

## HEAVENLY HURT EMILY DICKINSON

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper focused on the absurdist elements in the selected poems of Emily Dickinson. Spending her life in a politically and socially rigid family she also experienced an authoritarian patriarchy; and ironically these oppressive elements became inspirations to her for writing rebellious poetry while completely ignoring the set norms, regularities and unyielding poetic traditions. This paper reveals her rejections of existing religious order and social conditions while exposing their emptiness and austerity. This paper attempted to make a connection between absurdism and the poetry of Emily Dickinson to depict the disconnection among Man, God and Society as strongly propounded by Dickinson.*

**KEYWORDS:** Nothingness, Absurdity, Meaninglessness, Female Reality, Desolation, Patriarchy, Self Exile, Futility.

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The poetic world of Emily Dickinson makes its readers curious to know more about her and her poetic endeavors. Born in a religiously rigid, politically active and male domineering family of Amherst, Dickinson had a chance to explore religion closely. She led a secluded life and kept her opinion and revolt to the poetry and letter writing. She used to write her poetry on used pages, grocery lists and useless scrolls that divulge her thoughts towards the uselessness and the absurdity of one's existence. Emily Dickinson's poetry and letter writing reveal the emptiness and meaninglessness of human life in general and female reality in a male dominating society in particular. My paper aims at exploring the absurdist elements in the selected poems of Emily Dickinson to reveal nothingness, meaninglessness and emptiness of an individual's life. The elements of Absurdism, i.e. nothingness, alienation, and anguish in her poetry and letter, yet remain to be explored.

The desolation and futility which Dickinson felt in mid nineteenth century the same feelings have been conveyed by Albert Camus in early twentieth century as he reveals the reality of universe in these lines:

In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile... This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurd. (Camus 22)

Through the channel of her poetry and letters, Emily denounces the religious and patriarchal world around her and creates her own world by adopting seclusion from the rest of the society. She lived in self exile and felt herself a stranger and this exile creates emptiness and absurdity in her life and around her. What Camus defined about the universe and its shallowness the same experience and observation she expressed in her poetry almost seven decades back. Emily was also in search of purpose and meaning in life. The feelings of loneliness and anguish lead Dickinson to focus on the theme of self exile. She focuses on the feelings of bleakness, pain and blankness in human behavior and perception.

“PAIN has an element of Blank;  
It cannot recollect  
When it began, or if there were  
A Day when it was not.  
It has no future but itself.”  
(*Pain has an Element of Blank* 156)

Emily’s loneliness is a revolt against society as she feels herself alienated from the bleak world of patriarchy and religion. Word “Blankness” in her poem reveals the bleakness of faith, religion and universe and none of them has any purpose and function in the true sense of the word. Dickinson’s sense of futility and nothingness in her poetry makes her an absurdist as Abrams provides a definition of absurdity:

.....To conceive the universe as possessing no inherent **truth, value, or meaning**, and to represent human life—in its **fruitless search for purpose and meaning**, as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end—as an existence which is both anguished and absurd. (Abrams 1)

Dickinson’s poetry is in search of meaning yet she believes that this search is fruitless. In her poetry she wrote a letter to Jane Humphrey where she mentioned:

How **lonely** this world is growing, something so **desolate creeps** over the spirit and we don’t know what its name, and it won’t go away  
.....I am standing **alone** in **rebellion**, and growing very careless.  
(Dickinson 125)

In Dickinson’s poetry, loneliness and rebellion complement each other as her isolation is itself a revolt against society and religion. This revolt leads her towards death as an escape. Death for Dickinson is splitting in to two. She condoles her cousins on their mother’s Death by saying, “**split** lives-never ‘get well’” (185). ‘Split’ in Dickinson’s poem can also be related to the fragmented human existence which fails to acquire meaningfulness thus creating a meaninglessness and purposelessness in one’s life. Split exposes the absurdity of human life as Ionesco reveals absurd as “Absurd which has no purpose, goal or objective” (123). Dickinson in her poetry reveals a bitter truth that existence is scared of being hopeful:

WHEN I hoped I feared,  
Since I hoped I dared;  
Everywhere alone  
Spectre cannot harm,  
Serpent cannot charm;  
He deposes doom,  
Who hath suffered him.  
(*When I Hoped I Feared*, Second Series, 1891, P.222)

Dickinson’s manifestations about hope, fear, loneliness, doom and suffering seem to be quite prevalent in her poetry. All these traits shape her life and silent revolt that she wanted to start within herself and towards the conventionality and orthodoxy in the society. She did not want to do conversion yet she had to do without having any “hope” of salvation. She keenly felt her

isolation, writing her friend Abiah Root in 1848, "I am not happy, and I regret that last term, when that golden opportunity was mine, that I did not give up and become a Christian" (123). In 1850, she would share similar sentiments with her friend Jane Humphrey: "Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie believes she loves, and trusts him, and I am standing alone in rebellion" (Dickinson 127).

For Dickinson, salvation is a false hope and it will not deliver people from the agonies of life and she is not happy with the conversion that shows her indifference towards religion and God. The void created by Dickinson in this Absurd world also lacks the belief in religion and Faith. Dickinson complains in one of her poems for not being heard by God:

Of Course- I prayed-  
And did God Care?... (138)

Reader senses a mood of despair and anguish in the above mentioned lines as they simultaneously complain and question the love of God for His "people" as well as the role religion plays in one's life. Dickinson feels that God is indifferent to His people and here word "God" is symbolic both religiously and socially. Dickinson is both personally and "heavenly hurt" (There's a certain slant of light 134) by male dominant society and religion. She rebels by renouncing the world outside her father's land: "I do not cross my Father's ground to any House or town" (Dickinson 260). Dickinson's sense of alienation and anguish seems to be her silent protest against religion and patriarchal society. She assumes the world something as a "strangest place"

I've heard it in the chilliest land,  
And on the strangest sea;  
Yet, never, in extremity,  
It asked a crumb of me. (179)

Superlative degrees of adjectives used by Emily Dickinson make her revolt more forceful and emphasize her divorce from society and religion. Her use of irregular punctuations, her incomplete statements and her poems without title also assert her revolt against religious and patriarchal hegemony. Dickinson was an original thinker and her style is unique in terms of themes, ideas and literary form. Most of her poems have been written in short stanzas, incomplete and without title. According to her brother, "Her compositions were unlike anything ever heard--and always produced a sensation--both with the scholars and Teachers--her imagination sparkled--and she gave it free rein." Her poetic style is creative as well as strange which drags reader's attention towards the conscious irregularities within the poetic style, manner and language. Extreme indifference towards the discipline and manner of poetry make her poetic endeavors complicated as well as rebellious.

A word that breathes distinctly  
Has not the power to die. (171)

Her uses of dashes, inconsistent punctuation, jarring expression, and unpredictable capitalization single her out from the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century poets and place her among the absurdists of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Absurdists show their distrust in language as a means of communication. According to them, language is stereotyped and meaningless and it has failed to express the essence of human experience and the depth of human perception and consciousness. Language has become the unreliable and insufficient tool of communication as

it is fragmented and void of any purpose. Dickinson's use of language is quite similar to the absurdists. Her poems are not following proper and correct grammatical arrangement and her poems expose her distaste towards every existing traditional systems as she affirms, "**split** lives-never 'get well'" (265). This split here means "split" between individual and society and between creativity and conventionality. This split is also important as it reveals another characteristic of Dickinson's poetry and that is the elements of absurdity. Her poetry seems to be the bits and pieces of her rebellious approach towards the fragmented and disintegrated patriarchal and religious worlds. Dickinson wants to get split from the world she has and has built her own world. She emphasizes that she and this world should be parted from each other:

So we must keep apart,  
You there, I here,  
With just the door ajar  
That oceans are,  
And prayer,  
And that pale sustenance,  
Despair!

(I Cannot Live Without You 187)

Keeping apart from the religious and traditional worlds she exposes the nothingness and shallowness of human existence and shows her disappointment towards the rigidity of life:

I never heard that one is dead  
Without the chance of life  
After annihilating me  
That mightiest belief. R3(222)

Mightiest belief in religion and in patriarchy has been shaken and Dickinson has been forced to think rebelliously. For her that mightiest belief is alive till she realizes that it is eradicating her and making her thoughts and perceptions numb. Emily used not to be a social person; she preferred to live in door or shut herself in her own room yet loved to live close to peppers and scrolls on which she used to inscribe her fragmented yet imaginative thoughts. Emily used to decline invitations and used to keep herself away from public. As she wrote in response to one of the invitations from her cousins, "I'm so old fashioned, Darling, that your friends would stare." Due to her abandonment and retreat from the life offered by her politically, religiously and socially active family, she selects her own society:

The Soul selects her own Society --  
Then -- shuts the Door --  
To her divine Majority --  
Present no more -  
Unmoved -- she notes the Chariots -- pausing --  
At her low Gate --  
Unmoved -- an Emperor be kneeling  
Upon her Mat --  
I've known her -- from an ample nation --  
Choose One --  
Then -- close the Valves of her attention --  
Like Stone -- (234)

Dickinson had camouflaged herself in her own soul where she enjoys freedom to be different and diverse and she was not eager to welcome anyone else in this experience as she declared

at the end of this poem that valves of her attention are closed like the stone. The reason to such a rigid approach seemed to her indifference not only towards her family but also towards the religious activities going in and around her families. She was not ready to convert herself and felt herself isolated from the rest of the world and she in one of her letter, regretted over her decision, "I am not happy, and I regret that last term, when that golden opportunity was mine, that I did not give up and become a Christian" (145). Yet she wanted to stand in rebellion as she showed those strong sentiments of her rebellion, "Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie believes she loves, and trusts him, and I am standing alone in rebellion" (149). Emily showed courage as well as determination to reveal truth within her. She wanted to rebel against society which she did through the broken images in her poetry, irregular and inexplicable punctuation and incomplete poetic pieces.

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