

Death and immortality in Emily Dickinson's poem J. 712

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Abstract*

Emily Dickinson, uma das mais importantes poetisas da literatura americana, era considerada uma mulher enigmática. Este artigo pretende mostrar que, tanto suas obras literárias quanto os principais temas abordados por ela, foram influenciados pelo seu modo de viver. Assim sendo, foi escolhido, para ser analisado, um dos poemas de Dickinson, cujos principais temas são tópicos constantes em sua obra, morte e imortalidade. Após a análise, concluiu-se que Emily Dickinson traça um paralelo entre a morte e a mortalidade através do uso de imagens e metáforas. Além disso, constatou-se que a poetisa trata de forma simples e natural o tema da morte e vida após a morte.

Emily Dickinson, considered one of the most important and extraordinary poets of American literature, was an enigmatic woman. She was misunderstood by society because she decided to live isolated shrouding herself in creating mystery and thus raising suspicion that her seclusion was the result of a lost or unrequited love. This voluntary isolation influenced deeply her poems as Dickinson developed a connection between poetry and solitude.

Dickinson had few friends and little contact with literary personalities but, on the other hand, she read widely and she knew the authors of her age.

Emerson and Hawthorne can be considered the main influence on her poetry.

Dickinson wrote about her universe, that is, the universe of the human soul, her individual experiences, her personal confession, self revelation, her wishes and own imagination without having left the limits of her garden.

One of her constant themes is death and life after death. It did not matter whether death appeared in the form of a lovely being that she had lost or in the form of an unexpected assurance of its inevitability. This theme can be noticed in the poem J. 712:

*Because I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality.*

*We slowly drove, he knew no haste,
And I had put away
My labor, and my leisure too,
For his civility.*

*We passed the school, where children strove
At recess, in the ring,
We passed the fields of gazing grain,
We passed the setting sun.*

*Or rather, he passed us;
The dewes grew quivering and chill,
For only gossamer my gown,
My tippet only tulle.*

*We passed before a house that seemed
A swelling of the ground;
The roof was scarcely visible,
The cornice in the ground.*

*Since then 'tis centuries, and yet
Feels shorter than the day
I first surmised the horses' heads
Were toward eternity.*

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Observing the first two lines, "Because I could not stop for Death, / He kindly stopped for me", it is possible to realize that the persona does not have time to think about death, she is young and busy, she does not worry about it, but death (he)¹, personified as a gentleman, who takes her for a drive in his carriage, is inevitable. Besides, the world "kindly" has an important significance, it means that death is being very gentle with her. In the other two lines, "The carriage held but just ourselves/ And Immortality", it can be perceived that the persona and death are not alone, Immortality is in the carriage also. Her presence would be explained for moral's sake because it was not accepted that a single woman would sit alone with a man in a carriage. The presence of a third person, Immortality, was made necessary to preserve moral codes, which also reflects Dickinson's Puritanical upbringing.

In the two following stanzas, the passage of time is felt. In the line "We slowly drove, he knew no haste", it is possible to see that death is very patient, "he" does not have haste, he permits the persona to reflect about her life. This can be considered a characteristic of Emily Dickinson's poetry, that is, reflection. In the following lines, "I had put away/ my labor and my leisure too./ For his civility", the persona's moment of death is presented, she does not argue, she puts her labor and leisure away. The persona is conscious of death even though she is not prepared. The keyword "civility" points at the persona's polite response to death. Because "he" is very tolerant and courteous with her, she feels obliged to be courteous, too.

Observing the third stanza, the idea of time related to her own life can be realized. While the three persons in the carriage follow the road, she observes life outside the vehicle. In the line, "We passed the school, where children strove", the word "school" represents knowledge and the expression "children strove" is related to spending energy and vitality either at recess or in class. Therefore "children strove at recess" means young people in movement but, at the same time, studying hard. Although they are playing "at recess" they are engaged in arduous games or studies. This can be compared to difficulties faced in life. The word "ring" refers to a metaphor about life. It is like a circle, the circle of life, birth, growth, marriage, reproduction and death. It is possible to realize that the persona remembers her past moments. Even though her physical body is disintegrated, her memories are not. The two last lines, "We passed the fields of gazing grain" refers to the funeral cortege passing and the acknowledgement of the

persona that she is dead due to the fact that people are looking at the scene with respect. Again, the movement outside the carriage opposes the lack of motion live inside the coach, she observes the world which she does not belong to a world that is embedded in movement. The last line, "We passed the setting sun" is an antithesis to the first line of the fourth stanza "Or rather, he passed us" because, in the former, the idea of time being passed by the persona is pointed out while here time is eternal, consequently, she is eternal, she died but not her remembrances. The line "Or rather, he passe us" shows, on the contrary, time going by her, she is dead, it is the end, there is not any return possible. In all of the following lines, the persona describes, what she feels physically. After her death, she is cold, she is reduced to a frozen body. After her death, she is conducted to her new house described in the fifth stanza as a "A swelling of the ground;/ The roof was scarcely visible, / The cornice in the ground" a metaphor that stands for a tomb, her tomb.

In the last stanza, a parallel between mortality and eternity is made. The word "centuries" embodies passage of time, she died a long time ago, but, because she is immortal, she feels that it had happened just yesterday, the idea of her death is recent, she remembers the day she became eternal.

After analyzing the poem it can be concluded that Dickinson draws a parallel between death and immortality. Throughout the poem, she works with the idea of the inevitability of death, she uses the images of death to describe someone's unexpected death. But, on the other hand, she uses metaphors to clarify the idea that, even though this someone is dead, her soul is immortal. Emily Dickinson works with an antithesis of time: the time of dying that is very quick, only a minute, and the time of eternity where the persona's feelings, emotions, memories are eternal. The persona of her poem has eternity as her own time, establishing a parallel between immortality and eternity. Therefore, according to the first two stanzas this poem can be summarized as a love poem where the persona marries death and whose marriage is forever, according to the last two stanzas.

Referências bibliográficas

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¹ In the American culture, death is personified as a male noun.