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The Theme of Grief's Impermanence in Dickinson's "Poem 258"

In "Poem 258," Emily Dickinson describes the arrival and departure of death, which, because it distances us from our loved ones and cannot be understood, causes us great sorrow when a person dies. In many of Dickinson's poems, the theme of death is explored not to deluge her readers with anguish, but to help her readers understand the reality of death and to come to terms with it. Death happens, and it afflicts everyone. However, Dickinson wishes us to understand that grief does not remain at the same intensity forever; over time, the pain subsides as the person realizes that death is permanent. This is the important lesson that we must learn in order to move on after we suffer a loss.

In the first stanza, the arrival of death is symbolized by "a certain Slant of light" on "Winter Afternoons / That oppresses, like the Heft / Of Cathedral Tunes." Winter is the season of the year when it is cold, the sun is least bright, and living things die. Winter is also the exact opposite of summer, when there is lots of warm sun, and living things flourish and multiply. Overall, winter is a time of gloominess and death--the perfect setting for the poem because winter oppresses us. What oppresses us most is the dreary chill of the weather; bad weather is usually signaled by incoming gray clouds that begin to block the sun. One can visualize a cloud slowly coming in to block the sun on a cold day, and before the cloud completely obscures the sun, the sunlight begins to gradually "Slant." Using this scene as an analogy to death, the reader is better able to understand how death arrives. Because it takes time for the clouds to move into the sky, this action implies that death can also take a long time before it happens. Another thought is that if the sun's light represents life and happiness, then the act of the cloud (death) coming to cover it implies that life has been extinguished and happiness has been turned to grief. The clouds can break suddenly into a storm, signifying an early death, or the clouds can roll in slowly, leaving a person unaware of the exact time he or she will meet with death.

Death, in this poem, is as unpredictable as the weather, and therefore this analogy of winter to death is perfect for Dickinson's theme.

Meeting with death can mean two different things in this poem; it can mean that a person in the family will die, or it can mean that the person himself will die. Whichever meaning the reader chooses to attach to the "certain Slant of light" that signifies death's approach, Dickinson's basic message is the same--any kind of death is hurtful, whether it be the death of a loved one or the process of one's own dying. This concept is oppressing to us because we do not want to think about the coming of the cold, bad, gloomy winter of our lives. We want to keep focused on our summerlike vitality because the thought of death disturbs us. Setting the time of the poem in the afternoon is also appropriate to the theme of the poem. Since morning is usually used as a symbol for birth because it is when the sun rises and creatures begin to awake, and night is often a symbol for death because the sun sets, creatures go to sleep, and darkness (a symbol of death) befalls the land, setting the time of the poem halfway between the two extremes of life also adds the implication of not knowing when death will arrive. A middle-aged person can see the clouds beginning to block out the life-giving sun in the afternoon, signifying entrance into old age, but he cannot be certain of when he will die.

Dickinson informs us that death can be disturbing in the second stanza, as she discusses the "Heavenly Hurt" it can inflict upon us. Her choice of words to describe this "Hurt" is interesting, because when we think of Heaven, we think of happiness, God, and other good, lively things. However, "Heavenly Hurt" seems to describe both the huge proportions of the pain that we feel during grief, and the importance of feeling grief. Since Heaven describes a good place, somehow there must be a beneficial side to Hurt. Hurt can be good because it eventually will diminish and allow us to accept death easier. Dickinson herself states that "We can find no scar," meaning that the pain a person feels over another's death is not permanent, but will eventually diminish in severity over time. She wants us to know that the only lasting impression a death has on us is "internal difference, / Where the meanings are," meaning that although we may grieve heavily over a person, the death will not leave a permanent impression on us and that someday, the hurt will leave us. The "meanings" signify thoughts in the mind; this is where our "internal difference," or troubling thoughts,

reside after a person's death, but as with all thoughts and memories, new ones can begin to take precedence over pain and grief. This "internal difference," although it will never completely go away because the thought of another's death never completely goes away, will nevertheless diminish and allow one to move on with life.

The reader finds in the third stanza that living through the painful grieving process is not a lesson that can be taught in a textbook. "None may teach it--Any--," meaning that when a person is going through the grieving process, no one can tell him that some day, he will learn to live with the loss of a friend or loved one. The pain of grief initially seems to be permanent to people who experience it, and nothing that others say or do can mitigate this pain. The second line describes death as being the "Seal Despair"--like the seal on a can or an envelope, it firmly marks the end or limit to something. The knowledge that death is the end of life and the ultimate limit of living things brings despair. Death is a Seal; nothing can break free from it.

Also in the third stanza, death is described as "An imperial affliction / Sent us of the air." This phrase brings to mind images of pestilence and disease such as the bubonic plague, which have probably killed hundreds of millions, quietly and invisibly, through the centuries. Like the unpredictability of death, the people did not know when they would die of disease or when their friends and loved ones would. Dickinson's description of death being "Sent us of the air" seems to suggest that the air is the mode of infection for this literally lethal disease. It is very true that anyone who breathes the air will die. From the moment infants inhale their first breath, they are certain to die, and so this analogy of death to an airborne contagion gives the reader the view that death is quiet, invisible, and unpredictable. Also, because death is "An imperial affliction," it affects all people. If there is anything that holds true for all people, it is the fact that everyone will die someday.

In the last stanza, the analogy of the inclement winter afternoon in the first stanza is extended to describe events surrounding the arrival and departure of death. The "Landscape" is a symbol for all people, including those who have suffered grief and those who try to comfort them after their loss. In the wintry "Landscape" that Dickinson outlined for the reader in the first stanza, a "Slant of light" was created, most likely as dark clouds began to obscure the sun. When light shines on things, shadows are created in places where light does

not reach. When the light begins to “Slant,” longer shadows are created. Since light is usually a symbol of life and happiness, then the shadows must represent death and grief. Therefore, in the second line, the “Shadows” represent people who have suffered a loss. When death is about to arrive, people begin to anticipate its arrival and the “Landscape listens,” but when death arrives, grieving begins. For a period of time, life for a grieving person stops. If breathing symbolizes vitality and the continuity of life, then those in grief “hold their breath”--the loss is so severe for them that they cannot move forward in life until their grief begins to subside. However, “When it goes, ‘tis like the Distance / On the look of Death.” The “Distance on the look of Death,” figuratively, is a very long distance. A very long distance implies that a very long time has passed to traverse such a distance, and it is this amount of time that is needed to finally overcome the overwhelming sense of loss initially felt when a person dies. When the person in grief finally overcomes the pain of death, it almost feels as if nothing has happened.

Dickinson makes it clear in the poem that the grief surrounding the loss of a loved one is not a permanent, debilitating experience if the person is able to learn the lesson of death. This lesson, which can be taught by no one, will relieve the grief over time and allow a person to eventually move on with his or her life. Although each death we experience will always be initially painful, Dickinson’s message to us seems to be that the pain will not last forever when we learn that death is a common and natural event, and that once we understand this lesson, we can go on with our lives with the valuable sense that because we have lived through the terrible anguish once, it is possible to live through it again. Because of this, we become able to respect death and appreciate life more.