

The motif of death in the poetry of walt witman assignment

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In the Middle Ages, death was less important than the idea of salvation proclaimed by the Christian view. The Renaissance, on the contrary, was a more individualistic period and the followers of this movement saw death as an end of the individual existence. One of them, for instance, was Mitchell De Montaigne, whose famous quote "that to philosophize is to learn how to die" had great influence on the soliloquies written by Shakespeare for Hamlet. In this period, death was also seen as an association with sexual love.

This love and death connection could reside in a religious guilt or, as Freud suggested, in the desire for an union with the mother. This relationship of death and love is present in important works such as Romeo and Juliet. In the Romanticism, this topic became an obsession for the writers, as we can see in the poem of Percy Shelley, Adonis, an elegy about the death of John Keats. In modern literature, the greatest representation of death is in the work The death of Ivan Lilac by Tolstoy and a short story called The dead by James Joyce.

Since colonial times to the nineteenth century, the motif of death was very present in the American literature. Scholars such as Gerald Kennedy, Wendy Simmons ND Barbara Katz noted that this theme was very popular in poetry, especially in elegies about maternal grief. Examples of these poems could be seen in the magazines Goddess and Peterson. There are a lot of writers on American literature that wrote about death, but I am going to talk about what was death for Emily Dickinson and for Walt Whitman by analyzing several of their poems. Emily Dickinson had to treat with death since she was a child.

In the late 1840s and early 1850s, a number of people close to her died in quick succession, including her mother, her friend Judge Otis Lord, her young nephew, her good friend Helen Fiske Hunt and Dry. Charles Headwords. Death is therefore one of the recurring themes in Dickinson poetry. But in her poems there were two types of death: sometimes it was a gentle death, but sometimes it was a threatening and even inevitable one. In her poem *Behind Me dips -Eternity*, death is a normal phase, it is natural, and life is just an interruption of this death.

In *My life had stood -a Loaded Gun-*, the existence of death allows the existence of life. In *Some - Work for Immortality*, death is the moment where the speaker can exchange their good behavior for their eternal rewards. Despite of how it might be, all of these several types Of death do not contradict each other. For the author, death is the ultimate unknowable, and so she moves around it, as a way to come as close as she can for knowing the best she can. We are going to analyse two poems of Dickinson in which we found evidences of the importance that she gave to the theme of death in her poetry.

The first poem I chose is *Behind Me dips -Eternity*. The first thing we can say about this poem is that it has eight syllables verses with a consonant rhyme. The first three lines of this poem establish the image of Dickinson speaker positioning in the space between the eternity, which goes before her, and the immortality which will follow her, introducing a short interlude. *Behind me- dips Eternity- Before me- Immortality- Myself- the term before- Death but the drift Of Eastern Gray, Dissolving into dawn away, Before the West begin.*

When she talks about the drift, she is making a reference to the death that becomes more quiet and easy instead of having a sinister end. Instead of using the term twilight or sundown to make reference to the death, she uses dawn and she relates it with death. When she says Eastern Gray she is referring to life that ends up dissolved into dawn away. In the second stanza, we can see how immortality will look like. According to some Christian beliefs, heaven is a Kingdom. Every kingdom has a prince, referred to Christ, which is dateless, because is eternal. Its kingdoms-afterward-they say- In perfect-passels Monarchy- Whose prince-is son of none- Himself-his dateless dynasty Himself-h myself diversify- In duplicate divine- In the third and last stanza, the speaker can look progressively to some kind of miraculous future, (its miracle before me-then-) and she has the miracle of eternity behind her. She sees life represented as a reflection of the moon in the Water of the Sea, (a Crescent in the Sea) enclosed by the darkness Of the ocean and sky at night, which is very chaotic (and Maelstrom-in the Sky). Its miracle before me-then- ' Its miracle behind-between- A crescent in the sea- With midnight to the north of her- And midnight to the south of her And Maelstrom-in the sky- In this poem, Emily presents death as an omnipresent force and life as the rupture with the continuous eternal immortality. " Eternity' and " Immortality," however, lose their sense in the way that Dickinson presents them, weakening them or making them more threatening than the speaker thinks they are. They don't have beginning or end (Dateless) and they are not interrupted by any other event (passels).

In addition, the author uses repetition to make her descriptions of these things less meaningful, because by a constant repetition words lose their

power easily. For example, we see *Midnight and Miracle*, as well as the constant repetitions of line structure as we can notice in the first verse of the first and second stanza. These repetitions show the speaker some calm about the death that she talks about on the whole poem, which seems to have more possibilities for failing than for being successful with her (before me).

The other poem that I am going to analyse is *My life had stood - a loaded gun*. Here, there is a metaphor with two possible interpretations: the first one is seeing that the Master is God, who chooses the speaker as his marksman and compels him to fulfill the destiny that he hands over to him; the other portrays the Master as a lover and the speaker only means something when the lover carries out with him. In either case, the dilemma of the poem is that of the fusion of the gun and its owner, the force and the agent, the violence and the perpetrator.

This becomes very clear in the second stanza, where the speaker and her owner fuse together into a *We*, and this is emphasized by the anaphora on the first two verses of that stanza. In addition, the gun is communicating for the master - every time I speak for Him - copying his voice. And now *We* roam in *Sovereign Woods* - And now *We* hunt the *Doe* - And every time I speak for him - The mountains straight reply - This poem, like many others from Dickinson, deals with the idea of death, but here it is not a death that is powerful, but instead, it makes reference to the ability to die.

This shows how complex life and death are joined, and how life cannot exist without death, for while the gun may live longer than the human master, it never really lives at all without - the power to die. The last stanza puts

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everything together very close, and the evidence for that is the repetition of some words, a resource very used by the author in her whole poetry, but with different purposes in each poem.

Though I than He- may longer live He longer must- than I- For I have but the power to kill, Without- the power to die- In comparison with death as Dickinson sees it, now I am going to talk about how another author, Walt Whitman pictures this same issue. Whitman, just as Dickinson, had to face death since he was very young. He entered the army during the Civil War as a volunteered nurse in the hospitals of the army. His health began to deteriorate early in his life, and around 1870 his condition started to get worse faster, till his death in 1891.

The theme of death in his poetry is slightly different from the one depicted in Dickinson poetry. Whitman focused more on the cycle of growth and death, instead of focusing on death and immortality as Emily did. He reflects the growth and the vitality of the early united States, which in the early nineteenth century, seemed to be unlimited. But later that century, the Civil War started and all its violence med to destroy everything that was built before and to minimize the huge power of the States.

Whitman had to deal with the growth and death of population, and because of this, he decided to focus on the cycles of people: people are born, get old, reproduce and then they die. Describing the life cycle of nature helped Whitman conceptualize the severe injuries and trauma he witnessed during the Civil War. Linking death to life may have helped him to give some

meaning to the deaths of so many soldiers. While Dickinson faced death on her own family, Whitman saw it on the soldiers who joined the army.

The poem I am going to explain is called *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*. The first thing we can say about it is that, unlike from Dickinson poems that we analysed before, the meter of its verses is very irregular and the rhyme is sometimes assonant and sometimes consonant. This poem is composed of three separated but simultaneous poems, written as an elegy for the death of Abraham Lincoln. One follows the progress of Lincoln's coffin on its way to the cemetery (Coffin that passes through lanes and streets).

The second shows the poet and a leaf of lilac that has in his hand, meant to be laid on the coffin in tribute, as he rots on death and grief (lilac break the sprigs from the bushes for you and the coffins all of you O death). The third uses the symbols of a bird and a star to develop an idea of a nature sympathetic but separated from humanity (lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul). In this way the poem implicitly asks the question, What is the worth of a man? Are some men worth more than others?

The poet's eventual inability to lament and the evocative images of anonymous death soldiers on the battlefields suggest that something bad is impending. In the first stanzas, the language is formal and sometimes even recharging, full of rhetorical devices. By the end, much of these archaic terms were stripped away; the poet offers only lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of soul. Eventually he simply leaves behind the leaf of lilac, and ceases from song, still not sure of just how to lament properly.

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom's And the great star early drop's in the western sky in the night, mourned, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring. Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring, Lilac blooming perennial and dropping star in the west, And thought of him love.

Whitman realization of immortality, just like Dickinson, through the emotional conflict of personal loss, is the principal theme of this poem, which is a symbolist determination of the poet's grief and his ultimate reconciliation with life and death.

Finally, we must say that, although the theme Of death in both poets differs in particular approaches each from the other, it is, anyways, still death in both poetries. Both authors write about immortality as a term which goes hand by hand with death, being the main difference in that Dickinson focuses on the eternity and occasionally refers to God, a lacking element in Whitman poetry.