

The Eschatologicality in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson's artistic self was an outcome of the Calvinist branch of mainstream Christianity and her intellectual descent from eschatological people, the seventeenth century, New England Puritans. This spiritual backdrop along with some elementary ecclesiastical propensity of her New England pedigree contributed to her work. One of those pre dispositions was to scrutinize everything underneath the shadow of the end of life. The sense of end characterizes Dickinson's eschatological sensibility. Dickinson's poems loom large with images like death, darkness, destruction, dissolution, doomsday, Day of Judgment, and the like. Since the study of eschatologicality is crucial in understanding Dickenson's poems, the aim of this paper is to analyze different aspects of eschatologicality in Dickinson's poems

Keywords: Eschatologicality, Terminality, Calvinism, Puritanism, Apocalypse, Day of Judgment.

Under the rough and hard shell of Dickinson's poetic approach, puzzling dash mark, diffusive personifications, compactness of expression, unconventionality of grammar, strangeness of diction, strained figures of speech, often generalized symbolism, condensed style, monotonous rhythms, varied allegory, bafflingly recurring themes, distracting tones, moods and attitudes to life, death, immortality, doomsday, afterlife, God, nature, people, society, or art, critics have discovered her poems an unfathomably valuable treasure of world literature. Sustained readings by critics,

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in-depth study of her difficult works, and biographical information have contributed to the emergence of Emily Dickinson as one of the most illuminating and sanguine nineteenth century American poets. In fact, biographical and eschatological study is crucial in deciphering meaning and understanding Dickinson's poems (Tate 16-27).

The word "Eschatology" is derived from the Greek word "eskhatos" which means last, furthest, uttermost, extreme, most remote, or the discussion on last things. It refers to a branch of methodical religious studies dealing with death, demise, life after death, revivification, the second coming of Christ, the ending of the age, heavenly judgment, the future state, immortality, and eternity. Eschatology refers to the Judeo-Christian dogma of the commencement of the kingdom of God and the alteration of history. Metaphorically, it may be cited as the discussion of issues associated with terminality (J.D.M.). It also refers to the branch of theology or biblical exegesis concerned with the end of the world or that branch of systematic theology which deals with the doctrines of the last things. Originally, in theology, eschatology means the study of the four last things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Generally, eschatology denotes any system concerning the last or final matters such as death, the judgment, the future state, etc. (Toner). According to R.H. Charles, eschatology refers to a term of Greek derivation, meaning "discourse about last things." It is a branch of theology dealing with death, resurrection, the second coming of Christ, the end of the age, divine judgment, the future state, immortality, and eternity. It also refers to the Judeo-Christian doctrine of the coming of the kingdom of God and the transformation or the end of history. Figuratively, it may be viewed as the study of any idea or subject related to terminality.

Calvinism in Shaping Dickinson's Eschatological Self

The study of Dickinson's New England decadent eschatological culture and the Calvinistic background of her sense of the end and endings are crucial in understanding her personality and her poems as well. In discussing eschatologicality in Emily Dickinson's life, mind, and art, it is not only important to understand its theological meaning, it is also necessary to recognize its potential for imaginative extensions and intense personal expressions. Her creative self was an outgrowth of the Calvinistic branch of orthodox Christianity and her cultural descent from an eschatological people, the seventeenth century New England Puritans (Mahmood 110). This religious background contributed some fundamental spiritual tendencies of her New England in her works. One of those tendencies was to view everything under the shadow of the End. Dickinson's recurrent musing on death and afterlife might easily be termed as "morbid" but it would not seem that eccentric to her readers if they understand her descension from the New England Puritans who were extremely obsessed with the last things, ends, and endings. Dickinson's besotted curiosity with death is reflected in over one-third of her poems, with numerous others suggesting or referring to it. Seldom is there a letter that does not call attention to time and transience (Mahmood 38). Her recognition on any

subject is inevitably streaked with her speculations about death and life in the hereafter which ultimately constitute the typical texture of all her thoughts. Calvin's religious dogma, which actually contains stimulants for apocalyptic thinking, embodies the essence of Puritan eschatology in general. However, though this background instilled sentimentalist tendencies in Dickinson, she consciously rejected certain illogicality of her religion, Calvinistic ideas, and eschatological thoughts and developed her own private eschatology (Mahmood 210).

Puritan Background in Shaping Dickinson's Eschatological Self

Emily Dickinson's birth, growing up as a child, education, religion, private life, and overall socio-cultural milieu of the then New England deserve a sound analysis in excavating the eschatological aspects in her poems. Emily Dickinson was born in 1830 into an orthodox Calvinistic family that attended the Congregationalist church in Amherst, Massachusetts. Amherst was a sparsely populated 19th century farming settlement of the Connecticut River Valley with a cultural line going back to the Puritan beginnings of seventeenth century America. Eleanor Wilner contends: "For Dickinson the theology of her evangelical forebears and the disintegrating concepts and constraints of her society are imaginatively realized and heavy with emotions" (130). The sixth generation of Dickinson from Nathaniel to Samuel Fowler, Emily's grandfather, had sustained or did not make much departure from Puritan pieties. Samuel Fowler Dickinson says that "he remained one of the early Puritans" (Sewall 35). The Puritan character was also evident in Dickinson's father, Edward Dickinson's personality with his commitment to public service and strict moral conduct in private life.

The early New England Puritan brought into the new world the vision of a holy commonwealth and thought of themselves as "an eschatological people in quest of Jerusalem" (Gilmore 1-4). They were quite convinced that they were God's New Israel under the second disposition of grace and that it was in New England that the Kingdom of God would soon be established. They looked upon themselves as covenanted people. In their unspeakable misery, they sustained themselves by the strong faith that God had removed them from England to this wilderness (New England) and they were singled out above all other people to fulfill a mission- that is to build His Kingdom by setting up a new heaven and a new earth in new churches and a new commonwealth through the agency of His covenanted people. This sentiment resounds throughout the literature of both Protestant and Roman Catholic settlers of the New World. Such sentiments of New Englanders was further intensified by the preaching of Jonathan Edwards, one of the Congregationalist and America's first prominent theologians, who preached that the millennium is at hand and America was destined to be the center of the Kingdom of God and, therefore, the Christians should be prepared for it (Wilmore 67-71). In Dickinson's time, the fervor of Puritanism, though, dwindled everywhere to a great extent but in the

Connecticut River Valley its values wielded a decisive and far-reaching impact on the rural New England mind with its rigor of morality, its stern commandments, and its commitment not only to fulfilling the divine purpose but also to playing a social role. By 1820, despite the decline of Puritan orthodoxy due to the growth of mercantile centers in New Haven, Hartford, and Springfield, and the subsequent rise of secularism, the church still occupied center stage in the lives of the majority of the Amherst populace who were constantly reminded of their enduring concern by the regular preaching of sermons – the salvation of the soul (Ludwig 38).

Some deaths of Dickinson's close relatives, neighbors, and friends also contributed to the development of her eschatological personality. The diseases that ravaged New England during Dickinson's time left an appalling impact on developing an acute consciousness of death's triumphant presence in her life. Small pox, cholera, and many such epidemic diseases were on the rampage. Youth death rates were astronomical in Amherst (Bingham 178). Under these circumstances, it is quite usual for one to think of death and death alone. And in Dickinson's case, the thought of death found much natural and fertile soil owing to the eschatological background of her religious culture. Her imagination processed it into an indispensable psychic material for her poetry and thinking. Dickinson was always worried about the death of her friends and relatives. In her mature age she wrote to her friend Abiah Root of her concern with death:

I have seen pass from my sight in the prime of their days like dew before the sun will not again walk the streets and act their parts in the great drama of life, nor can I realize that when I again meet them it will be another & and far different world from this ... I wonder if we shall know each other in heaven, and whether we shall be a chosen band as we are here.(Dickinson L10)

After two years, following the actual incident, she wrote to Abiah about the death of her bosom friend Sophia Holland: "My friend was Sophia Holland ... I visited her often in sickness ... but after she was laid in her coffin ... I gave way to a fixed melancholy" (L11).

There is another biological reason for Dickinson's preoccupation with death and the grave. Dickinson's home at Pleasant Street (1840-1855) was closer to the village cemetery. The fact that nearly all the funeral processions passed her house must have aroused in her a frequent consciousness of mortality and afterlife. This cemetery view would also provide her with ample opportunity of studying at first hand the ceremonies and trappings connected with funerals. As the early New Englander confronted the presence of death which bore down heavily on their daily lives and all too often took a toll on them, it is recognized as a typically New England subject (Flinn 63). Death was all too familiar a thing in the trying frontier conditions of the early New England settlements. The high mortality rate due to unhygienic conditions and frequent epidemics during the early years of New England settlements made the inhabitants particularly sensitive to the physical presence of

death. Dickinson was often horrified to visualize her own death. In another letter she portrays her sentimental self-image in death but her horror at the thought of death persists as usual: “The other day I tried to think how I should look with my eyes shut, and a little white gown on, and a snowdrop on my breast; and I fancied I heard the neighbors stealing in softly to look down in my face – so fast asleep—so still—Oh Jennie, will you and I really become like this?” (L86). In visualizing her own death-scene, Dickinson articulates some certain usual things that take place in the house of the dead: friends, relatives and neighbors visiting the house, weeping over the coffin, and wondering about the destination of the departed. It is as if Dickinson is trying to establish that it is necessary to imagine and visualize one’s own death in order to visualize the end of things (Winters 31-52).

Dickinson’s eschatological inclinations further intensified because of her mother. Her mother Emily Norcross is said to have developed hypochondria and fear of death following some early deaths in her immediate family. Hence she may be singled out as a probable source for Dickinson’s death obsession and so-called neuroses. Millicent Todd Bingham says that Mrs. Dickinson had a tremulous fear of death (4). Because of her mother’s carelessness and her failure to satisfy Emily’s love hunger, the sensitive daughter felt rejected and grew up as an embittered person which resulted in the persistent recurring of the themes of death, anxiety, suffering in her poems and letters.

Dickinson’s traumatic personal life, especially her failure in love, has a share in formulating her eschatological self. Bingham’s analysis reveals that a mood of dejection developed in the voracious love-hungry, sensitive young woman who felt rejected by many of her wooers and grew up an embittered person, reading voraciously and submitting her love-needs in her writings (10). Like her mother, she too was severely affected with a lifelong hypochondriac fear of death. The eschatological implications of death in her writings no doubt have their roots in her religion, New England Puritan culture, and particularly in her failure in love.

Emily Dickinson’s nineteenth century Calvinistic, evangelical, and Puritan education profoundly colored her eschatological imagination from which actually sprung her sentimental attitude towards a traditional idea of “dreadful” death (St. Armand 26-77). Her religious education instilled the idea in her that this earthly life is a present to us – a period of probation revealed in the writings of Reverend Charles Wadsworth, the eminent Philadelphia divine whom Emily Dickinson called the dearest earthly friend and who influenced her most (Eddins 1989). In consonance with Calvin’s attitude to life and death, the New England Puritans were trained to the facts of the transitory nature of life, the inevitability of death, and the terrifying vision of the last Judgment from their early childhood. Naturally, the children were the primary target of the severest clerical admonition. Their primers at school, too, were filled with the chilling lessons based on eschatological ideas such as the brevity of life, the futility of earthly glory and achievement, and the

imminence of death. In order to make their sermons and writings more effective to their audience, the New England Puritan divines would compound the imminence of death with the vision of the terror of hell fire, venomous infernal creatures, the image of loneliness, and the burning on the Day of the Last Judgment which instilled a deep-seated fear of death that the Puritan child would carry over into adult life. Every Puritan in the congregation would be severely exhorted to keep the thought of death uppermost in the mind. Therefore, death and damnation as eschatological subjects would receive special attention and their explication would rise to the concert pitch in evangelical sermons. Emily Dickinson, too, had the experience of intensive and relentless evangelical exhortations during her one year studentship at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Besides, her religious education was rigidly Calvinistic and highly evangelical. In her early letters she talked a great deal about attending the religious meetings aimed at converting the impenitent (L10, 35). Therefore, the eschatological implications of death in Dickinson's writing have no doubt their roots in her religious education and in New England Puritan culture.

The Shadow End

That Emily Dickinson is a poet of endings rather than beginnings has been documented by many of whom Weisbuch, Sewall, and Rashid are prominent. The manifestation of endgames in various facets of human life and nature such as burial, death, departure, funeral, passage of time, seasonal transition, sunsets, and diurnal endings constitute the staples of her writings, whether prose or poetry. She is perpetually absorbed in things and occurrences, ephemeral and terminal in human life and nature as she looks down the road to the journey's end. The daisy's humble reply, in Poem 106, to the sun's angry fulmination – "Wherefore – Marauder – art thou here?" – can be treated as the poet's apology for her inclination for terminal themes (Thomas):

We are the Flowers – Thou the sun!
Forgive us, if as days decline-
We nearer steal to Thee!
Enamored of the parting West –
The peace – the flight – the Amethyst –
Night's possibility!

In a sense both the daisy and the poet have a common fate. They are automatically and even fatalistically drawn to their end and the end of things without a choice under the given circumstances – the daisy as a flower and the poet with her acute perception of mortality. Metaphorically, night denotes death whereas sunset refers to terminality which is followed by the end of the day. Such a view of the end is apocalyptically significant and optimistic in religious terms as it understands the mortal end not as a conclusion but as a state of transition. Burials, funerals, graves,

graveyards, sepulchers, and tombs constitute so significant a portion of Dickinson's graveyard themes and imagery that one may feel tempted to call her an American graveyard poet (Ford 21). She demonstrates an extraordinary capacity for feeling funerals in her brain as well as experiencing in life. She used to practice dying in her imagination which has been deciphered from many of her poems. In Poem 51, the speaker is a dead person who died "Earlier by the dial/ Than the rest have gone." Poem 51 is a graveyard poem. When Dickinson was alive, the graveyard, she passed by on her way to and from school looked like a strange village. Sometimes she would see people come there and leave the place after doing some curious business. She could not guess what they did. To her, it was a distant place and she was ignorant about it. She became knowledgeable about it after her own (imaginary) death. The fear of the place disappears when she herself becomes an inhabitant. As a dead person now, she finds it quiet and peaceful, posing no threat to the delicate and vulnerable.

The Terminality

Dickinson's extraordinary preoccupation with the terminal theme, death, calls for close attention and an eschatological survey of her writings. Suffering from acute sense of loss, sorrows, anguish, despair, and often futile grudge and feelings of jealousy resulted in her extraordinary preoccupation with this terminal fact. Funerals, burials, graves, tombs, graveyards, and sepulchers constitute a significant portion of Dickinson's terminal themes and imagery. Images of midnight, cold, frost, and winter are usually associated with death and the graveyard has been portrayed as a chamber of horrors or prison or the last home of the dead where the deceased souls stop for a moment to make their onward journey to the future state of being in the next world.

To Dickinson, death does not have any fixed meaning. She experiences a wide variety of sensations and meanings out of death. But two distinctly opposite ideas of death are discernible from her poems. One originates from the traditional idea of death and the other springs from contemporary religious culture. The traditional idea defines death as an intractable, abstract, stranger which remains quite distant from us. Its mysterious, non-descriptive, and unforeseeable nature has made it dreadful and unnerving (P90). The age-old image and traditional idea that death is an eternal sleep, absolute, changeless, rigid, and unadjustable to human circumstances; the wages of sin, and so on pervades her poems (P654, 749). Death is a persecutor, an elusive runaway worm, an insect in the human tree (P1716), "the deep stranger" (P1247), a metallic drill machine boring holes in the human soul (P286), the numbing cold that a freezing person recollects, the trackless waste (P341), a silent soft-footed ghost (P274), Old Emperor (P455), a long sleep (P654), a ghastly goblin cat-and-mouse game player (P762), and so on. In the "The Cat receives the Mouse" (P726), death's torturous nature is revealed through the cat and mouse game:

The Cat reprieves the Mouse
She eases from her teeth
Just long enough for Hope to tease –
Then mashes it to death – (P762)

Of course, Dickinson's attitude towards death is not altogether pessimistic and negative as is viewed from the surface. A happy-go-lucky and gay attitude is also traceable from many of her poems and letters. Under the influence of the idyllic landscape of nineteenth century rural New England cemeteries, death became the most desirable resort for the fulfillment of sentimental cravings for unfulfilled friendly or conjugal love. In this mood, death was romanticized and was made an object of great attraction and honorable attainment. Death was viewed as "a peaceful and beautiful deliverance – the releasing of a butterfly from its cocoon" whereas afterlife was dreamt of as an abode of eternal spring, full of happiness and tranquility (Stannard 174). This optimistic attitude to death is reflected in the following poem:

Let down the bars, Oh Death-
The tired Flocks come in
Whose bleating ceases to repeat
Whose wandering is done.

Thine is the stillest night
Thine the securest Fold
Too near Thou art seeking Thee
Too tender to be told (P1065)

She even goes to the extent of mocking at death in the poem "I could not stop for death." Death in Dickinson, too, stands in a dramatic gesture as a pointer to a world of eternal light – a "Beckoning –Eutrascan invitation – / Toward Light" (P295). Her "Alabaster Chamber" is the soul's safest, clean well-lighted residence, an abode of peace and tranquility providing ample space for its occupants. Death underwent a process of romanticization and sentimentalization with Dickinson with its "altered image of soft and affectionate embrace of feminization" (Douglas 132). Sometimes death is personified as a romantic lover by using the idiom of love poetry in portraying it as a stealthy wooer – "Death is the supple suitor" (P1445). Therefore, death no longer was represented as dreadful, something strange staring out of the scooped-out dark eye pits of death's head. It became, instead, a promise of transforming this perishable life into something enduring and permanent, which is far better than that of the early Puritan attitude.

Biblical Interpretation of Death

The two Testaments of the Bible also hold diametrically opposite views of death: the one is persecution, terror, and damnation; the other of forgiveness and love

(Stannard 75-77). The second one puts more emphasis on the non-biological, figurative, and spiritual meaning of death: it is all sweetness, glory, and light. It does not focus on the body in the grave – putrefaction and disintegration. But the other one stresses on the physical miseries of the sinner in the grave. The difference in attitude to death between the early New England Puritans and those in Dickinson's time is comparable with the two different attitudes of the two Testaments. In the Old Testament, death figures as the wages of sin: "Therefore, as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin; and so death passed unto all men, for that all men sinned" (qtd. in Bandon 167). The physical proximity of death was too real in the early days of the New England settlements owing to the adverse frontier conditions. Death was a terror to them. The stark "death's head," the most common image to appear on the early New England gravestones, embodied the early Puritan idea of death: the dreadful skull reminded the heedless sinner of the grim consequences of an unholy life, of worldly satiety.

By contrast, the New Testament views death as the soul's longing to leave the sinful body and reunite with its long absent Lord. This outlook holds death as a "blessing as if it were a little window or door whereby we pass out of this world and enter into heaven" (Perkins 5-43). All this is evidence that a dual concept of death as both punishment and reward did exist at once in early Puritan discourse. Dickinson's attitude to death is also characterized by a similar ambivalence. Therefore a change from the hard face of death and repulsion that characterized the Early New England image of death mellowed into attraction and a soft, sentimental one in the nineteenth century. It was not much recorded in the prose or poetry of the period as on the gravestone but, to be sure, it marked a progressive decline of the gloomy and heavy going Puritan culture in New England and the dawning of a new cheerful mood. Stannard says, "In death, as in life, Puritan culture had lost its grip. The elegies and sermons, the journals and wills, the poetry and prose on death all suggest the dramatic changes that overtook the world of the Holy Remnant during the middle of the eighteenth century" (161).

Consequently, an extraordinary fondness for romancing with death developed into a fad in the nineteenth century. The difference of attitude towards death from the early period was ascribed to the difference in the moral and spiritual upbringing of the Puritan children in the 19th century. Now death was made into an object of romantic desire and glorious achievement. The icons of death on the gravestones, too, changed from frightful skulls, scythes, and hourglasses to imageries of transcendence into a world of empyrean light and rarefied spirit. This new map was so pervasive that it even led to the addressing of the old burial grounds as God's acres and consecrated places (Mahmood 17). Thus the face of death softened and afterlife grew more attractive and desirable. Corpses increasingly received veneration and cosmetic treatments: dead bodies were embalmed as precious objects and coffins were shaped with the suggestion that the mortal remains were jewelry. Though deathbed or the dying moment was deemed to be a time of great uncertainty,

fear, and psychological turmoil on account of one's spiritual achievements on earth, the Puritans started to exhibit humanity in their rhetoric eulogizing death as a means of liberation and a respite for the earth-bound soul. They would deem the dying moment most crucial and the climax of one's spiritual career on earth. It was a moment of possible revelation for the living; and for the dying, it was passing into the next world to which one had looked forward all one's life.

The paradigm shifts from a scared and skeptic attitude to faith and trust. Therefore, Dickinson can be celebrated as a poet of life, faith, hope, trust, light; a poet building confidence in her readers rather than "a graveyard poet" or a poet of mere terminal things. She has dispersed the doubt and fear of death and afterlife with a greater skill than a priest in a Church or the Pope on his throne in the Vatican City. This nineteenth century sentimental attitude towards death and the hereafter which deeply colored Dickinson's eschatological imagination is a remarkable deviation from her early stand about death and after life (St. Armand 59-77).

Ambivalent attitudes are perceptible in the treatment of Dickinson's terminal themes as well. Death, graveyard, the Day of Judgment, and the second coming of Jesus Christ have been termed as "terminus" in Christian theology. To Dickinson human life symbolizes a long journey which is to taste all these stages in a cyclical order. However, all these terminal stages have often been viewed with doubt and fear by the poet though they not only represent the end but also indicate the beginning of another life or age.

Afterlife

Without a follow-up study (after the discussion of death) of the three other last things, namely Judgment, Heaven, and Hell of Christian the ology, it would by no means complete the eschatological study on Dickinson. The poet's opinion about the existence of afterlife, of course, constantly oscillates between doubt and faith. Some of her letters show extreme reservation that death leads to an afterlife whereas several others reveal hardly any ambiguity. According to Dickinson, death is the end of profane times for the individual dead and also constitutes the apocalyptic moment for them. Death is also viewed as a release from the corporeal form. Dickinson is profoundly concerned with afterlife, time, and transience. Her belief in resurrection and eternal life appears to be particularly strong in the letter to Mrs. William Sterns (L434) where she expresses her strong faith that she would meet her dearest ones in the afterlife. Her images of the afterlife are often cast in the images of the world. The natural cycle of vegetation and seasons tempt her to draw an analogy between the human and the natural world. She believes that death in nature is temporary and in resurrection lies the renewal of natural life just as it happens in the natural cycle of the seasons. The recurrence of life in spring or summer follows the death in winter. This process is so spontaneous and regular that resurrection in nature seems hardly any miracle (P74). She distinguishes between death and resurrection by defining the former as scary, bitter, and temporary

whereas the latter is sweeter, longer, and lasting. Yet, often, her skeptical mind is afflicted with great insecurity and anxiety about the afterlife. And this happens because after all she is a human being. Her human nature is infested with anxiety and doubt.

The Christian Apocalypse and the Day of Judgment

The Christian idea of the Apocalypse constitutes a major part of Dickinson's eschatology. She frequently uses the imagery of resurrection, judgment, Heaven, Hell and, quite often, immortality. The Day of Judgment has vividly been portrayed in the Bible as the day of reckoning for all and sundry. The Day of Judgment would be preceded by supernatural visions coupled with grueling cries and woes of human beings and the natural world. It is a day of the Jewish vindication against a sinful nation. On this day God would award punishment to the wicked. Dickinson visualizes the mammoth gathering of the resurrected dead at the Last Judgment. She can see the "The Dust—connect—and live / On Atoms—features place—" (P515). She envisions a terrific and capricious nature of the Judgment Day when every earthly action is weighed. God sitting on the Seat of Judgment would dispense rewards and punishments. An earlier letter of Dickinson's contains the typical Puritan anxieties, fears, and ecstasies of the Judgment Day. It describes the majestic spectacle of the judgment of the dead at the Celestial Court with a visual effect of summoning the souls, standing before the trial of God, and sentencing the souls either to deliverance or damnation. No earthly conduct is taken into account here as an evidential reference in the trial and the judgment is apparently arbitrary. The souls will be either sentenced to the endless term of permanent separation from its loved ones or awarded the bliss of reunion and eternal coexistence in the hereafter. In another early letter (L10), Dickinson expressed her typical view about the double predestination which states that just as God's elect would have eternal life in Heaven, the unelected or rejected would go to perdition. At other times she recognizes the value of effort and discipline to be gone through compulsorily before attaining Heaven. Man's actions and intentions both will be taken into consideration by God (P823). Spontaneous response of the heart to the divine call which is the sign of God's grace would be a serious concern for the soul's salvation in the afterworld (L47).

Dickinson conveys genuine anxiety of her personal salvation on the Day of Judgment. In the poem "Why –do they shut Me out of heaven?" Dickinson is apprehensive of her falling a victim to God's arbitrary judgment and being excluded from the company of the elect (Ford 102). Her fear that she might be separated from her beloved ones in the afterlife and the guilty feeling at foolishly throwing away the best chance of redemption initially shapes her eschatological frame of mind. Nevertheless, she desires to appear before God on the Judgment Day with her own earthly image: in the shape of a human being.

Heaven and Hell

In Christian theology, Heaven has been depicted as a place of eternal life with eternal happiness; a place of honey and milk and God's grace where only pure souls or the elected or the predestined ones have access and hell is a place of purgatory for impure souls and sinners. It is a place of eternal darkness, fire, and smoke; full of stones, thorns, venomous, and infernal creatures, and other instruments of torture. Dickinson's eschatological thoughts of Heaven and hell are in conformity with the Calvinist's plain faith:

And after that – there's Heaven—
The Good man's – “Dividend”—
And bad Men – “go to Jail”—
I guess—(P234).

Heaven is God's house where the angels dwell (L187). It is described as a romantic place, a place for reuniting with lost family and friends. Heaven is a construct of the imagination and has no specific physical location. Heaven, to Dickinson, is the house of God, a jolly place which is romantically remote and free from the shadows of terror (P239). Love is another sign of Heaven: “To be loved is Heaven” (L361).

Dickinson also develops her own private concept of heaven. To her, heaven remains a hypothesis, some sort of mirage. Her skeptical attitude has been reflected in many a poem of which Poem 338 and 346 may be cited as examples. She considers the temptation of Heaven as bait to delude, befuddle, and trap the dupes. She even fears heaven to be illusory and delusive. Heaven and immortality might be an insidious lure:

And far from Heaven as the Rest—
The soul so close on Paradise—

What if the Bird from journey—
Confused by Sweets—as Mortals –are—
Forget the Secret of His wing—(P346).

Despite Dickinson's preoccupation with the invincible process of physical dissolution, she is not a poet of earthly endings; rather it would be more appropriate to call her a poet of the End, where lies hope and the assurance of immortality and endless happiness against annihilation. Her optimistic attitude about death and the afterlife, her sense of immediacy about the presence of the life after death, her instinctive imagination, and desire for a transposition of heaven and earth: “Heaven on earth” and “earth in Heaven” (L827), distinguish her as a great poet.

Dickinson's eschatological sensibility which consists of the general perspective of the New England eschatological culture in the 17th and 18th centuries, and the Calvinistic background of her sense of the end and endings, deserve a thorough,

detailed, and microscopic scrutiny to explore their implications and to trace the impact of her emotional extremes in shaping her idiom of agony and ecstasy on the four last things – Death, Judgment Day, Heaven and Hell – of Christian theology in her writings. Though Dickinson eschews certain ideas, cults, and rituals of her religion, especially of the Calvinistic branch, which appear incongruous to her, eschatological thoughts and feelings always remain at the core of her writing. They are always oozing out of her soul in critical circumstances in her life and spirit. Her attempt at the appropriation of a great deal of eschatological language transformed into imaginative constructs, individualized and internalized, finally resulting in the making of her private eschatology. Nevertheless, her private eschatology is fully in conformity with the Christian eschatology.

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