

The Element of Death in Emily Dickinson's Chosen Poems

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Abstract : Emily Dickinson is an influential woman- American poet who was known and praised internationally. Her poems were timeless and inspiring, yet the theme mostly talking about death. Death is a taboo topic in certain literary works, but not for Dickinson. This research talked about two of Dickinson's poems, *I Heard A Fly Buzz-when I Died* and *It Was Not Death For I Stood Up* which focusing on the moment of death. Using structuralism approach, this research discussed the analysis using the poetry elements. From the theory, the writers elaborated information regarding the expression of death portrayed in two chosen poems through their physical and mental elements. The writers obtained that both poems clearly shown a vivid expression about death with diction, imagery, concrete words, figure of speech, imagery, rhyme and rhythm, typography (physical elements), and sense, tone and feeling, intention (mental elements).

Keywords: Emily Dickinson, Death, Poetry, Physical Elements, Mental Elements

1. INTRODUCTION

The experience occurred throughout history in the world that binds humans together is death. Death is something that must be faced by all of us. For most people, death produces fear. Some do not ready for it to happen, yet it is unavoidable.

Languages have more function for us, not only to communicate verbally, but also to express our thoughts or feelings, for example through writing. Aminuddin said that literature as one form of artistic creations using language as media presentation. However, different form of the language used in daily life, language in literature has its own uniqueness. Languages in literature are the result of processing and the expression of individual authors (Aminuddin, 2004).

The primary aim of literature is to give pleasure, to entertain those who voluntarily attend to it (Barnet et al., 2010). Poetry is one of prominent literary works. It deserves study as much as they do, perhaps more, since poetry is the type of English which touches our personal feelings most closely. Poetry shows art based on language that is very difficult to understand. Selection of words in each poem shows a deep meaning. Emily Dickinson assumes poetry as something amazing which made here shiver so that no fire is able to warm her (Kaplan, 1943). This famous line came up when she corresponded to Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Emily Dickinson was one of the well-known American female poets. She had written poetry since she was young, but never wanted to be published. Instead, she made a poem for herself and sending some of it to her friends through the letters that she wrote. Her poems are associated with death, faith, and immortality (Kirk, 2004).

From the explanation about how special poems are, especially Emily Dickinson's poems, the writers decided to analyze two poems of Dickinson; *I Heard a Fly Buzz-when I Died* and *It Was Not Death, For I Stood Up*. Both poems illustrate fear and hopelessness clearly when a person faces death. There was a sinister feeling from her choice of words and how she expressed the entire process of death, yet both of them were still beautiful and memorable.

The analysis focused on Waluyo's physical and mental elements of *I Heard a Fly Buzz-when I Died* and *It Was Not Death, For I Stood Up*. The physical elements of poetry are the elements that build poetry from the outside. Poetry is created from beautiful and meaningful words and language written in stanzas. People can distinguish between poetry and non-poetry based on their physical appearance. The physical elements of poetry consist of diction, imagery, concrete words, figure of speech, rhyme/rhythm, and typography (Waluyo, 2003). In addition, the mental element of poetry as a whole is a discourse of poetry text that contains meaning that we can feel by experiencing the elements of a poem. The mental element consists of sense, feeling, tone, and intention (Waluyo, 2003).

Several researches that the writers found as foundation of this research were Rifirin Lindya Ferani's "*Imagery of death in the poem Out-Out by Robert Frost*". She analysed the intrinsic elements, including theme, tone, style (figurative language and imagery) in poem "Out-Out" by Robert Frost. She clarified the picture of the death coming and moral values contained in the poem (Ferani, 2012). Second was Rukti Rumeekar's "*The meaning of death in children Shabon Dama lyrics by Naguschi Ujou*". She analysed a song lyric using structural and semiotic study that outlines the physical and mental structure contained in Shabon Dama song (Rumeekar, 2017). The last was an article by Ayesha Ashraf, "*Representation of Death in Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost: A Stylistics Analysis Because I Could Not Stop for Death*". She analyzed both poems based on their stylistics analysis and revealed personal philosophy about death. The meaning of death was embedded deep down with the help of linguistic structure and represented the reality of death (Ashraf, 2015).

All three previous studies talked about death which in-line with this study. However, all of them analysed different literary works, two from Frost' poems, one from a Japanese children's song, and one from Dickinson's, but with different title. The way the writers approached their own research were also different. Ferani focused on the intrinsic and moral message of the poem, Rumeekar's examined the physical elements and Ashraf's talked more in stylistics' side.

2. METHODOLOGY

The two selected poems by Emily Dickinson; *I Heard a Fly Buzz-when I Died* and *It Was Not Death, For I Stood Up* will be explored using Waluyo's theory of physical and mental elements of a poem. The researchers will also elaborate the philosophy of death from the data analysis of their physical and mental elements.

3. FINDINGS

The findings show the analysis of two poems, based on their physical and mental elements.

Physical Elements

The physical element is the means by which the writer expresses the essence of poetry. These elements consist of diction, imagery, figure of speech and rhyme /rhythm. The first is diction. In poetry *I Heard A Fly Buzz-when I Died* and *It Was Not Death For I Stood Up*. Dickinson utilized words that are easily understood by the reader, but each of these words can strengthen the meaning in one sentence of her poem. For example, in the poem *I Heard A Fly Buzz-when I Died*:

⇒ *The stillness in the room*

Was like the stillness in the air

The choice of words is easy to understand, but each element of the word is interrelated. She used the word *stillness* to explain the atmosphere in the *room* and *air* and to strengthen the feeling of death in this poem. Like we all know, *stillness* and death are related to each other. So, in that sentence Dickinson began her poem by explaining the smallest things first. While in the poem *It Was Not Death For I Stood Up*:

⇒ *It was not death, for I stood up*

And all the death, lie down

Dickinson started her poem by explaining in advance about the death. The words *stood up* and *lie down* are two contradictive words, but both of them were placed to describe the death. In addition, this poem contains more unfamiliar words comparing from the first, yet it is still understandable for common people. Words like *Tongues*, *Siroccos*, and *Chancel* added the feeling of death. The writers found this very unique and special of

Dickinson. The second is language style. Dickinson used figurative language which according to the author is difficult to understand, because each element of the word has a deep meaning and is intertwined between one sentence with another. As in the poem *I Heard A Fly Buzz-when I Died*, one of the figurative languages used was metaphor.

⇒ *And the Windows failed-and then
I could not see to see*

The *windows* is a metaphor of life as it is related to scenery outside the house. When the *Windows failed*, the life vanished. It somehow emphasized that the window is closed, and it is the time to go to the next life. While in the poem *It Was Not Death For I Stood Up*:

⇒ *It was not night, for all the bells
Put out their Tongues, for noon*

The *tongues* is the personification of the sound word that explains the previous sentence, bells. From two examples of figurative languages above illustrate that Dickinson pointed *windows* and *tongues* to give a deeper meaning of her description of death. The word *windows* is illustrated as a way in the sense that in someone's life, there will be a time when they will going through the road or gate to after life. While the word *tongues*, which is illustrated as sound, explains that death is a very different thing from life. And it can be distinguished through things that can be felt or seen with one's five senses. From the figurative languages that used by Emily Dickinson, the writer concludes that, to develop a work of poetry must have an interesting style of language so that it can help in examining the extensive explanation that the author wishes to convey.

The third is imagery. In the poem *I Heard A Fly Buzz-when I Died*, and *It Was Not Death For I Stood Up*, Dickinson explained in detail about what she felt through imagery. As in one of the lines, the sound imagery is highlighted.

⇒ *I heard a fly buzz- when I died*

The sentence above has a strong element of death. A fly is an insect which usually exist in a dirty place or death organism, such as death animal, or human. The line *I heard a fly buzz-when I died* strengthens the image of the writer's last time alive.

⇒ *The Eyes around- had wrung them dry*

The word *The Eyes around* shows sight imagery of what the writer of the poem saw at her last day on earth. She witnessed the people who gather around her to see her die.

⇒ *With Blue- uncertain- stumbling Buzz-
Between the light- and me-
I could not see to see*

In this last stanza, sight and sound imagery existed to describe how Dickinson has accepted her death. She saw a blue fly buzzing in front of her with the light behind it. This symbolizes her last moment before going to the next journey, heaven which she could not see to see. While in the poem *It Was Not Death For I Stood Up*:

⇒ *It was not death, for i stood up
And all the death, lie down
It was not night, for all the bells
Put out their thongues, for noon*

In the first stanza, Dickinson starts from the little things about death, how a dead person lies down and who is alive can still stand. Then she explained the atmosphere that she could still recognize, the hot and cold days and nights she felt. However, in the third stanza she doubts and feels herself as if she had felt those things, as if she were remembering her own death. She felt like her life stopped and was in darkness. The author

concludes that imagery in poetry is very important to explain the meaning contained in a work, so that the work looks more alive and real to the reader.

The last is rhyme and rhythm. These elements are very important in the formation of meaning in every sentence in poetry, because the sound is an element that describes the atmosphere in poetry. The rhyme functions in regulating the sounds that are created by the letters of each word in the poetry array, while the rhythm functions to determine the length or the short and the high or low of the sound (Stewart, 2009). For Dickinson's poems, the rhyme and rhythm were absolutely created extraordinary. Almost all of her poems were the result of her experiments, which the rhymes and rhythms were not accustomed like mostly other poems created in that century. Dickon's rhymes were unexpected, disruptive, and unsettling, yet it supported the poem's backstory very well (Capps & Small, 1991).

Mental Elements

The mental elements are the elements associated with the reading of poetry. There are four elements; namely sense, feeling, tone, and intention. The first is sense. Sense in here has the same meaning with theme, which is the core of a work that underlies the main meaning or idea of a literary work. It conveyed through characters, images and actions. The theme can be stated immediately but more often implied. As in the poem *I Heard A Fly Buzz-when I Died* and *It Was Not Death For I Stood Up*, the writers concluded that the sense discussed in the poem is death, since both poems described how Dickinson felt when death coming for her. From the titles, the lines, and the dictions are all death-related words.

Second is feeling. Feeling is a building element in a work, especially poetry, because the element in poetry is more complex than other literary works. Feeling creates images of the feelings of an author, which makes the meaning in a poem deeper. As in the poem *I Heard A Fly Buzz-when I Died* and *It Was Not Death For I Stood Up*, Dickinson wrote it down with feelings of loneliness, desperation, and confusion. Like in the poem *I Heard A Fly Buzz-when I Died*, she stressed loneliness by portraying an atmosphere of silence, and how the situation was just between her and the buzzed fly. While in for poem *It Was Not Death For I Stood Up*, Dickinson radiated the feeling of desperation and confusion to what it was like for a dead person. She convinced herself that she was not dead yet. In her confusion and desparation, it was as if she also wanted to invite the reader to be confused with the situation regarding her death.

Third is tone. Tone functions in the reading of poetry. The meaning contained in a poem will be conveyed with intonation or sound pressure on each word. As in the poem *I Heard A Fly Buzz-when I Died* and *It Was Not Death For I Stood Up*, Dickinson emphasized a few words so that the meaning conveyed could be understood by the readers. As for the tone of the poem, *I Heard A Fly Buzz-when I Died* using Iambic and Dactylic. Where Iambic is a word that is stressed in the second syllable, for example:

⇒ *I Heard / a fly / buzz-when / I died.*

The words *Heard*, *Fly*, *when* and *died* are words that are pressed to emphasize the meaning in one sentence. With details that the second word in one syllable is an explanation of the previous word. Whereas Dactylic is the emphasis that is done at the beginning of words in one syllable, like:

⇒ *For that last / onset-when the / King be*

The words *For*, *onset* and *King* are words that are suppressed because the word prefix becomes the key in explaining the next word so that it can convey meaning deeply through reading a poem. The poem *It Was Not Death For I Stood Up*, has an iambic and spondic pressure tone. Spondic is a tone emphasis carried out in succession with a clear reading, for example:

⇒ *And spaces stares-all around /*

The word *spaces stares-all around* is pressed in a row and is read aloud. The tone in this line should be end hanging as something mysterious to add the sense of emptiness from the previous line, *When everything that ticked- has stopped.*

The last is intention. In every literary work, the writers always convey the message in their works, as well as in poetry. Messages are classified as important in the formation of meaning, since there must be reasons why certain writers want to write their works. As in the poems *I Heard A Fly Buzz-when I Died* and *It Was Not Death For I Stood Up*, the researchers concluded that death is something that is certain to come to anyone. There is no rejection or delay on that matter, and no one can guess its arrival. Death is something that is certain and has been determined. However, death is not something that can be feared because it is part of our life. Everything that is created in this world is all in pairs. As with death, a person will not be said to be alive if she cannot experience death. Therefore, Dickinson wrote about death to familiarize the readers with its sense.

4. CONCLUSION

Emily Dickinson's, *I Heard A Fly Buzz-when I Died* and *It Was Not Death, For I Stood Up* have the same tendency in narrating the element of death. This similarity can be found by further analysis on both poems' physical and mental elements. These two elements supported each other in giving a realist experience towards the readers. The dictions, imageries, figurative languages, rhyme/rhythm, sense, feeling, tone, and intention were so vivid and alive, forcing us to imagine if it was our own death. Furthermore, Dickinson's intention on talking about death was to advise her readers that death is not something to be feared, but rather be embraced.

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