

Emily Dickinson's Two Minds of Death ©

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Emily Dickinson treats death with two minds – death as trepidations and as blessings. To her, death symbolizes immortality. Many of Dickinson's poems are ambiguous, but four stood out to me as related to death – Nos. 216, 449, 465, and 712.

She describes the end of life as the greatest encounter, where truth meets the soul. In poem 449, the speakers, Beauty and Truth, are in parallel rooms and speak in similar language, but are not indistinguishable. One must question why she chose the word “failed” instead of “died” in “He questioned softly, “Why I failed?”” (line 5). Does Dickinson correlate failure with death? In essence, she questions if death ends all hope. She ends poem 449 with “Until the Moss had reached our lips” (line 11) and “And covered up – our names” (line 12). The moss appears to cover any communication between the two and the world, making them powerless.

Dickinson's image of death erases the human being from existence. She seems fond of anonymity, possibly due to her Puritan background. In poem 712, she describes a bizarre journey of her life and onward to the other world. Death is shown as a polite escort and she as a willing partner who is not dressed for the occasion – “The Dews drew quivering and chill” (line 14) and “For only Gossamer, my Gown” (line 15). She labels her grave as her house almost telling us that death is not unlike life itself. The dead live on eternally just the same way as the living.

In as much as Dickinson seems to embrace death, she also dreads it. In the beginning of poem 465, the sound of the fly buzzing seems nondescript. However, as the poem continues, this buzzing fly represents the dying. Dickinson could not possibly write

about dying through experience. She uses the fly as a symbol or a sound of death as it is happening. The sound is more pronounced as life is becoming more silent. What if the fly represents the morbid part of death? Flies are attracted to decaying bodies. Here she is contemplating the reality and the horror of death.

In conclusion, Emily Dickinson embodies death in many ways in her writings. Her feelings on death sway between fear, blessing and liberation. By today's standards, one would have diagnosed her as bipolar. I believe Dickinson expressed her opinion on death the way she lived her life – simple and offbeat. Emily Dickinson is clear that death is a journey to be experienced and the means to everlastingness.