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ENG 246 / F01

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ABSTRACT

Without any question, humans are creatures motivated by both logic and emotion. This paper, “The Role of Emotional Depression and Mental Duress in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson,” focuses on four specific poems by Emily Dickinson while giving granular detail and analysis regarding the emotional and mental health of each of speakers of each poem. While the language in each of these poems is intricate and lucid, the symbolism used in the prose by Dickinson clearly shows obvious strife and suffering despite the ability of the writer to convey thoughts that illustrate literary brilliance and beauty, even when delivered in a macabre and gloomy setting. Dickinson may very well have been the perfect person. at the perfect place, and at the perfect time, to compose poetic works that shall resonate with timeless messages that are laced with the struggle to find some meaning in life while exorcising the demons of emotional depression and mental duress.

Keywords: Mental Health, Emotional Health, Depression, Stress

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The Role of Emotional Depression and Mental Duress in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson

It would be virtually impossible for any reader to examine the poetry of Emily Dickinson without encountering copious examples of her using death and the mild macabre as a recurring theme by the speaker. Dickinson is indeed worthy of her recognition as a master of the English language, offering abundant evidence within the high caliber of illustrative prose she uses in brilliantly crafting her poetry. While death is something everyone shall inevitably encounter, Dickinson often uses the speaker of poem to covertly flirt with voicing another lingering theme in her poetry that is not universal in its random assignment to a person: emotional depression. In life, while physical death is certain, there is no guarantee of one ever arriving at a place of personal content or happiness. Consequently, no one receives any assurance that he will succeed in avoiding the debilitating condition of emotional depression and the mental duress endured by those who suffer this plight. In an article published by Johns Hopkins University in 2016, Keith Mikos states, "Dickinson poems are often compressed, a quality that makes even the smallest detail—and every detail—potentially crucial for interpretation" (Mikos 30). A closer and critical examination of her poems "After great pain, a formal feeling comes," "I felt a funeral in my brain," "I measure every grief," and "Much Madness is divinest Sense" offer interesting and subtle insight into the innuendo of the emotional condition and mental mindset of the speaker. While it can easily be argued that death may be the most prominent theme in the poetry of Dickinson, the possibility of the speaker being emotionally depressed or believing he or she is

unduly oppressed are likely the primary catalysts for this recurring morbid fixation on dying.

In the poem “After great pain, a formal feeling comes,” the speaker describes a scene reminiscent of his systemic resignation of life, in a manner which feels abundant with cold logic while also being in modest deficit of emotion. The actual “great pain” is void of any description in the poem, so one is left a mystery to unravel, but it likely represents an event so traumatic in context or an ailment so distressing to the speaker, that he has achieved the unenviable condition of emotional numbness regarding his impending death. The impassiveness of the speaker can be clearly interpreted in the following stanza: “The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs,” personifying his nerves possessing a stony and rigid conduct, possibly symbolizing a mausoleum style crypt (Dickinson 73). Additionally, the phrase “This is the Hour of Lead” is a clear reference to a coffin, which were sometimes made of, or adorned with, lead (Dickinson 73). Lastly, when the speaker refers to “As Freezing persons” feeling the “chill” before the “stupor”, then finally “letting go”, he is comparing the end of his tolerance of the “great pain” with a clinically “formal” physical resignation from the living world (Dickinson 73). While death is clearly the final destination of the speaker in this poem, the arrival of this “formal feeling” prompts his stoic “Quartz contentment” which precedes his final surrender to the enigma of this “great pain” by paying tribute with his own mortal life (Dickinson 73). In the article, “Insane in the Membrane: Emily Dickinson Dissecting Brains”, Stefan Schöberlein comments, “how could we not read melancholia, depression, or even schizophrenia here, with images of mental anguish and despair so vividly represented” (Schöberlein 46). While the language used in this poem may be subtly laden with an air of trivial melancholy relative to the preciousness of life, one can clearly get a sense of the emotional anguish and depression of the speaker in the poem. To this speaker, his anticipation of death is symbolic of an unnatural mental sanctuary from a state of

never ending despondency and mental duress.

In the poem “Much madness is divinest Sense,” the speaker is describing the subjective nature of being perceived as either sane or insane by the speaker when contrasted with the accepted societal norms. When the speaker writes “Much Sense - the starkest Madness / 'Tis the majority” one gets the sense that the speaker sees modest lunacy in being a conformist with society, even though most the population likely falls within this census (Dickinson 101). In contrary fashion, the speaker says “Much Madness is divinest Sense - / To a discerning eye” the speaker explains he has divine enlightenment for logic and “sense” even though society may define him as being “mad” or possibly insane (Dickinson 101). In this poem, to be perceived as one who was “demur” would lead to a perception of being “dangerous,” possibly getting the speaker incarcerated or institutionalized, as seen in the reference to the “Chain” (Dickinson 101). While references to depression may be marginal at best in this poem, it seems obvious that the speaker is very cognizant of being trapped within his true self for fear of becoming a disenfranchised citizen of society. Far better for the speaker to take refuge in his own thoughts and emotions, hidden in plain sight, then to be alleged a “dangerous” or “mad” person by society. Again, it is easy to imagine the potential paranoia and/or depression of the speaker, seeing life through a different lens than others, in the weary prose of this poem. The emotional paradox endured by the speaker of this poem in realizing that his certain and calculated silence will maintain his position in civil society, in spite of his own better judgment, is almost beyond being conceivable for any “emotionally well-adjusted” or “sane” person.

In the poem “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” the speaker is giving account of his descent into mental and physical death while enduring depression. In the article “Anatomy Lessons: Emily Dickinson’s Brain Poems,” Barbara Baumgartner, contends that Dickinson was deliberate

in making the brain the setting for her poems to challenge the common cultural presumptions of feminine emotion and masculine logic and thereby avoid any pre-conceived notions of gender tendencies (Baumgartner 69). This conclusion seems sound based on the absence of any gender assignment to the speaker of this poem, and numerous other gender neutral examples of the speaker in the writing of Dickinson. In this highly celebrated Dickinson poem, the speaker describes “Mourners” who seemed to first bring “Sense” and then “Numb(ness)” to his or her own mind, clearly referring to a sullen inner monologue of his or her perception of disparaging thoughts prompting a funeral for his or her own sanity and/or happiness (Dickinson 42). Eventually, these “mourners” lift a “box,” symbolic of a casket before being “dropped down” into the grave, where he or she would be “Finished knowing - then” (Dickinson 42). This unusually picturesque and descriptive narrative of the descent into the grave, and the end of physical life and eternal consciousness is in stark contrast to the Christian dogma of salvation and spiritual life after death delivered through faith in Jesus Christ. However, according to Schöberlein, “The brain, in Dickinson’s poem, creates and sustains the soul; the soul, in turn, is a natural growth clearly dependent on the brain” (Schöberlein 58). To a Christian, physical death is the requisite transition to be able to spiritually rise again to achieve eternal life, the brain has no bearing on custody and maintenance of the soul. The speaker in this poem sees a grim and final destination in the grave as opposed to rising to Heaven with the other devoted saints of Christian faith. This jaded belief, especially in a predominantly Victorian Christian society, and in the uniquely and morbidly descriptive context of this poem, is clearly indicative of the speaker being completely oppositional to the dominant religious views in his or her culture and society. This absence of faith and hope, especially if one were vocal about his or her views in Victorian society, would almost certainly prompt undue negative judgement on the speaker by those in his

or her immediate sphere. Thus, the speaker in this poem can easily be interpreted as a person capable of conveying both logic and emotion, regardless of gender, who is ambivalent towards life and/or emotionally depressed.

In the poem “I measure every Grief I meet,” the speaker is a person who is suspect of, and very interested in, everyone else who confesses or projects grief, to contrast their sufferings against his own sorrows. The speaker ponders the “weight” and “size” of the grief of others, curious to know if it has been “easier” than his own (Dickinson 140). He wonders if their time of grief has been “long” or has it “just begun” (Dickinson 140). In comparative contrast, his own pain is so “old” that he “could not tell” when it started for him (Dickinson 140). Thus, the pain of the speaker, seems to have become, at least in part, primary to his identity and his reason to live. Reading further, the speaker gives additional statement that alludes to the possibility of his emotional depression, while waiting on the siren call of death. The speaker continues his pondering of the pains of other individuals “wondering if it hurts to live” and do “they have to try” (Dickinson 140). It appears there is a dual meaning in these laments from the speaker as he is in constant focus of the sorrows of others, but to selfishly extend the contest of comparison with his own great “grief” as well. Is life difficult for the speaker? Most certainly! To imagine the marathon of focus and commitment required to develop a narcissistic chronicle a life of pain and grief while having a constant focus on “every grief” one would encounter is almost unimaginable. Ponder the self-centered and narrow views of the speaker, but take pause to consider the depth of the pain that they must be facing in to approach life in such a twisted emotional manner. The speaker comments that “some” people have “gone patient long” and found the ability to posture “their smile” once again, but he sees the hollowness in the gesture, comparing their smile to a “light (lamp)...little oil” (Dickinson 140) Again, the speaker talks of

the grief of others and how they respond, but one can just as easily sense the possibility of self-reflection in how the speaker may be struggling to handle his own dreary perception of life. Possibly the most difficult line to reconcile by the speaker is the stanzas that reference Christ on the cross at Calvary, as the poem approaches crescendo. The speaker uses the oxymoron “A piercing Comfort it affords / In passing Calvary,” clearly referencing the suffering Christ endured on the cross at Calvary, when His hands and feet were pierced by nails, and His side was pierced by a spear to assure He was dead on the cross (Dickinson). While the speaker is highly cognizant of all the griefs that he meets, it is completely impossible for him to bear witness the capstone moment of grief in Christianity. He seems to overtly mock the crucifixion by comparing “the fashions - of the Cross - And how they’re mostly worn” to “Some - are like my own” (Dickinson 140). In 19th century New England Puritan society, statements such as this would most likely be seen as blasphemous, even heretical by some. Clearly, hope and eternal contentment seem to be in dwindling supply for the speaker, yet somehow he conjures some measure of twisted pride in his own suffering to take a demented precedence over all his other musings and thoughts. Categorizing the uniquely combined emotional and mental enigmas of the speaker of this poem may lie beyond the ability of a single clinical definition or context. In his consideration of attempting to decipher the meaning of Dickinson poems, Mikos states “The alteration of any detail necessarily alters any sense of the complete subject; this is a topic for both manuscript studies and thematic interpretations”. (Mikos 35). Thus, one might conclude that the speaker in this poem is adrift in the sea of pain and suffering, while enduring some daunting level of emotional depression, despite his ability to craft prose that seems to be exceptionally logical in his conclusions. In any case, one can clearly sense his state of mental chaos.

In looking at these specific poems, while death seems to be the inevitable destination for

the speaker in each poem, the recurring motivation to his welcoming anticipation of death is clearly preceded by turbulent pain and suffering from emotional depression and/or mental duress. The speaker sees death as the end of his laborious enmity with the unbridled agony of a tormented life trapped in a station not of his own choosing. One can see the attempt to summon some modest majesty and elegance in his prose, portraying the nobleness of his suffering before meeting with a merciful and final end to his life, but this approach can still be perceived as self-serving as well. In any case, it is difficult to dispute that the ubiquitous pain and anguish of the speaker are clearly the catalysts to this recurring theme of his focus on death and despair in these four specific poems.

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