lu Xiao 2002). Besides, some researchers adopted a cognitive poetics approach to death metaphor in Emily Dickinson's poems and aimed to examine its presentation and development in the text (He Zhongqing, Zhao Jing 2019). What's more, someone tried to explore Dickinson's attitude towards death through a detailed analysis of one or two death poems (Yang Qiao 2019). Besides, auditory sense seems to hold an uncommon position when Dickinson depicted the theme of death, especially appeared in the condition between consciousness and unconsciousness. Many researchers have studied the theme of death in Emily Dickinson's poems, however, few studies have been done on the analysis of the sound of death which aims to explore the death aesthetic of Dickinson's poems. This research is a follow-up study of related research about the theme of death, which studies the death aesthetic from the sound of death in Emily Dickinson's Poems. In this present paper, I am going to analyze these below mentioned poems to explore and exhibit the sound of death and death aesthetic. The poems are: "Success is counted sweetest" (112), "There's a certain Slant of light" (320), "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (340), "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died - (591).

2. The Sound of Death

Generally speaking, sound is a particular auditory impression. It is also the sensation perceived by the sense of hearing. For humans, five senses, including visual, tactile, olfactory, gustatory and auditory senses, make us different. Among five of them, auditory sense became special in Emily Dickinson's death poems. The poet presents many scenes which are close to the death, specially by virtue of auditory sense to perceive the state of death. The sound of death that we discussed in Dickinson's poems is different of the medical death rattle, which is the noisy, rattling breathing that occurs in many dying patients (Wee et al., 2006). It mainly refers to the surrounding sound, which appears around the dead or between the condition of consciousness and unconsciousness makes the incognizable and grand death theme appreciable. The sound of death appears in various ways. On the one hand, it refers to the sound that could be heard by ears. On the other hand, it is a manifestation of the abstract concept-death which conveys a sense of heaviness and sorrow.

2.1 The Sound of Noise

Death, which can not be touched or seen, conceptually is an abstract object. It can also far from been tasted or smelled. Dickinson's unique art perspective is that she tries to transform the imperceptible death into the perceptible death.

In "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -" (591), Dickinson detailed the last moments of a dying person who was witnessed by the lowest insect, a disgusting fly. "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died - /The Stillness in the Room" (1-2). It was the most direct narrative and shocking scene that Dickinson had depicted about the sound before death. The silence of death contrasts sharply with the noise of flies all around. "Was like the Stillness in the Air -/Between the Heaves of Storm -" (3-4). Here Dickinson gives the voice of the poem to the speaker who is in the midst of traversing the border between life and death. And as such the association of dying with the noise of an insect is all the more jarring coming from such an unusual authority (Zarlengo 2). It also creates a close kinship between the reader and the speaker, as the speaker conveys her sense from life into death through the sound of her surroundings.

In "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (340), abstract image of death is directly depicted as a objective funeral in the speaker's brain. If the sound of a fly buzz is classified to a disturbing and noisy one, the sound heard at the funeral is much more annoying. "A Service, like a Drum -/Kept beating - beating - till I thought/My mind was going numb -" (6-8). The speaker takes this service for the dead as a beating drum. In such a narrow and limited space, the constant noises made by the mourners torture the dead mentally and physically.

2.2 The Sound of Sorrow

In the last stanza of "Success is counted sweetest" (112), the poet makes a contrast between the winning side and the losing side in the third person. "As he defeated-dying-/On whose forbidden ear" (9-10). A defeated soldier, with his last breath, heard the shouts of victory from his opponents in the distance. "The distant strains of triumph/Burst agonized and clear" (11-12)! Although this poem expresses that only those who experience failure can understand the true meaning of success, Dickinson also conceives of another way to reappear the scene of death. For the one who longs for success but nearly dying, the sound of triumph in the distance, is the sound of bitterness, which is full of sorrow and pity, and also is specifically memorable and indelible.

In "There's a certain Slant of light" (320), the emotions and psychological states caused by the imagination of death are perfectly reflected. At first, when the speaker enjoyed the winter afternoon alone, a slant of light through the window broke her solitude. She didn't feel pleased but suffered the oppression with the arrival of such an uninvited guest. The two lines, "That oppresses, like the Heft/Of Cathedral Tunes-" (3-4) shows that the light is similar to the sound of a church, which is so heavy and ponderous. This intangible oppression crushes the speaker's nerves and forces her to capture instantaneous senses. "Heavenly Hurt, it gives us-/We can find no scar" (5-6); "An imperial affliction/Sent us of the Air-" (11-12). As the light disappears, the speaker realizes that the life is going to pass away as well. The death comes silently and keeps everything intact, while the invisible sorrow covers everywhere.

3. Aesthetic of the Death Sound

In the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the term aesthetic is mainly defined as: of, relating to, or dealing with aesthetics or the beautiful; a particular theory or conception of beauty or art; a particular taste for or approach to what is pleasing to the senses and especially sight. This paper basically focuses on the conception of art and taste. The death is a very personal and intimate process, which in most cases is not beautiful. The reality of death in clinics, intensive care units and operating theatre is cruel by its human nature. Usually, the more intensely a person thinks about the final nature of life, the more he is bound to a moment in life that is limited in time. For most people, they are hardly willing to perceive death since it is full of unknown and horror and at most cases it is miserable and torturous.

Whereas Dickinson is not that kind of this group of people. She is indeed obsessed with the issue of mortality, meanwhile, she has an aptitude for capturing the aesthetic expression of death.

3.1 The Beauty of Death Scene

In the previous section, some poems have been discussed to express grief and sorrow by means of portraying different kinds of death sound. Besides, the related poems also convey some aesthetic experience to us. For example, the last stanza in “I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -”:

With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -

Between the light - and me -

And then the Windows failed - and then

I could not see to see- (qtd. in R. W. Franklin 591)

Here it is in combination with sight and sound to reach a state of artistic beauty. “Blue” could refer to the color, somewhere of a fly maybe blue. It also can be explained as the emotion of depressed and sad, specifically referring to the feeling of the speaker who was struggling for falling into unconsciousness. At this time, a stumbling buzz blocked the light of the speaker’s visual field. For the speaker, it just like closed the window of the real world and lost the last light, which also means blocked the possibility of the life. Dickinson’s thematic message here appears to be that at the moment of death, the human desire to live is ignited, and the senses become acutely tuned and highly appreciative of the most mundane details of life, simply because they are leaving it (Zarlengo 1999). And this scene, the conception of the last moments before death, reaches the level of artistic aesthetic. This finality, which is much closer to reality, is expressed as the inevitable ending all of us must go through without any horrible scenes.

3.2 The Beauty of Horror and Sublime

In Edmund Burke’s views, beautiful and sublime had an intimacy. Although they are in different ways apparently, passions inevitably linked them. No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain (Edmund Burke 53). In “There’s a certain Slant of light” (320), Death is depicted as an uninvited guest who is the object of terror. He is noiseless but exerts invisible pressures and despairs here and there. For the speaker, she has melded into the “landscape” and becomes a member of the nature so that the silence of the surrounding brings her “an imperial affliction”. “When it comes, the Landscape listens –/Shadows – hold their breath –” (13-14). Here almost everything stands in awe of Death and tries to lower their presences. The sound of death is full of unknown. The dashes in line of “– hold their breath –” are also meaningful. In most instances, Dickinson’s use of capitals and dashes, similarly, is at times without significance, and her grammar scratches the skull ever and anon (Clarence L. Gohdes 426). But here each dash demands that we pause for a moment, except for emphasizing the rhythmic and lyrical qualities of the poem, it also expresses the horror and sublime towards the death.

3.3 The Presentation of Afterlife

Death can be viewed both as a destroyer as well as a rescuer. For some it is the culmination of life and for some it just opens the door to new eternal world. Emily Dickinson’s philosophy of death is much more complicated. She is keen to observe the surrounding scenery, and catches instantaneous senses about the mystery of death. Death is also viewed as an escape route from the dull, mundane and grief-stricken world of reality, just as nature was the escape route for the Romantics (Khanday Ahmad 2017). In this aspect, death is no longer as a horrible marauder that people can’t accept but a wish of the rebirth in the afterlife. In Dickinson’s poetry, the idea of death is repeatedly accompanied by the possibility of life after death. For instance, the speaker of “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” (340) witnessed her whole funeral after she died. As the heroine of the funeral, the speaker narrated the process calmly. Meanwhile, she still could feel the physical pain of the existing world. After continuous torture of the noise and the tear of soul, the reason gradually disappeared. “As all the

Heavens were a Bell, /And Being, but an Ear, /And I, and Silence, some strange Race” (10-12), these three lines vividly describes the picture of the dead out of existence in real world. All senses except auditory sense become obscure little by little. The speaker can't see clearly and is hard to speak, only can receive the sound around her that proves she is still conscious. The last lines of this poem, “And I dropped down, and down-/And hit a World, at every plunge, /And Finished knowing-then -” (14-16), also indicates the concept of afterlife of Dickinson. Instead of fearing it, she accepts it as a cosmic truth and simply a gateway to the world of infinity.

4. Conclusion

In summary, the sound death is the embodiment of the abstract concept of death. And it can be roughly classified into two categories: the sound of noise and the sound of sorrow. Both of them convey the characteristic of death itself. When it comes to the aesthetic of the death sound, Dickinson has shown us different kinds of beauty, including the scene of death, sense of horror and the induction of afterlife. For Dickinson, this physical world and its life are mortal and it involves nothing but stress, strain, chaos and confusion, which can only be stopped with the arrival of death. Her mystic imagination of death makes her a unique poet and there are still much to explore about her poetry.

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