

1970

"The Grave and I ... Our only Lullaby": An Interpretation of Death as a Metaphor for Isolation in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson

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Recommended Citation

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"The Grave and I...Our Only Lullaby"

An Interpretation of Death as a
Metaphor for Isolation in the Poetry

(TITLE)

of

Emily Dickinson

BY

Thomas W. Rea

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1970

YEAR

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I cried at Pity--not at Pain--
I heard a Woman say
"Poor Child"--and something in her voice
Convicted me--of me--

So long I fainted, to myself
It seemed the common way,
And Health, and Laughter, Curious things--
To look at, like a Toy--

To Sometimes hear "Rich People" buy
And see the Parcel rolled--
And carried, I supposed--to Heaven,
For children, made of Gold--

But not to touch, or wish for,
Or think of, with a sigh--
And so and so--had been to me,
Had God willed differently.

I wish I knew that Woman's name--
So when she comes this way,
To hold my life, and hold my ears
For fear I hear her say

She's "sorry I am dead"--again--
Just when the Grave and I--
Have sobbed ourselves almost to sleep,
Our only Lullaby--

The more one reads the poetry of Emily Dickinson and such examples as the preceding "I cried at Pity,"¹ the more one becomes aware of the dimension of personal isolation in the life of the poet as it is expressed in the poetry. In this poem one is aware that the speaker is a living person and not literally dead at all because she says: "So long I fainted, to myself." The words "to myself" begin a tone of isolation and the speaker ends up talking about "the Grave and I." Someone has apparently pointed a finger at the speaker in this poem and pitied the "Poor Child" whose life (as a recluse?) is as good as dead. The speaker senses her exclusion from the rest of society and attempts to resign herself that she is "not to touch, or wish for,/Or think of, with a sigh--" the life that has been denied her. In the last stanza the speaker equates her life with a grave and suggests that her lullaby is the isolation she must live with and sleep with. The reader can see that death is really not the theme of this poem but has been a metaphor for the real theme of isolation. Here, then, is an example of the poet equating her life with the grave. The death she speaks of is metaphorically used for describing an emotional state. In numerous poems, as I shall demonstrate, Dickinson thus uses death as a metaphor for expressing an emotional state. My own interpretation of such poems is that most frequently the emotional state described is one of isolation. Indeed, isolation must have been an overriding concern in the reclusive life of Emily Dickinson, so much so that the factor of isolation, whether expressed explicitly in theme or implicitly in metaphor and tone, permeates her poetry. If such is the case, to fail to fully

¹Emily Dickinson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed., Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: 1960), poem 588. ~~all references to Dickinson's poems are numbered and quoted as they appear in this volume.~~

appreciate this element of isolation is to fail to fully savor the essence and intent of poem after poem in the canon of Dickinson's work. Although the tone of isolation is to be found everywhere in her poetry, of more specific concern to me here is the observation that death frequently becomes the appropriate metaphor for the poet in which to clothe the isolation, the bitter reality of her life as a human being. Obviously an element of isolation is inherent in any discussion of death. Yet for Emily Dickinson the natural element of isolation associated with death seems to become more generalized and useful to her as a means of describing the inner life of the isolated soul. It, therefore, seems almost inevitable that death become the metaphor for the poet, isolated (or dead, in a manner of speaking,) as she was from the love and warmth of marriage and children of her own, isolated further as an artist from praise and understanding by the very intensity of her sensitivity and the lack of critical or public acclaim in her lifetime, and isolated nearly to despair as a religious being by her inability to find conviction or solace in the religious atmosphere of her time. That deprivation was part of the source of this isolation is perhaps evidenced in poems like the following in which the deprivation is so pointedly expressed:

"I want"--it pleaded--All its life--
 I want--was chief it said
 When Skill entreated it--the last--
 And when so newly dead--

I could not deem it late--to hear
 That single--steadfast sigh--
 The lips had placed as with a "Please"
 Toward Eternity--(731)

Such deprivation as expressed here implies an isolation of the soul in its unfulfilled desire. The desire may be for love, for meaning to the

riddle of life--whatever, the desire is all that is stated and the very ambiguity of what the dying soul desires reinforces a tone of isolation, for not even the poet can penetrate the isolation enough to know the answer or the fate of the soul's plea.

Little has been said by the critics and scholars about this crucial element of isolation in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. One reason no doubt is the fact that the critics have been faced with so many other considerations in the now ascending acclaim of this nineteenth century American poet. I feel that most readers of Emily Dickinson's poetry, however, are aware of the tone of isolation although they may have called it by another term. Also the isolation expressed is seldom so explicit as not to warrant an interpretation. Fortunately, Dickinson's poetry lends itself very well to personal interpretation. Indeed, that is perhaps one of the greatest dangers to the student of her poetry. One can rather easily become myopic and fail to approach the poetry objectively. Therefore, I must state in fairness that it is neither my intention nor within the scope of my effort here to enunciate any de fide doctrines about Emily Dickinson's poetry or to offer any new and irrefutable criticism. What is intended here is a personal interpretation which has not seemed too extreme to me and which has added new insight into and deeper appreciation of numerous of the death poems. I have intentionally used some of the more obscure poems since many of the well-known poems have been discussed so often by the critics that the impression is made that the fame of Emily Dickinson rests on five or six very famous poems. Actually, the richness of her work is only beginning to be realized, and vast numbers of poems still have not been adequately interpreted.

The most obvious place in which to begin a discussion of Emily Dickinson's use of death as a metaphor for isolation is with the common observation that she was a poet of death. Of course, this is not entirely true, but, for various reasons, Emily Dickinson did choose to write on death in at least one third of her 1,775 poems. Obviously, then, this poet was concerned to an uncommon degree with death. Many critics have cited this concern as a morbid obsession. Clark Griffith remarks in his new critical book, The Long Shadow, Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry:

With death...Emily Dickinson was almost uniquely preoccupied. Except perhaps for Melville, no writer of the American nineteenth century looked more habitually than she upon the skull beneath the skin, or was more visibly shaken by the spectacle. To a degree that is morbid and even ghoulish, Miss Dickinson's letters probe for answers among the recently bereaved.¹

Mr. Griffith is rather sweeping in his certainty of Dickinson's morbidity. Actually, it is not the subject matter alone which would make a poet morbid. I shall demonstrate that a much richer interpretation of many death poems than the merely morbid is possible once the reader is aware that death becomes in many instances a rich vehicle for expression of personal and psychological emotional states of mind. Even Mr. Griffith admits that "the most gripping of Emily Dickinson's poems are the poems centered around the questions of what is death? why is death? and what is it like to die?"² Obviously, more explanation of Dickinson's use of the theme of death is needed before we can demonstrate her expansion of the theme to the metaphor.

¹Clark Griffith, The Long Shadow, Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry, (Princeton, N. J.: 1964), p. 112.

²Griffith, p. 112.

In using the theme of death, Emily Dickinson was in part a product of her times. In her education and daily life she was exposed to the popular graveyard school of poetry which had its origins in eighteenth-century English poetry. The more gothic elements of early Romanticism had an important impact in nineteenth century American tastes in poetry, and Emily Dickinson was not immune to the influence. Not only are some of Emily's earliest death poems typical of this graveyard school, but they repulse the twentieth century reader with their maudlin sentimentalism:

Dying! Dying in the night!
 Won't somebody bring the light
 So I can see which way to go
 Into the everlasting snow?

And "Jesus"! Where is Jesus gone?
 They said that Jesus--always came--
 Perhaps he doesn't know the House--
 This way, Jesus, Let him pass!

Somebody run to the great gate
 And see if Dollie's coming! Wait!
 I hear her feet upon the stair!
 Death won't hurt--now Dollie's here! (158)

Fortunately, Emily Dickinson developed as an artist, and, although there were always occasional lapses into the mawkishly sentimental modes of the day as above, she increasingly avoided the merely sentimental and began to take her own unique tacks on an old theme. One saving quality of even her earliest death poems is Dickinson's knack for dramatic presentation. The following short poem is superb for its dramatic presentation of death and the originality of its approach to describing the dying individual's realization of death:

What Inn is this
 Where for the night
 Peculiar Traveller comes?
 Who is the Landlord?
 Where the maids?

Behold, what curious rooms!
 No ruddy fires on the hearth--
 No brimming Tankards flow--
 Necromancer! Landlord!
 Who are these below?(215)

Despite the numerous early death poems which are flowery and philosophically shallow, such artistry as demonstrated in this short piece redeems Emily Dickinson from the typically non-artistic standing of the numerous maudlin rhymers to be found in the poet's corner of the newspapers of her day.

Another important point to note about the early death poems is that at this time in her life Emily Dickinson seems optimistically to have viewed death as at least the gateway to immortality. The following poem not only demonstrates her early sense of imminent immortality, but once again the technique of the highly dramatic presentation of death.

Here too is isolation implied:

Departed--to the Judgment--
 A Mighty Afternoon--
 Great Clouds--like Ushers--leaning--
 Creation--looking on--
 The Flesh--Surrendered--Cancelled--
 The Bodiless--begun--
 Two Worlds--like Audiences--disperse--
 And leave the Soul--alone--(524)

The real center of interest in this poem, as in others which treat death dramatically, is the inner life of the protagonist. While it is true death and human fate after death form the ostensible subject matter of such poetry, the interest is not in philosophical concepts or projected states of experience. Here are the beginnings of the art of Emily Dickinson to describe complex, non-verbal emotional states. We note here in this early example a tone of isolation because the dying soul is alone, and apparently helpless, and a victim of forces greater

than itself. This tone of isolation is only implicitly present here in this early poem of circa 1859, but will become more pronounced in later years.

"Departed--to the Judgment" has at least two possible readings depending upon whether one interprets the voice of the speaker as the voice of one actually dying or as the onlooker at another's death. Both readings work in the poem. No doubt the element of the onlooker is present whether or not the primary action is of the speaker experiencing her own death and judgment. The key word is "alone." The point the poet makes is not merely the drama of the judgment or the moment of death. What is the central interest here is the "aloneness" of the experience, whether one is dying or helplessly observing another's death.

The moment of death is the ultimate moment of isolation for the human being. Emily Dickinson's concern with death is not merely a morbid concern. For her, as a person of profound doubts and fears and questions, death is an extremely important focal point. For example, she calls death (in poem 822) the "most profound experiment/Appointed unto Men." This is perhaps obvious since death is the closest the living can get to a knowledge of the afterlife if any such exists, and it remains a central concern to Dickinson. Not only is death the moment of truth for the dying in this regard, but, if revelation is to come, this moment is the most opportune for the living onlooker also. Thus Emily Dickinson sees death as the most dramatic moment of life, and as an artist her concern becomes one of portraying the drama and reality of the experience. Rather than answers to the riddle of death, she most often prefers the challenge of presenting death's extreme

reality in artistic form. Her concern is "the tremendous nearness of death." She must also resolve for herself this great drama of death and its emotional effects. In this light, the criticism of ghoulishness and morbidity is not valid because her aim is to examine this extremely important--indeed, for her--crucial experience from every angle--from the angle of the dying, the long dead, the onlooker of death, and the living who stand in awe and apprehension before the bleak gates of the cemetery and the rows of snow covered mounds. A touch of the graveyard school in her early poetry must be acknowledged as a starter, but that is only a beginning.

Mr. William Sherwood also seems to doubt the validity of judging Emily Dickinson's death poetry as merely graveyard school. In attempting to trace her artistic development in his book, Circumference and Circumstance, Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson, he remarks:

...The more one examines Emily Dickinson's poetry of the years 1858 through 1860, the less one is convinced that death itself is an important theme for the poet. Death is the ostensible subject of some poems and it is a part of the content of a great many of them, but it is never in itself the center of interest. Either, as in the majority of her poems, "Death (is) but our rapt attention/To immortality"--that is, that death and the dead are scrutinized only because they necessarily mark the limits of our perception when we look for evidence of eternity from our standpoint in time--or, when the poet's attention seems to be limited to death alone (more precisely, to the act of dying), death is examined as a possible mode of response to the pressures and restrictions of living. Hence in these latter poems it is not death but life against which dying is raised as a strategy and an alternative that is the poet's real subject.

By the period of her greatest creativity which critics and biographers generally place as the years 1861 to 1864, Emily Dickinson was no longer treating death only as an objective fact, or a phenomenon to be investigated. By this time she was also using death as the best metaphor

"to objectify one of her most characteristic states of feeling"¹ As I have said, it is not difficult to see how she came to use death for expressing her personal isolation.

"In Emily Dickinson's mind, there was little difference between the death of a friend and her prolonged absence from him; indeed in her poetry the death of another is often a metaphor for his absence, and her own death a metaphor for her feelings of isolation."²

For example, the following passage from a letter written to Jane Humphrey in January of 1850 indicates that death and absence were linked in her mind. In discussing the absence of her sister, Lavinia, she writes, "When I knew Vinnie must go, I clung to you as the dearer than ever friend--but when the grave opened and swallowed you both, I murmured."

The poem, "It Was Not Death, for I Stood Up" (a poem from 1862, during one of her most productive periods, and a poem of artistic stature), is an obvious example of this use of death as a metaphor for an emotional state:

It was not Death, for I stood up,
And all the Dead, lie down--
It was not Night, for all the Bells
Put out their Tongues, for Noon.

It was not Frost, for on my Flesh
I felt Siroccos--crawl--
Nor Fire--for just my Marble feet
Could keep a Chancel, cool--

And yet, it tasted, like them all,
The Figures I have seen
Set orderly, for Burial,
Reminded me, of mine--

As if my life were shaven,
And fitted to a frame,
And could not breathe without a key,
And 'twas like Midnight, some--

¹Ibid., p. 47.

²Ibid, p. 18.

When everything that ticked--has stopped--
 And Space stares all around--
 Or Grisly frosts--first Autumn morns,
 Repeal the Beating Ground--

But, most, like Chaos--Stopless--cool--
 Without a Chance, or Spar--
 Or even a Report of Land--
 To justify--Despair. (510)

This indeed is a poem about a state of the mind and perhaps no subject matter could be so intangible and difficult to verbalize, yet no poet in the language has demonstrated any greater power to express so well such intensely personal emotional states of the mind. Emily Dickinson begins with the metaphor of death and through the imagery returns to the death motif to describe her mood. I interpret the feeling that she has captured in poetry here as one of extreme isolation.

The very use of the metaphor of death evokes, in the first place, a sense of immobility and cessation of activity, for "all the Dead, lie down." The mind feels as prone and stopped as a corpse, yet the body is standing which reminds the speaker that she is not really dead in spite of her feeling. Next the poet says the feeling is one of "Night." The imagery of night is generally associated with unpleasant and frightening times, especially in Dickinson's poetry; therefore, the emotion the speaker feels is as unpleasant and frightening as night with its nightmares. But, paradoxically, the emotion has come to her in the midst of day ("for all the Bells/Put out their Tongues, for Noon").

In the second stanza of this poem, Emily Dickinson evokes still another paradoxical quality of her emotional state. She feels a mixture of warmth and coolness. The warmth that she feels is agitating and unpleasant for it "crawls" on her "Flesh." At the same time she knows she is not really warm because her "Marble feet/Could keep a Chancel, cool."

The imagery of frost is very appropriate since it is a physical representation of one of the irresistible forces of nature--ice. In conflict and confrontation is the other extreme element of nature, equally irresistible--"Fire." Since her feet are "Marble," there is the further suggestion in this stanza of immobility and inability to escape from this vexing clashing of forces, forces of the mind personified in natural phenomena. The result of this clashing is a sense of extreme vexation and contradiction of the senses in the face of irresistible forces.

That the emotion is not really, literally, anything which the poet has thus far described is made clear by her negatives, "It was not" and "Nor." "And yet, it tasted, like them all," she says in the third stanza. She then visualizes her state as like a corpse "Set orderly, for Burial." Here the poet is returning to the pervading metaphor of death, and with good reason. Her feeling is one of rigormortis, rigidity and utter passivity as one dead. She feels "as if her life were shaven/And fitted to a frame"--the coffin. She is so overwhelmed by her state of mind that she feels as if she needs a "key" to "breathe." (Such excellent metaphorical use of death is far and above the graveyard school of her day.)

"And 'twas like Midnight, some," the speaker goes on to relate. Here is a return to the nighttime with all of its attending apprehensions and fears. Even more frightening, this is a midnight when even the clock's ticking "has stopped." The mood, at this point, is characterized as one of silence and utter stillness, the cessation of all the activity that makes living appear to be going somewhere. As far as space is concerned, the soul now stands in a kind of suspension in which

"Space stares all around." The mind is removed from space and is suspended in a frightening kind of isolation in which it knows no position or whereness, even as it is isolated from a sense of time or ongoingness. The mind lives and orients itself in the dimensions of space and time, and to be removed from these suggests an utter captivity in confusion.

The death metaphor returns in the destructiveness and death-dealing of the "Grisly frosts" when they "Repeal the Beating (i.e., living) Ground." The emotional state the speaker describes is devastating, as destructive as death and as chilling as the killing frost is to the autumn flowers. The word "Repeal" is important for its suggestion that any reprieve from this anguish has been denied. Part of the feeling then is a knowledge of non-reprieve; there is no end in sight for the pain.

In the final stanza, the poet moves to the climax and performs the seemingly impossible task of evoking further anguish. The speaker exposes the depths of her anguish in relating that her state is "most like Chaos--Stopless--cool." As Mr. Griffith has pointed out in The Long Shadow, Emily Dickinson saw chaos and disorder as a kind of supreme horror.¹ Perhaps, for her, chaos implied aimless futility and meaninglessness. That the speaker's horror is "Stopless" and impervious to her need for release (i.e., "cool"), is indicative of the most extreme mental anguish this side of sanity.

Many readers of "It was not Death" come upon the final word of the poem, "Despair," and draw in their breath, believing that at last they have grasped Dickinson's final meaning--that she is speaking of the mental state of despair. Despair, indeed, it may be; but if so, it is

¹Griffith, p. 83.

a kind of despair far beyond the merely traditional. In Western tradition one despairs of something; one despairs of an object. Our whole concept of despair is that we give up hope of attainment of our goal. The state of mind in this poem is beyond despair, for it never even had the hope. The poet says it was a despair "Without a Chance, or Spar--/Or even a report of Land." What can be more agonizing than utter despair without even "the report of land" or sight of the object of our hope? The speaker apparently is not even allowed to know what it is she despairs of.

Even though Emily Dickinson never uses the word "isolation," this poem describes in the most poignant psychological terms the most truly agonizing of all human dilemmas--isolation. It is isolation and solitary confinement that are used as extreme punishment in penal institutions and on prisoners of war to break their wills to resist. It is indeed in terms of isolation or separation from God that theologians describe hell, the ultimate of human loss and damnation. And psychologists concur that the need to belong or the fear of isolation is one of man's most motivating psychological forces. Despair is perhaps the best word Dickinson could use to describe her mental state, but she uses this word only at the very end, after she has thoroughly described spiritual and mental isolation.

The intensity of Emily Dickinson's sense of isolation has been adequately accounted for by her biographers. Despite the diversity of biographical opinion and conjecture as to the life and loves of Dickinson, there seems to be agreement that she was indeed a recluse for many years. Biographers have difficulty in pinpointing the exact date or circumstances of her withdrawal from the world. However, from remarks in family letters, it is definitely known that she was withdrawn most of her adult life and a complete recluse for her last 15 years. Whatever

the origins of this withdrawal, the important fact to note is that it is an obvious demonstration that the isolation expressed in the poetry is real and personally based and not merely poetic invention. The poetry aptly reflects the genuineness of the isolation expressed--all of which suggests to me the rich field for exploration of this element in her poetry. As A. C. Ward has said of Dickinson: "Of what went on mentally and emotionally within this secret woman we shall never know more than her poetry tells us, because the poetry tells us everything, in the only way it can be told."¹

From the poetry it can be demonstrated that the poet's sense of isolation becomes a generalized emotional state including such concerns as the isolation evoked by the death of loved ones; the isolation resultant from an absent or unattainable lover; the isolation of the soul from knowledge of God and certainty of the afterlife; isolation resulting from the poet's failure to find answers and meaning in nature and the universe; isolation of the self in its own world of seclusion; and the isolation experienced by the artist as solitary singer.

The poetry eliciting the sense of isolation caused by absent or dead friends and loved ones is perhaps the most numerous. Isolation with respect to the departed dead has an inherent effect of isolation for the bereaved:

Those who have been in the Grave the longest--
 Those who begin Today--
 Equally perish from our Practise--
 Death is the other way--

Foot of the Bold did least attempt it--
 It--is the White Exploit--
 Once to achieve, annuls the power
 Once to communicate(922)

¹A. C. Ward, "Emily Dickinson," in American Literature: 1880-1930 (London: Methuen, 1932). Reprinted in the Recognition of Emily Dickinson, Selected Criticism Since 1890, ed., Caesar R. Blake and Carlton F. Wells (Ann Arbor, Mich.: 1964), p. 146.

Death in this poem has not only an insurmountable power to separate and isolate the living and the dead, but even "annuls the power/...to communicate." The inability to communicate, to break through to the other world and even to this world, we shall see, is a continually vexing aspect of the isolation Emily Dickinson felt as a person and an artist. The next poem similarly implies isolation of the living and the dead:

Too little way the House must lie
 From every Human Heart
 That holds in undisputed Lease
 A white inhabitant--

Too narrow is the Right between--
 Too imminent the chance--
 Each Consciousness must emigrate
 And lose its neighbor once--(911)

This poem is perhaps difficult with the first reading. Much more is implied than said and what is said is paradoxical. The first stanza says that the grave or "House" of the departed loved one must remain too close to the heart ("Too little way the House must lie/From every Human Heart"), that is to say, that the memory of the dead, the bereavement, always lives with the living. Emily did not believe with the common lot that time heals all wounds. She says instead:

They say that "Time assuages"--
 Time never did assuage--
 An actual suffering strengthens
 As sinews do, with age--

Time is a Test of Trouble--
 But not a Remedy--
 It such it prove, it prove too
 There was no Malady--(686)

Martha Hale Shackford comments on this aspect of the personality of Emily Dickinson: "Grief was a faith, not a disaster. She made no effort to smother the recollection of old companionship by that species of spiritual death to which so many people consent."¹ The poem, "Too Little Way,"

¹Martha Hale Shackford, "The Poetry of Emily Dickinson," in Atlantic Monthly, CXI (January, 1913). Reprinted in The Recognition, Blake, p. 87.

implies that grief keeps the grave too close to the heart and that we the living are unable to escape the grave even while living. And in the second stanza we are too close to death, for "Too imminent is the chance" that we ourselves will soon die and suffer the loss of distance from our neighbor implied by the grave. The problem of death in this poem is that it vexes and isolates us from the dead by being too close. Death is too close to escape except in death and then the isolation is one of distance. Every soul must suffer this dual isolation of death.

The separation of the dead and the isolation of infinite distance is especially central to this excellent poem:

Under the Light, yet under,
Under the Grass and the Dirt,
Under the Beetle's Cellar
Under the Clover's Root,

Further than Arm could stretch
Were it Giant long,
Further than Sunshine could
Where the Day Year long,

Over the Light, yet over,
Over the arc of the Bird--
Over the Comet's chimney--
Over the Cubit's Head,

Further than Guess can gallop
Further than Riddle ride--
Oh for a Disc to the Distance
Between Ourselves and the Dead! (949)

This poem is more forthright and easily understood. Its whole concern is with the infinite distance "Between Ourselves and the Dead." Turning to death again for meaning and perhaps revelation (the "Guess" and the "Riddle"), the poet finds only insurmountable distance. The isolation of the distance is not merely from the loved ones, but from meaning and understanding as well, for the dead are "Further than Guess can gallop/

Further than Riddle (can) ride." The speaker's longing to transcend death and fathom its isolation is implied with the final cry, "Oh for a Disc to the Distance/Between Ourselves and the Dead!" Furthermore, the poem shows all the ways in which the living are isolated from the dead. The dead are "Under the Grass and the Dirt/Under the Beetle's Cellar." They have passed through the gates of mortal corruption and decomposition in the first stanza and are therefore beyond human reach. They lie in such darkness that not even the "Sunshine could/(reach them) Were the Day Year long." The darkness and obscurity of death are impenetrable and furthermore, since sunlight marks our time, the dead are beyond time. They have transcended it. The poet also knows that somehow the dead have transcended the barriers of knowledge ("Light") and space ("The arc of the Bird" and "The Comet's chimney") and even all earthly measure ("Cubit's Head"). The living must remain isolated from the dead and frustrated in their desire to transcend mortal limitations to knowledge and communication with the dead.

Numerous other poems form a cluster dealing with isolation from the dead similar to the ones just discussed: "I Meant to Find Her When I Came" #718, for example, which relates the frustrated desire of the speaker to speak to a dying friend and tell her how she, the speaker, "longed/For just this single time--/But Death had told Her so the first--". An interpretation beyond the purely literal here is that death is used as a metaphor to illustrate the isolation the speaker feels in being unable to reach another human being and share the intimacy of real communication. Poem #529 "I'm Sorry for the Dead--Today--" also has isolation as its center of interest even though the subject matter is ostensibly death. This time the separateness and isolation are experienced by the dead who are "Set

separate from the Farming--/And all the Neighbor's lives--". The dead are cut off from the earthly joys of the living which are going on above them "When Men--and Boys--and Carts--and June,/Go down the Fields to 'Hay'--". It must be understood that in many of these examples death is not so explicitly used as a metaphor for isolation as that the center of interest is really on the isolation involved in the poem. In this way death moves from theme to metaphor.

The following death poem tells yet another aspect of the isolation the artist wishes to express:

A Dying Tiger--moaned for Drink--
I hunted all the Sand--
I caught the Dripping of a Rock
And bore it in my Hand--

His Mighty Balls--in death were thick
But searching--I could see
A Vision on the Retina
Of Water--and of me--

'Twas not my blame--who sped too slow--
'Twas not his blame--who died
While I was reaching him--
But 'twas--the fact that he was dead-- (566)

In this poem too we witness a death, and more than that, our interest is focused on the inability of the speaker to help another creature, i.e. the "dying Tiger." On first reading it might seem strange that the poet chose a tiger for this sort of death scene. I think the choice is not really bizarre or peculiar, but extremely well-chosen after all, once one understands the statement of the poem.

In the first place, this is a poem not only about isolation, but impotence and power. The tiger represents the personification of power and vitality in earthly life. Most fearsome, powerful, and beautiful of creatures, the tiger is the last creature we usually would think of

in a non-violent death scene. Emily Dickinson's choice is deliberate and striking because in a sense a dying tiger is almost a contradiction. She wishes to jar the reader by showing the most powerful and fearsome animal brought to impotence by death. The power of death is supreme. That mighty was a word in the poet's mind in regards to the tiger is evident when she calls the tiger's eyes "mighty." Another curious element of the poem is that a human is coming to the aid of a feared, wild animal. Man and wild beast usually only come together in confrontation and struggle, in which man matches his wits against the brute strength of the beast. The coming together of man and beast in this poem is the unity and brotherhood of the mortal creature in the face of overwhelming forces, i.e. death. Death has caused man to approach the beast in pity and a realization of fraternity in mutual fate.

The pervading tone is one of helplessness. The diction is responsible for this effect. For example, the speaker "hunts" for drink in the "Sand." One knows that any such search in sand will be futile. A sense of futility and further helplessness is suggested when the drink is found not gushing in a stream, but merely in "the Dripping of a Rock." In this poem, water is the life-giving substance or antidote to death, and it is significant to an interpretation of the poem that the substance is so scarce and so impossible to carry in the "Hand." In the face of death, the poem says, we are unable to help one another and all our efforts are impotent and futile.

In the second stanza the reader is presented with a scene of isolation of lives. Here, as in other poems, Miss Dickinson likes to focus her attention upon the eyes of the dead. Here the speaker in the poem beholds himself and the life giving "water" in the eyes of the now

dead tiger. This stanza has deep philosophical implications as does the rest of the poem. We can suspect that the speaker is looking into the eyes not only in curiosity about death, but also for some sort of understanding. Since the eyes are regarded as the windows of the soul, one might hope for a glimpse of the spiritual realm. What the speaker sees is what is the tiger's "Vision" and likewise, for the moment, it becomes the speaker's vision. The choice of the word "Vision" brings to mind a religious vision and the suggestion is in the poem that the speaker does experience a glimpse into death and an insight into the nature of existence. From the tiger's point of view, we can suppose that the vision of the man and the water is a vision of a saviour and salvation. There is irony, of course, in the fact that the tiger is already dead and probably has missed this beatific vision. What is to be seen is really then a vision for the human being. Man looks for meaning and communication outside his own isolation only to have a vision of his own self--a vision of his own impotence. The comment of such a situation about the nature of the universe is ironic. Where man might hope to see God, he sees instead his own frail image performing an exercise in futility. The vision suggests a world that will not give answers, and, perhaps, a world similar to that of the existentialists in which there is no meaning or answers to be had other than those man can make for himself. Also, the situation of the poem suggests that man too may have a vision on his eyes in death as the tiger and that the vision may be of a saviour just as unreal and impotent as the tiger's saviour. The universe may not contain any saviour more real than what man, like the tiger, in ignorance can conjure up in dreams. The irony of this second stanza

points out vividly the aloneness and isolation of man, not only from another that he has tried to reach and help, but also from the meaning which he desires, the meaning which would make his isolation bearable.

Confronted by his isolation in a meaningless world, man, nonetheless, muses in the third stanza about what has happened. He realizes this death "'Twas not (his) blame--who sped too slow." The use of the word "blame" suggests guilt; the poet is trying to assess the blame for the less than benign world she has discovered. Man is not to blame who has "sped," paradoxically, "too slow." The blame for the fact that man can not break through his isolation is not his own because he tries even though the effort be like carrying water in the hands. Neither is the fault with the tiger "who died/while (man) was reaching him." The blame is with "the fact that He was dead." The blame is the nature of existence. Emily Dickinson is pointing out in this poem the revelation that death can sometimes give. No wonder then that death was so important to her. It, above all else, strips away delusion from man's eyes. Death can show man, as it does in this poem, that he is utterly vulnerable, impotent, alone, isolated and ignorant of the truth. Such a condition may be a vision of horror and certainly it is one that isolates man, but it is the point from which man must see himself Dickinson suggests.

Note the similarity of the following poem to "A Dying Tiger Moaned." Here again is the vision and revelation on the eyes of the dead. Death in this poem also is a metaphor for the isolation of the human spirit in a universe which hides its meaning:

Like Eyes that looked on Wastes--
Incredulous of Ought

But Blank--and steady Wilderness
Diversified by Night--

Just Infinities of Nought--
As far as it could see--
So looked the face I looked upon--
So looked itself--on Me--

I offered it no Help--
Because the Cause was Mine--
The Misery a Compact
As hopeless--as divine--

Neither--would be absolved--
Neither would be a Queen
Without the Other--Therefore--
We perish--tho' We reign--(458)

This poem once again contains the vision of the soul isolated in a bewildering, uncaring universe, but here the poet finds a meaning of her own and she is reconciled. To begin with, the speaker looks into the eyes of death, and once again sees no meaning--only obscurity. There in the "Infinities of Nought" she sees only a reflection of herself. Here again, as so often happens in her poems when Emily Dickinson looks for meaning in the eyes of the dead, she sees only a reflection of herself. She is denied answers and all that she beholds is her aloneness and isolation from meaning. She and the dead are separated by infinite distance, yet now she sees that each shares a compact of misery of life. And part of the nature of that misery is isolation since neither can help the other ("I offered it no help--/Because the Cause was Mine"). This means that the suffering in the vision of death is more for the living than the dead.

In the latter part of the poem, the poet describes the nature of the compact of misery as "As hopeless--as divine." Our isolation causes us great suffering and even despair (as we noted earlier in "It Was Not Death"), yet it also is "divine," i.e., it gives insight and,

therefore, superiority. Death, which is man's end, is paradoxical. It is both sought and shunned. It offers him both annihilation and hope. The living must behold the vision of the dead even as the dead, the living, which is what is said in the lines: "Neither--would be absolved--/Neither would be Queen/Without the other." The poet seems to be saying that man must confront the true nature of reality; even if death is annihilation, man needs the vision of it to understand and appreciate life. One without the other could not be queen, i.e., without death, life would have no meaning and death no meaning without life. Man must face suffering and isolation to find the reward. Like Yeats of our century and other mystic poets of the past, Emily Dickinson, in effect, is suggesting that the poet must suffer and be isolated to see. This is what makes the "misery" (isolation) "divine." Isolation is destructive and "hopeless" when "We perish" and are consumed by it. Yet it brings the reward of superiority and meaning which is when "We reign." Isolation is penetrated in this compact of mutual suffering, and we are united in a brotherhood of mutual fate.

The universe in "Like Eyes that Looked on Wastes" offers no meaning in itself, only "Wastes" and "Wilderness," "Blank...Diversified by Night." There is "no Help" for the situation either for the living or the dead. Yet, stoically, Emily Dickinson sees man's greatness in such a vision. Man is great, and the poet will be "Queen" because man will endure his fate even in the face of "Infinities of Nought." Then no matter what the nature of life, no matter that man is destroyed and "We perish," the poet says, because we are not defeated--"We reign." Dickinson grapples with death and isolation in this poem, and, like the existentialists, she finds meaning for herself. This is, of course,

the tragic vision that makes her poetry elevated far beyond the personal desperation which, in fact, may have been the source of the power of the lyrics.

The following poem is especially interesting in the fact that it too, like the last selection, is a poem in which the poet attempts to find some solution to the problem of isolation:

I tried to think a lonelier Thing
 Than any I had seen--
 Some Polar Expiation--An Omen in the Bone
 Of Death's tremendous nearness--

I probed Retrieveless things
 My Duplicate--to borrow--
 A Haggard Comfort springs

From the belief that Somewhere--
 Within the Clutch of Thought--
 There dwells one other creature
 Of Heavenly Love--forgot--

I plucked at our Partition
 As one should pry the Walls--
 Between Himself--and Horror's Twin--
 Within Opposing Cells--

I almost strove to clasp his Hand,
 Such Luxury--it grew--
 That as Myself--could pity Him--
 Perhaps he--pitied me-- (532)

This poem also finds some consolation in mutual pity and suffering. It seems to me that it too uses death metaphorically in describing an emotional and psychological state of mind. One cannot read it and fail to sense the tragic loneliness and isolation of the poet. Her suffering at this point is so intense that she can alleviate it only by thinking of something "lonelier" than herself. By "Some Polar Expiation," some contemplation "Of Death's tremendous nearness," she hopes by contrast that her own suffering will seem lighter.

In the second stanza the poet probes "Retrieveless things," memories and perhaps past losses or loved ones to find her "Duplicate." By

"Duplicate" she may mean a lost loved one who could match her in loneliness and isolation. She may mean a lover who was her match or duplicate in the love he bore for her. At this point the poet says, "A Haggard Comfort springs/From the belief that Somewhere--/Within the Clutch of Thought--/There dwells one other Creature/Of Heavenly Love--forgot--". A creature of "Heavenly Love" could be, of course, the dead who are forgotten from our love by their absence for a life in Heaven. A better interpretation of the phrase would be another lonely soul that God has forgotten, a soul in the depths of isolation also.

The imagery of the fourth stanza is particularly effective in portraying the speaker's attempt to break through her isolation. The mental process is like prying "Walls--/Between Himself--and Horror's Twin--/Within Opposing Cells." Here the imagery is of prison cells and two desperate souls "plucking" and "prying" at the walls for the release or comfort of communion with at least one another. "Horror's Twin" would be one who suffers as the poet or speaker does. It is significant that the poet calls her suffering and isolation horror.

Finally, the poet says in the last stanza that the process, the knowledge of at least another soul's mutual isolation, becomes a comfort ("Such Luxury--it grew--"). The isolated artist in her intense suffering finds release and comfort in the thought that if she can pity some other sufferer whom she cannot reach, then someone else perhaps pities her and longs just as much to break through his isolation to reach her. Such mutual pity, despite all the intensity of the suffering involved, is at least able to give comfort to the speaker "Within the Clutch of Thought." Part of the power of this poem comes from the reader's own reaction of pity to the speaker. The pity that the reader feels in

response to the poet stands somehow as a testament to the fact that the isolation is indeed broken--by art--because, in a sense, the poem itself, although it springs from the suffering and isolation of the poet, is able to reach and touch the reader through its universality.

Yet the poet does not always feel as optimistic about her isolation. In the following example we see another view of the isolation of the artist:

I died for Beauty--but was scarce
Adjusted in the Tomb
When One who died for Truth, was lain
In an adjoining Room--

He questioned softly "Why I failed"?
For Beauty", I replied--
"And I--for Truth--Themselves are One--
We Brethren, are", He said--

And so, as Kinsman, met a Night--
We talked between the Rooms--
Until the Moss had reached our lips--
And covered up--our names-- (449)

The view in this superb poem is that art fails and that moss will cover up its name. The speaker in this poem is one who dies "for Beauty," and his other half, "Truth"--the artist. The artist here dies and is forgotten in the tomb. Perhaps the implication is not only the power of death to silence even art, but also that the artist must have a public or the artist's search for beauty and truth is buried with him. Throughout her life, Emily Dickinson knew only repeated frustration and isolation as an artist which, perhaps, explains the outlook of this poem.

Yet another poem concerning art, the artist and isolation is the following:

As far from pity, as complaint--
As cool to speech--as stone--
As numb to Revelation
As if my Trade were Bone--

As far from Time--as History--
 As near yourself--Today--
 As Children, to the Rainbow's scarf--
 Or Sunset's Yellow play

To eyelids in the Sepulchre--
 How dumb the Dancer lies--
 While Color's Revelations break--
 And blaze--the butterflies! (496)

The poet examines the meaning of art and the artist from the viewpoint of death. In death the soul too is isolated, and here the isolation is from the consolation of art and earthly beauty. Curiously, one wants to interpret the isolation expressed in this poem as that of the poet projecting herself in death in the "Sepulchre." The reason for interpreting the speaker as an artist comes from the concerns of this particular speaker's isolation. The speaker is concerned to be "cool to speech" and "numb to Revelation" as if (her) Trade were Bone." What then is her trade? A good guess is poetry or art. The poet's tool, after all, is "speech" and his concern is "Revelation" and "Time" and the beauty of the world as suggested by the description of the rainbow and the colors of the butterflies. To the dead, and particularly to the artist projecting himself into the isolation of the grave, "How dumb the Dancer lies." The image of the dancer could not have been better chosen to represent art, for the dancer is the symbol of the artist, the interpreter, and the expressor of beauty, form and meaning. To the poet who, as we have seen, confronts isolation in his daily life, death may be, as in this poem, only the ultimate of isolation. In the grave the artist will be separated from the beauty and revelation which is his trade. The state of death is ironic inasmuch as the artist is numb and dumb while the world of beauty "breaks" and the butterflies "blaze" in all their splendor.

This poem indicates that Emily Dickinson prefers life to death where the isolation will be even from her one source of consolation-- beauty and art. The poem also suggests that such concerns as beauty and revelation have relevance only for the living since the "eyelids of the Sepulchre" are blind. Although one would expect some revelation to be found in death, one will not find it in this poem. Here the suggestion is that life holds the joys as well as the revelations; death has only blindness and isolation.

One may also find the element of isolation among the love poems. Note, for example, the death metaphor and the isolation of the lovers in the next poem. Once again the image of the "wall" appears in describing isolation:

I had not minded--Walls--
Were Universe--one Rock--
And far I heard his silver call
The other side the Block--

I'd tunnel--till my Groove
Pushed sudden thro' to his--
Then my face take her Recompense--
The looking in his Eyes--

But 'tis a single Hair--
A filament--a law--
A Cobweb--wove in Adamant--
A Battlement--of Straw--

A limit like the Veil
Unto the Lady's face--
But every Mesh--a Citadel--
And Dragons--in the Crease--(398)

The isolation in this love poem is that which separates the speaker from her lover. The reader is told in the first two stanzas that were the separation only caused by death, it would not be such a problem ("I had not minded..."). The speaker's love is so strong that it could break through even death for union with the lover. Were the isolation only

produced by "walls," "universe," "Rock," or "Block"--something solid-- there would be no stopping the speaker in going to her lover. But the latter part of the poem tells us the barrier is "a single Hair--/A filament--a law." The barrier is nothing tangible, nothing that can be attacked, but something as flimsy, nebulous and intangible as a law, i.e. convention and propriety. The contradictory imagery that follows shows the paradoxical power to separate and isolate of such seemingly permeable barriers. The effect is to focus attention on the frustration and helplessness of the speaker to reach the lover. It is one thing to be separated by solid, immovable barriers, but somehow worse to feel the frustration of separation caused by flimsy ones that should not have the power to isolate. The speaker in this poem must remain imprisoned in isolation by no more than the cobwebs and mesh of social convention which paradoxically are as impregnable as "battlements" and "citadels" with "dragons."

Such isolation from the lover usually becomes equated with death in Emily Dickinson's poetry. This is very appropriate when one considers that in tradition love becomes synonymous with life to lovers, and the loss of love with the loss of life. Miss Dickinson uses the metaphor of death in this next love poem as the most appropriate means of conveying the isolation she feels from her lover:

This Chasm, Sweet, upon my life
I mention it to you,
When Sunrise through a fissure drop
The Day must follow too.

If we demur, its gaping sides
Disclose as 'twere a Tomb
Ourselves am lying straight wherein
The Favorite of Doom.

When it has just contained a Life
Then, Darling, it will close

And yet so bolder every Day
So turbulent it grows

I'm tempted half to stitch it up
With a remaining Breath
I should not miss in yielding, though
To Him, it would be Death--

And so I bear it big about
My Burial--before
A Life quite ready to depart
Can harass me no more-- (858)

Unattainable love becomes the speaker's living death ("My Burial--before/
A Life quite ready to depart...").

The theme of "This Chasm, Sweet" is echoed in poem #631, "Ourselves
Were Wed One Summer--Dear--", in which the lovers are separated by dif-
ferent futures or different paths in life. The loved one has a future
where his "Cottage--faced the sun--/While Oceans--and the North must be--/
On every side of mine" (the speaker). The poet says that she is isolated
even from a future and her life is like a bereavement, a living death.
And it is not strange, therefore, that death becomes the metaphor for
Emily Dickinson to talk about isolation and separation of lovers.

Such examples as the last two poems in which Emily Dickinson equates
her life of isolation with death greatly help us to understand the
following poem which the poet has written to evaluate her life:

It was a Grave, yet bore no Stone
Enclosed 'twas not of Rail
A Consciousness its Acre, and
It held a Human Soul.

Entombed by whom, for what offence
If Home or Foreign born--
Had I the curiosity
'Twere not appeased of men

Till Resurrection, I must guess
Denied the small desire
A Rose upon its Ridge to sow
Or take away a Briar. (876)

Clearly it is the poet's life that is described as "a Grave." The word "Entombed" in the second stanza means isolated and the question is why has her life been so isolated--because of her own "offence" or because of some outside or "Foreign born" source such as fate. She says that she must guess the cause until "Resurrection"--she who is denied the small desire of some happiness in her life ("A Rose upon its Ridge to sow") or even the alleviation of her sufferings ("...take away a Briar.").

Such, finally, was the dilemma of Emily Dickinson. She never understood why she was destined to live a life of lonely and insufferable isolation. And while she lived, her mental, physical and spiritual isolation was to be her only companion. In her own words:

* * * *

Adventure most unto itself
The Soul condemned to be--
Attended by a single Hound
Its own identity. (from 822)

When she turns to society for contact she finds death (her metaphor for isolation) has beat her to the gesture. Isolation is like death; it annuls her power to communicate. When she probes the morbidity of the grave in hopes of comfort, she often finds herself shut off from the meaning, the answer she desires. When she seeks the consolation of a lover or loved one, she is imprisoned by walls--perhaps inexplicable, nebulous--but real enough to block all efforts of escape. The poet's whole life and art were an attempt to probe this mystery of human experience, the mystery of our "own identity" which to some degree is the mystery of aloneness and isolation. In all man's great religious the essence of heaven is the peace and beatific vision of a power so great as to be able to relieve man's isolation and cease forever his longing for communion. Whatever one may or may not believe about religion, the fact of the problem of isolation to man is obvious.

Emily Dickinson grapples with her problem in poem after poem, finding in art the only power open to her to combat the foe. In many poems the suffering is so intense that no relief is obtained. Occasionally, consolation comes to the poet in the realization that she does not suffer her fate alone. Whether Emily Dickinson ever realized it or not, she used her poetic art not only to console herself and temper her isolation, but through her lyric genius to universalize her personal torment. Whether she ever knew it or not, her poetry did break through all the walls and barriers of the prison of her isolation to speak to all ages, to speak to the world.

There is a solitude of space
A solitude of sea
A solitude of death, but these
Society shall be
Compared with that profounder site
That polar privacy
A soul admitted to itself--
Finitis infinity. (1695)

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