Modern American Death: How Death Education Should Not Be

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ABSTRACT

*Death education is necessary. Western philosophy emblematizes all other forms of death and anything associated with it. This is a problem as plurality destabilizes the scope with which death needs to be defined. As far as this study is concerned, works of literature are thought to have gained preeminence over the scriptures; hence, the point of departure from worldly and other worldly views is made in favor of Biblical perspectives. As a metaphysical concept, death is examined by taking a cross-section of Emily Dickinson's poem **Because I Could Not Stop for Death** put against scriptural verses. In effect, the constitutive nature of death is thereby offered-dying, the act of separation, and the afterlife. Its duality and inclusive-exclusive nature reveal that the cessation of life leads to a much clearer picture of the life beyond, opposite to what the foremost modernist American poet promotes.*

INTRODUCTION: DEATH AS AN OVERARCHING TERM

Emily Dickinson's death poem is challenged by two questions as regards the ultimate scope of death and the characteristics defining that boundary. The 'cutback' this study anchors itself upon is the constitutive nature of death and how it rejects change over time. The present study looks into the vague presentation of death and its surrounding elements by America's foremost modernist poet in Because I Could Not Stop for Death. Guiding learners on what to expect with one of life's inevitable realities is an appropriate response to the common concern of academics, as part of their being life-long educators (Mak, 2013).

Scholars believe in the limitation of literature to paint death (Jernigan et al., 2019) as it is, but this present study addresses that gap by referring to some verses in the Bible to gauge the deficiency of Dickinson's poesy. Fondly writing about death, she takes it as a way of affirming life (Cooney,1998), and this helps in characterizing modern poetry that resonates with the modern persona.

Her comparison of death to several images (Daghamin, 2017) creates several nuances of the process in her pursuit of clarifying the subject. Therefore, this research dwells in the threefold scope of death, defying Walter's (2018) 'separated-dead-pervasive-dead' discursive frames which disentangle the dying experience as a major part of this' overarching' death framework. Scholars like Hawkins (1991)

expound on *ars moriendi* with three prevailing potentialities---ritual death, victorious death, and one's death. This is based on pathographies which similarly present themselves in the guise of a poem where the persona's own experience of dying is recounted. This could very well be rebutted by the Biblical claim of a 'non-victorious' one.

The experience of the rich man, who had not been good to Lazarus, is documented, proving the existence of the lake of fire that torments souls without end: "And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame"(Luke 16:24, KJV).What happens in the rich man's afterlife records the suffering in an unbearable environment which the Bible refers to as the place of torment for the unbelievers.

Moreover, looking at the continuity of the death experience from 'conception' to ' eternal damnation' (for the unbelievers but 'eternal life' for the believers) shelters the assumption that death per se is not just the separation of the soul from the body, but the eventual fall from grace at the outset; hence, "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23). In Dickinson's poem, the highly significant stages of life (in stanzas 3, 4, and 5) constitute 'good death' which may be understood in a different light considering medically timed death (Koksvik, 2018). It emphasizes the worldly

concept of a life fulfilled by basic activities, that form the cycle, which is not what Acts 16:31 contends: "…Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou halt be saved."

Being saved in the Bible denotes freeing oneself from the bonds of sin thus attaining eternal life through salvation by faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). While this offers a remarkable promise of life after death for those who believe, the worldly persona in Dickinson's poem does not---there is instead an 'eternal' concept after one has coursed through the scenes in the physical world and not by 'believing' in 'anything' that resides in the eternal as the Bible succinctly points out. The hazy presentation is due to the limitation of her verses that do not indicate what a wait sin the afterlife. However, the Bible can caricature that, even the dwelling place in heaven for those who believe and a tormenting habitation for those who do not.

Within the context of the aforesaid reality, this study goes on to prove that death's design in terms of meaning is overarching, that recognizes an objective reality.

DUALITY OF DEATH

Life in death and death in life presupposes that life and death are never separate entities; they are inextricable forces without which one cannot exist. Studies found out that students not subjected to death education are the ones who negatively react to death and positively prefer life, unlike those who have gone through with the course (Mc Clatchey & King, 2015;Wong, 2015; Wallace et al., 2017) or even those who are exposed to death conversations online (Miller-Lewis, 2018). This reality is marked by the lack of constant confrontation of the idea that should have existed in a neutral platform--- the classroom. It does not necessarily mean however that the inclusion of death education in the curriculum eliminates students' fears right away, but at least the drive to inform them of its complexity and how best to prepare for it are given especially that contemporary issues around death are capitalized in their development (Masters,2003). Therefore, academics are understood to take the pivotal turn, bringing students to understanding the relevance of the duality of death.

Brent et al. (1996) revealed that a group of American and Chinese children at an early age have a 'fuzzy' concept on the boundary between life and death. This fuels the argument that children need to know more about it because of the assumption that the 'boundary' is part of that grand design by which they could fully grasp its meaning. Their unfounded notions lead to anxieties and other unwanted emotions (Yang & Park, 2018). Corr (2004) notes that the rich repertoire should reappear in scholarly articles to cultivate one's appreciation toward it, as it is not as simple as knowing how heaven looks like to help children make sense with dying and death (Malcom, 2011).

Religion forms a significant part in how a man decides for any forthcoming event like death. Dichotomizing the idea results in affirming the role of religiosity that helps people understand better (Bassett & Bussard 2018). Simply put, life for death and death for life, where both have an eternal nature. Despite the several personifications of death in Dickinson's poems, the fact remains that there is life itself in death, a dynamic force that fulfills its purpose. A sublime view of death reassures Christians of the redemptive value of the blood of Christ purged at the time of his death: "… and without shedding of blood is no remission" (Hebrews 9:22, KJV). Transcending the value of life, meanwhile, implies the necessity of a victorious death as what Christ's action on the cross shows, or as what Paul fervently speaks: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21, KJV). Paul reiterates that living is all about doing what Christ commands, and it does not refer to a luxurious lifestyle but one that is death-like, as he himself had to suffer several persecutions, even natural calamities that almost caused his death.

That death is for both life and death is an argument that supports duality. The concept of 'good death' sustained by the palliative care sector has underpinned the ambiguous characteristic of death such that its two-dimensional quality in terms of effect is not supported. 'Good' falls under consolation and is never qualified to describe the complex nature of death. Hence, Yang (2013) asserts that it is rather an equivocal term, to begin with. The challenge of determining the contemporary understanding of death runs alongside the need to uncover what has been widely accepted as the process that encourages survival among the living. Depictions of dying and death, for example, in scripts maintain that they are upheld as sacred and needing acceptance hence the downplaying of these portrayals in favor of the living who needs to cope with both (Lowrie et al., 2017). But this rather conceals the struggle that dying and death show. Contending that it is

not the actual end-of-life experience, Lowrie attempts to draw the line between what can be readily accepted and what is difficult to acknowledge. He further suggests that death is toward eliminating the physical temporality for eternity and affecting the living in the physically temporal realm, who has actualized himself as the 'pervasive' dead in the dying state.

'INCLUSIVE-EXCLUSIVE 'NATURE OF DEATH

'Individual trajectories' when it comes to the process of mourning create intersections for gender, religion, beliefs, and traditions (Backstrom, 2019; Ahaddour et al., 2018; Corr, 2018; Surall & Steppacher,2018), construct meaning of death itself (Fortuin et al., 2016), and determine how one approaches death and dying (Beaty, 2015), as the search for its significance goes on among 'antecedents' or culture-oriented elements. Drawing the bigger picture, these instrumentalities relate to both the 'inclusive' and 'exclusive' natures of death. Allowing this to beat the tail of its definition means embracing the immediate repercussions toward identifying its extent of influence on the existential aspect of being.

The dead and the one left behind both have this 'inclusive-exclusive' sensibility. Caswell and O'Connor (2017) reveal that dying alone is preferred by the respondents in their study however discredit the pain that those left behind certainly feel. They believe that it is in dying alone where one feels empowered unlike being with someone. The exclusive nature of death is presented much succinctly in a way that one believes in what one has acquired for a lifetime, say, being independent or being able to come to a point of surrendering one's life to the Creator (for Christians) at some point, which automatically disregards the idea of a companion at the moment of death.

Meanwhile, the inclusive nature of death involves many factors such as religion, gender, and more that form part of an individual's proclivity when faced with death (both to the one who is dying and to the one left behind), exemplified in Spennemann's (2017) argument on cremation as part of the Hindu tradition. The practice thrives even with other cultures not accepting it, as they too have their unique belief systems. Sooner these diverse traditions cross to form commonalities. Despite possible complications due to the eventual converging

and diverging of these elements, one might observe the fluidity of thought that never alters the identity. The existential 'catch' in this line of thinking presupposes the idea that "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall bed one: and there is none thing under the sun "(Ecclesiastes 1:9,KJV). Identity change is nonetheless a fabricated concept when it comes to death, contrary to the idea that transformation is always evident at least among Italian-Americans in DiCello's (2019) study. On the part of the one who died, the transition itself does not bring a change of identity. Neither loss nor gain of something can be attributed to the natural act of passing from one life to another.

Irrespective of the popular belief that grief is part of the process of transformation (Mathijssen, 2017; Steffen and Klass, 2018; Døving, 2018, DiCello, 2017), this study emphasizes the original design of post-mortem psychological experience. Echoed in the last four lines of the poem is the persona's statement of life's non-intermittent journey to death and another life ahead: "Since then–'tis Centuries – and yet/Feels shorter than the Day/I first surmised the Horses' Heads /Were toward Eternity." Entrenched in such lines is the persona's positive attitude in accepting death. Many scholarly works qualify the voice as that of someone who speaks from the grave. Expressed in the line: "he kindly stopped for me" is a woman's reckoning of the moment when her companion finally came. A near-death experience supports the persona's welcoming of death such that there is the loss of fear of death (Tassell-Matamua, 2014). The poetic vision that America is a "death-accepting" society is attuned to Corr's (2015) belief, but the lack of grounding as to what is actually accepted in death fails Dickinson's case.

Identity change is one of the many stages in the whole process of meaning reconstruction. Although partially isolated is the idea of approaching grief through meaning reconstruction vis-a-vis the present study, the concept of grief being connected to death is not. The reduction and expansion of meanings are certainly left to the individual involved; therefore, it is safe to say at this level of argumentation that identity change is non-existent at all. In determining 'change' in one's psyche, the original state and outcomes [which

could be assumed as different entities] are looked into otherwise none could be declared as a product of change.

As death is perceived as a lover by the persona, there is a display of calm disposition on the part of the one who took 'the carriage' driven by Death himself. The 'uncanny' setup as what this study initially tries to identify begins to unravel the ongoing mental motif upon which this whole psychological journey rests. Because at the verge of apparently losing one's consciousness one instead gains clarity in all that is happening, the phenomenon of grief is lost. Passing through the "rice fields", "school", etc. in stanzas 3, 4, and 5 indicates the simple recollection of life's basic activities that inflict no pain to the one reminiscing. Such lines in the poem emphasize the gentle pace by which they consume the entire day [or life for that matter]. Understanding the loss is what Niemeyer et al., (2007) call the way to avoiding 'complicated grief symptomatology.' Yet again, what needs to be accepted in death is not addressed by avoiding the 'complicated grief' scenario. Dickinson's poetry operates on a vacuum based on its loose ends. Merely accepting the fact that death is inevitable does not equate to having understood the afterlife which is part of the threefold ideology.

CONCLUSION

The overarching reality of death as an inevitable stage of life is vaguely depicted in Dickinson's poetry but contextualized in the Bible (Romans 5:12-21). The literary piece only offers a glimpse of what happens after the separation of body and soul thus not enough to help learners transcend the value of death as an extended phenomenon, that is, from being originally dead in trespasses (state of dying) to having the soul and body separated (death) to having an eternal life (either in heaven or hell). Death education is central to one's growth. It helps to create mental pictures concerning the lives lost, gained, and lost again (second death). More importantly, it seeks to validate or debunk views on the eternal concept of life for academics to fulfill, in part, their responsibility of teaching clearly one of the fundamental realities of existence.

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