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Dialectical Irony in Dickinson's Death Poems

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This thesis is titled “Dialectical Irony in Dickinson’s Death Poems” submitted to Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Balika Thapaliya, has been approved by the undersigned members of the research committee.

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Abstract

Dickinson's dialectical irony becomes available not as much locally in a poem but as globally in respect to her poetry. For example, ironies are not as many there as in her individual poem like "Because I Could not Stop for Death." Her ironic vision becomes clear when we read this poem dialectically against other of her death poems like "I Felt a Funeral in My Brain" "I have seen a Dying Eye" and "I Heard a Fly Buzz." These three poems dialectically ironize her fascination with death in the poem "Because I Could not Stop for Death." Cumulatively the idea of death that emerges from Emily Dickinson's death poems, because of the use of dialectical irony, is that death promises immortality but at the same time it remains a terror. In Emily Dickinson, dialectical irony exists somewhere in the gap that obtains between the terror of death and the assurance of immortality.

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Chapter One

Introduction to Irony

Emily Dickinson's poetry is largely based on the theme of death. She understands the inevitable factor of death in life. And after all she became a death poet. Actually, Emily Dickinson is the poet of love, madness, death and immortality. Irony runs rampant in her various poems. It refers to such kind of event and situation and circumstance becomes the little valuable or having not any value by the cause of the attack of evil fate. In another sense, irony means saying something and its meaning holds another intention. Dickinson's life was itself ironical. She faced a lot of painful ups and downs in her life. And she expressed her earnest feeling in poetry.

Irony has a frequent and common definition. "It is that kind of term which is contrary to its meaning" (Colebrook 1). It is the definition that is usually attributed to the first-century Roman orator Quintilian who was already looking back to Socrates and Ancient Greek literature. But this definition is so simple that it covers everything from the simple figures of speech to the entire historical epochs. These days irony can be referred to the huge problems of postmodernity. Our historical context is ironic because today nothing really means what it says. We live in a world of quotation, pastiche, simulation and cynicism which is a general and all-encompassing irony. Irony then, becomes curiously indefinable by the simplicity of its definition.

Irony has a long history in the writing procedure of literature. I think I must include some reference to certify the importance of irony. Irony has a two form like *eironeia* and *ironia*. At first I am going to explain about *Eironeia*. *Eironeia* referred to lying rather than complex dissimulation in the comic plays of Aristophanes.

Aristophanes' irony intersects with the political problem of human meaning. The problem of irony is at one with the problem of politics. The word *eironeia* was

first used to refer to artful double meaning in the Socratic dialogues of Plato, where the word is used both as pejorative in the sense of lying and in an affirmative sense to refer to Socrates capacity to conceal what he really means. This type of practice of concealment opened the western political/philosophical tradition. (2)

It came in appearance through the art of playing with meaning that the interlocutors of a dialogue are compelled to question the fundamental concepts of our language.

Plato's Socrates has been identified with the practice of irony from Quintilian to the present. It can't be taken as an accident that Socrates used irony to challenge received knowledge and wisdom at a historical moment. When the comfort and security of small communities that those were being threatened by political expansion and the inclusion of other cultures. In conclusion we can say that *eironeia* is no longer lying or deceit but it is a complex rhetorical practice whereby one can say one thing such as the Socrates claims to be ignorant but meaning goes in another way. Socrates exposes the supposed wise thing as it lacks all insight.

Irony has its own history. As Colebrook asserts, "To think about irony historically we have to try to separate the sources for the definition of irony (which ranges from ancient

Greece to present) from the past texts to which we can now apply the idea of irony” (8). On the one hand, there are uses of the word irony throughout literary history to name various levels of linguistic complexity. On the other, there are instances of language that we can now identify as ironic, even if they were not explicitly labeled as such kind of irony.

Irony takes a changeable movement. “It can be taken as varieties of works in the sense of tense and time” (8). Through reading the above information it is not difficult to know that the most recognized definitions of irony came from Cicero and Quintilian. Medieval and renaissance authors who did not have access to these texts directly were nevertheless aware of the tradition of Ciceronian rhetoric through the later sources. The most important of these later sources were the widely used grammars by Aelius Donatus and Isidore of Seville, whose *origines* or *Etymologiae* served as rhetorical encyclopedia throughout the Middle Age. Donatus defined irony as a trope where the real meaning is the opposite of the apparent meaning in his monumental named *Ars Grammatica*. Irony was employed within texts and speeches for clearly intended and recognizable reasons. Like Quintilian, Isidore of Seville also defined irony as a figure of speech and as a figure of thought with the figure of speech, or he clearly substituted word which is being the primary example.

There are two broad uses of irony in everyday parlance: cosmic irony and linguistic irony. The first use is related to cosmic irony and has little to do with the play of language or figural speech. As Colebrook points out, “Cosmic irony can be called as the irony of fate. Linguistic irony is having double sense of meaning; situational irony and existential irony can be implied here” (14). Related to cosmic irony or the way the word irony covers twists of fate in everyday life. It is the more literary concept of

dramatic or tragic irony: “Dramatic, cosmic and tragic irony are always of thinking about the relation between human intention and contrary consequences” (15). This sense of irony is related to verbal irony in that both share a notion of a meaning or wishes beyond what we manifestly say or intend. In dramatic and cosmic irony this other meaning is plot or destiny. In verbal irony the other meaning is either what the speaker intends or what the hearer understands.

The primacy of intention makes the use of irony stable. If we think of irony as primarily stable or as exemplified clear and simple cases and after then we will also think of social and political life as primarily reciprocal, common and operating from a basis of agreement: “Complex, undecidable or insecure ironies are filled with confusion. Where we are not sure about sense or there what is meant is not clearly recognizable” (16). It would be regarded as special and marginal cases that deviate from the common ground of human understanding. In literary irony, we assume that a recognized great writer is great that clumsily unpalatable or inhuman expressions are assumed to be the having ironic sense. Irony reveals something about the nature of communication. That we know what our words mean because we share contexts and conventions along with general expectation of sincerity and coherence.

Irony started to enjoy the status of a literary touchstone as the era of modernism began to dawn in the 20th century. When New Critics used irony and paradox as the hallmark of literary and poetic discourse, they did so by regarding the text as a self-contained organism. Poems are ironic because they take the words we use in everyday language and give them a richness of meaning. Irony lies in the tensions of language.

Irony, however, is generally used in the sense of saying the opposite of the overt meaning. The simplest definitions of irony dates back to Cicero and Quintilian where irony is saying something contrary to what is understood. This is where irony’s reliance

on culture comes to the fore: “Irony foregrounds the social, conventional and political aspects of language that language is not just a logical system but it relies on assumed norms and values” (15). Irony covers different aspects and perspectives in the literary procedure, creating gaps in the literary text and thereby causing difficulty for the readers who ultimately figure out things by picking up the cultural intentions behind the uses of irony.

Dialectical irony is not merely stating the opposite of what one means, for by such a definition irony would be no more than simple lying. Instead, the ironist is a liar in the service of truth. She simultaneously asserts two or more logically contradictory meanings such that, in the silence between the two, the deeper meanings of both may emerge. This deeper meaning is dialectical. As Richard Harvey Brown puts it, “dialectical irony does not inhere in either the initial literal assertion or its negation, but rather in the dialectical tension and completion that ironic awareness sets off between them (544). Irony and dialectic are two ways of expressing the same processes of perception and conduct. Dialectical thought or conduct always reflects back upon itself. By re-involving its presuppositions in its presentation, dialectic fuses the objectivity created by the authors method's with the subjectivity of her critical reflection on her own interests and techniques. This dialectical involving-back-upon-oneself which also involves the interpretive perspective of the readers is unique to the ironic method of Emily seen, as this dissertation argues, in her death poems.

Dickinson's dialectical irony in her death poems captures this double-edged humanism—the poet's humanism in interplay with that of the readers. While exposing people's complacent unawareness, it also attributes to them the capacity for being aware and controlling their fates. Such a perception revolves back upon the ironist herself. To be ironic means that one is conscious that one's own existence is itself a contradiction. In

most of Western history this conception of humanism was a value of the aristocratic class. As a dialectical movement in the discovery of new cognitive and social forms, irony preserves this aristocratic concept of humanism, yet provides a truly democratic method for critical societal analysis. When this thing happens, irony becomes dialectical. It is in this sense that Emily Dickinson's poetry is ironic.

Dickinson is a difficult poet to understand. The difficulty is posed by verbal penuriousness which requires the readers to come to terms with the omissions or spaces that they cannot fill except through interpretation. To some extent, we must interpret all texts to understand them, but interpretation becomes all the more indispensable for understanding Dickinson's poems which are so cryptic ironic. Shooting the gaps in her poetry primarily means the insertion of readers' bringing about an interaction of the text with the socio-cultural contexts in which it was encoded. Such a decoding, however, does not mean a lop-sided dependence on the mainstream culture only. As the critical theory of Cultural Studies emphasizes, ". . . cultural studies challenges accounts of mainstream culture that ignore cultural alternatives" (Ager 11). Cultural alternatives given expression to by the writer and accessed by the reader lead to the unfolding of new meanings, particularly in Dickinson's death poems wherein there ironic tension between the fear and lure of death.

Dickinson's insight into the nature of death is complex, shifting, ambivalent, and rooted in the nineteenth century American culture, yet at odds with the general trend of treatment of death in her time. For example, if we probe her swinging between fascination for and fear of death in a poem like "Because I Could not Stop for Death," we find that

the fear arises from Puritanism prevalent in the Dickinson household, and the fascination is influenced by the sentimental love religion and the popular gospel of consolation which bear out “the strange, sometimes, perverse ways in which Americans dealt with dying, the dead, bereavement, and consolation” (32). Yet in “After Great Pain, A Formal Feeling Comes” Dickinson, with her presentation of the Purgatorial grave as hell—a permanent end to consciousness, seems to write against the influence of consolation literature of the period: “The ornate statuary which increasingly decorated Victorian graves,” “the sacred emblem in the cult of the overlooked” that “symbolized . . . the dead were not losers but winners” (Douglass 202). The ambivalence of endorsement as well as rejection of the sentimental love religion and the consolation gospel is available in “Because I Could not Stop for Death.” Thus we see that a socio-cultural approach to the analysis of irony in Dickinson’s poetry yields in new meanings.

Chapter Two

Dickinson as a Poet of Irony

For Emily Dickinson, irony never acted as a deterrent to creativity, but rather as a positive and complaining spur. Always anxious to keep her guard in place, Emily Dickinson adapted method to attitude and developed what might appropriately be termed an ironical aesthetic. It is out of this that there evolve the language and structure, the tone and wit, which are the hallmarks in much of her most interesting poetry. Sometimes, for instance, Emily Dickinson achieves ironic effects through a calculatedly ambiguous image, or through the use of descriptive touches which seem to invite one sort of interpretation but then turn out to resist it vigorously. This technique, though easily managed, actually serves a two-fold purpose. It makes the poem ironic as its own expense: that is, it adds unexpected richness and density to a given context. It likewise provokes wariness in the reader, thus guarding against the heresy of inattention, which, in her own way, Emily Dickinson would have found fully as objectionable as did that other supreme ironist, Henry James.

It is in connection with her ironical aesthetic that we can possibly come to terms with the most distinguishing quality of Emily Dickinson's style, which is her deliberate suppression of rhetorical forms: her preference for the austere, laconic, carefully guarded utterances that can be described only as non-rhetorical. Or better than merely explaining it, perhaps we can defend this tendency in her work, since among Emily Dickinson's detractors it is the one that excites the greatest amount of adverse comment. The case against her in this respect is notorious. Her poetry suffers, because it is too terse, too threadbare, too inveterately lacking in the niceties of adornment and refinement. Even in her most powerful lyrics, these deficiencies make themselves felt, resulting in a certain monotony of expression, a sparseness and want of polish that are usually objectionable.

On nearly every page, Emily Dickinson presents the short, cramped line, the crabbed and cryptic phrase, the equivocal question, the flat and the unembellished statement. Plainness in diction, a hesitant and hence involuted syntax, a studious avoidance of ornamentation, a cautiously subdued tone: these are the recurring features in her poetry. The relative absence from her work of rhetorical flourishes is a testament to her complete honesty, as, in the final analysis, it may constitute one mark of her greatness as an artist. For in lyric poetry where the speaking voice is likely to that of the poet himself. Rhetoric is the language of involvement. It is the substance of panegyrics and amorous avowals; it bears the weight of the personal credo; it enters into bald declarations of affirmation or denial. On the whole, Emily Dickinson shied away from rhetorical devices because most forms of the rhetorical were totally at odds with her ironic pattern of thought. Trapped in a world which declined to be committed, she saw that any avowal suggesting her commitment to it would be a confession of naiveté and, much more seriously, a jeopardizing of the poise and security that indifference alone could afford. Hence just as Emily Dickinson, the composer of ironic themes, remonstrated against overly grand expectations, so Emily Dickinson, the ironic stylist, remained chary of making statements that were likely to seem overly sweeping, overly passionate, or merely overwrought. Emily Dickinson's drab and narrow language was not, as has been asserted the product of an insensitive ear or of a constitutional awkwardness with words. Her language sprang, instead, from her conviction that in a world characterized by manifold uncertainties, the only viable speech would be a terse and astringent speech—the speech of careful, quiet inconclusiveness.

In our time we have been attuned to the poetry of John Donne, and to the harshness, the verbal incongruities, and the strained and convoluted syntax which are its chief stylistic components. We realize that Donne's peculiarities of style served as the

exact reflectors of his philosophical position. Far from being personal idiosyncrasies, his stylistic mannerisms registered the profound sense he had of the disorder and the incoherency in the world around him. And with Emily Dickinson, the background for a style is remarkably similar. To expect that she would, or she could write prettily; to assume that she might remain within the bounds of a conventional, nineteenth century lyric eloquence –this is to presume for Emily Dickinson a view of experience which she was never prepared to muster. It is on the basis of what she did see that her writing has to be comprehended, and on that basis the principal stylistic modes open to her can be defined rather readily.

They involved a sort of studied ugliness: an attempt to record the treacheries of experience by the blunt antithesis, the guttural expression, the abrupt break in meaning, the barbarous lapse from rhyme. They involved the logical contradiction and the apparently inept word: qualities which reflected Emily Dickinson's sense of a tangled and indecipherable reality. And they involved dryness, reticence, and understatement: qualities that satisfied her need to be uncommitted and inconspicuous. One and all these were the mannerisms best suited to Emily Dickinson's vision of man's difficult place in a difficult world. If, as poetic technique, her way of writing can offend the eye or rasp angrily in the ear, the way was nonetheless essential to the poet. The reader seeing that in her is the measure of content and that both were of prime importance to the way of life which she adopted.

To the extent that Emily Dickinson did regularly resort to rhetorical forms, she drew upon devices which, again, would embody her ironical perspective. Like Donne, for example, she was inordinately fond of the paradox, which she used, as he did, to express the fundamental disharmonies of life. Let us observe, in isolation, a half dozen of her paradoxical utterances:

Success— is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed...

A Wounded Deer—leaps highest —
I've heard the Hunter tell—

To Learn the Transport—by the Pain—
As Blind Men learn the Sun...

Just lost—when I was saved ...
We lose —because we win —

Tell all the Truth—but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies—

In each instance, paradox derives from the way in which antithetical concepts or experiences have been yoked together into a meaningful, if bitter, perception. The ideas stated are basically tragic; from the standpoint of a sentimentalist they would seem unnerving and therefore repellent. Yet they catch precisely the spirit of irony. For they have enunciated with force and lucidity the ironist's recognition of how disparity and contradiction rule human experience. And when Emily Dickinson extends paradox through an entire poem, the tensions of thought which she begets can frequently be astonishing. Thus in the full text from which the first quotation was taken, complexity is the result of a deft steering between two extreme views. Avoiding the purely logical proposition, this says that success is best comprehended by the successful, Emily Dickinson likewise remains aloof from the sentimental truism: success in failure or sweet

is the uses of adversity. The point she makes is that the idea of success will be most poignantly real to those who have been denied the actuality. It is a bleak, complicated, and paradoxical truth—one which none save the ironical intelligence could possibly have formulated.

It is, then, largely through a wry poetic diction that Emily Dickinson's ironies are conveyed: through the single off-key word, or through a series of such words, joined together into the equivocal passage. It remains, however, to speak of how her ironical sensibility is also manifested in certain of the strictly formal features of her poetry. Perhaps the chief of these would be the short, epigrammatic line. What a short poetic line tends to preclude, of course, are the expansiveness and looseness which we associate with the rhetorician. The short line is ordinarily not an ideal vehicle for grandiose assertions; tense and pithy, it is admirably suited for holding in balance the contrarities and dissonances which are aspects of an ironical style.

Finally, one suspects that her determination to be ironic will, in some measure, explain the strange habits of punctuation that Emily Dickinson employed. They persist through all the poetry, the ironic and the non ironic equally so that elsewhere certain of them will have to be dealt with in a different fashion. But a cursory reading will indicate that Emily Dickinson's favourite marking was the dash, which she used copiously as a substitute for commas, semicolons, and periods, and that her standard practice was to leave the final line of the poem dash-stopped or completely open ended. About the kinship to an ironic style of both these practices, little real doubt can exist.

What the dash alone accomplishes is a keen sharpening of Emily Dickinson's antitheses. It points up the paradoxical quality in her writing, sets off and thereby dramatizes the ambiguous word, acts to underscore the doubleness that is latent in many of her themes. In conjunction with the dash-stopped or unstopped last line, furthermore,

the dash creates in the poetry certain fragmentary effect, a sense of the broken and unfinished in brief, just that air of sustained and intentional inconclusiveness which Emily Dickinson's viewpoint required. When taken together, these markings do either or both of two things. They help to set forth a world that is far too erratic and disordered to permit deep human engagements. Or they become integral parts of the only prudent and feasible response to that world, which, as they help to demonstrate, is the open. It shows the poetic forwardness of Dickinson's feeling.

Chapter Three

Irony in Dickinson's Poetry

Emily Dickinson gained full academic recognition in the 1930s. Since then her poetry has been praised for its ambiguity. Critical focus has been on the radical ambivalence concerning the various manifestations of the traditional, patriarchal pattern of authority. In particular, the figure of the father and such associated emblems of creative power and enlightenment as the sun and divine light occupy a central position in Dickinson's imagination. Dickinson deploys irony as a technique of systematic double-meaning to achieve a formal, aesthetic solution to the various problems of meaning in an increasingly secular world, a world violently suspicious of and yet secretly nostalgic for the righteousness. The consensus is that during one of the most critical periods in American history Dickinson's irony secured for her still basically religious sensibility—a creative balance of faith and skepticism. It is of the will to believe and to surrender to something larger than oneself and the will to negate and to master experience by transforming it imaginatively according to one's aesthetic designs.

As Daniel T O'Hara points out, one of Dickinson's letters to Thomas Wentworth Higginson provides a clue to Dickinson's ironic imagination. The letter carefully avoids responding directly to Higginson's inquiry into personal religious convictions by playfully taking the word "religious" in its purely conventional sense. She defined it like this way: "My family is all religious, except me and address an eclipse every morning that they call father" (O' Hara 176). That she is irreligious in comparison to her family members makes Dickinson's use of irony at times defensive. For example, her handling idea of the sublime in "Before I Got My Eye Put out" exemplifies how her irony at times

functions defensively as her many critics claim it does. In light of this idea of the sublime, her poem is as much a critical commentary on the sublime as an instance of it:

Before I got my eye put out
I like as well as to see
As other creatures that have eyes
And know no other way.

This poem is an ironic reduction of the most influential paradigm of the American sublime. Dickinson wants to achieve some aesthetic distance from the straining economics of imaginative compensation. She focuses on the possibility, loss of vision, and begins the poem by casting a reflective, ironic glance at the worst that can happen before she gets her “eye put out.”

As mentioned in Chapter One, the aesthetic aspect of irony has been stressed by New Critics who see irony as a technique which discovers a formal aesthetic resolution of balance of the painful oppositions and ambivalences of existence. The New Critical kind of irony is available in the poem “Because I could not stop for Death.” It is a representative example of how Dickinson’s irony manages aesthetically her critical moment. As O’Hara remarks, “Dickinson’s poetry resolves formally the historical conflict between a dying Puritanism and a rising ‘piratical’ individualism by dramatizing their polar opposition in the form of a revised version of the puritan theological ‘dumb-show’ ” (180):

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 Dews drew 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.

The central irony of the poem comes from its guiding metaphor of a young woman abducted by Death which goes back to the classical myth of Persephone, daughter of Demeter, who is carried off to the underworld by Hades. Aware of this tradition, Dickinson makes of it something distinctly her own. The irony cannot be missed when she transforms the female victim, not into a willing or even passionate lover of Death, but into an avid witness/participant in the mysterious transition from life to death, and from human time to eternity.

The speaker never expresses any direct emotion about her abduction; indeed, she never calls it that. She seems to experience neither fear nor pain. On the other hand, there is no indication that she is enamoured of Death: She is too busy to stop for him and it is he, the courtly suitor, who takes the initiative. But she does not resist. Death's carrying her away is ironically presented as a "civility," an act of politeness. And she responds with equal good manners, putting away her labour and her leisure, too, that is, the whole of her life.

What does draw her powerfully is the journey, which she observes and reports in scrupulous detail. The poem is her vehicle for exploring the question that obsessed her imagination: "What does it feel like to die?" It should be noted that there is a third "passenger" in the carriage—"Immortality"—the chaperone who guarantees that the ride will have an "honorable" outcome. Immortality is a promise already present, as opposed to the "Eternity" of the final stanza, toward which the "Horses' Heads" advance. Eternity is the ultimate transformation of time toward which the poem moves. But ironies abound during the course of the journey. One of the ironies is that the carriage and its passengers are frozen in time. The sun appears to have abandoned the carriage—as reflected in the can mean either a fine increasing coldness that envelops the speaker. She is ironically dressed for the occasion, in "Gossamer," which filmy piece of cobweb or a flimsy,

delicate material, and a “Tippet,” that is, a small cape or collar. While tippets were commonly made of fur or other substantial materials, this one is of “tulle”—the fine silk netting used in veils or gowns. All at once, the serenely observing speaker is a vulnerable physical presence, dressed for a wedding or ball, but “quivering” with a coldness that suggests the chill of the grave.

The climatic irony is a note of uneasiness and disorientation that only grows stronger from this point on, has been injected into what began as a self-assured journey. This is a stunning example of Dickinsonian irony of how mid-poem, it introduces a realistic doubt. The carriage “pauses” at “a House that seemed/ A Swelling in the Ground—,” presumably the speaker’s newly dug grave. The word “Swelling” is ominous, suggesting an organic, tumor-like growth. But there is no unified physical picture of what the speaker sees. The ground is swelling upward; the House has sunk; its cornice, the ornamental moulding just below the ceiling, is “in the Ground.” The repetition of the word “Ground” stresses its prominence in the speaker’s consciousness. It is as if all her attempts to hold on to the things of this world—the children at school, the grain, the setting sun, the cobweb clothing, the shapeless swelling of a House—have culminated in this single relentless image.

Thus “Because I could not Stop for Death,” there is ironic embodiment of the strife between the puritanical theocratic idea of existence and leveling skepticism of a secular democratic individualism. By means of its ironically staged allegorical dramas centering on the conflict between Death and Immortality, Dickinson’s poem the essence of a vanished cultural moment when unity of being was possible for the society at large because the patriarchal theocratic idea pervaded every aspect of the individual’s daily existence. The role of irony in this projection of order is clearly central. Double-meaning and radical ambiguity allows Dickinson to entertain the puritan theocratic idea and her

concrete experience as purely formal elements. She composes an antithetical spatial order from the images representing the various ideas associated with eternity and mortality. Dickinson conquers the chaos of death and the antinomies of life by means of her dialectical irony. In the poem the terror of death is objectified through the figure of the genteel driver, who is made ironically to serve the end of mortality—something which comes close to having been deceived.

The irony of the poem “Because I could not Stop for Death” gains in further intensity when we read it in conjunction with “I Heard a Fly Buzz” which presents a deathbed scene through the eyes of the one who has already died. Not a word is said about where the speaker is, while telling of how she died, not even the bare allusion to the centuries of eternity that concludes, “Because I could not Stop for Death. If, in that poem, Dickinson explored the moment of dying in images of movement and destination, in this one she clings to the final moments of stillness (repeated twice), stasis, and expectation in this world. With open-eyed determination, she pushes her imagination—and the reader’s—to the extreme limits of what a dying person might perceive.

In stanza 1, sound—the “Buzz” of the “Fly”—is heard against the “Stillness of the Room”; and this stillness, in turn, is perceived as similar to the stillness “Between the Heaves of Storm—,” suggesting that something momentous is about to occur. The word “Stillness” contains both silence and lack of movement; it evokes the stillness of death. Dickinson then uses images of disembodiment to further the poem’s powerful sense of estrangement. In stanza 2, which alludes to those standing around the deathbed, we never see a whole person; instead we have disembodied “Eyes around” and “Breaths”:

The Eyes around—had wrung them dry—
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset—when the King

Be witnessed—in the Room—

Similarly, in stanza 3, the speaker signs away a “Portion” of herself. Fractured grammar raises the ironic effect: in line 1, stanza 2, it makes no sense to read “The Eyes around” as the subject of the phrase “had wrung them dry,” since “them” can only refer to those Eyes. We can only conclude that there is an omitted subject, that is, “grief” or “weeping” had wrung them dry. Dickinson enhances the sense of a floating reality by setting off the phrase with dashes. Then, briefly, the poem admits the elements of a conventional deathbed scene: the religious expectation of the bystanders that the King, presumably the King of Kings, will be witnessed in the Room by the dying speaker; and the speaker’s willing away of her earthly treasures. The Fly intervenes at just this moment, but its appearance is presented as sequence, not causality.

There interposed a Fly—

With Blue—uncertain—stumbling Buzz—

Between the light—and me—

The fortuitous appearance of a blue-bottle flies—the most ordinary, everyday annoyance—sharply undercuts the expectation of a divine apparition. With the appearance of the fly, ordinary perception once more breaks down. Dickinson uses synesthesia, the merging of visual and aural sensations, to get at what the dying person perceives. The windows, the apertures of the house, darken just as do those of her body’s house, her eyes. When light fails so does life; the speaker observes it with minute precision as it disappears. The final words “see to see” inch the reader closer to the perception of the final moment. They seem to imply two levels of perception, with the second “see” denoting physical vision, while the first suggests a state prior to that, a certain modicum of life force, perhaps, required for visual perception to take place.

The phrase “see to see” is also the culmination of the poem’s complex sound play. It echoes the repetition of “Stillness” in stanza 1, and it is the last of the series of sibilants, or hissing sounds (*s, sh, z*) that run through the poem, building up to the Fly’s “Buzz.” The consonant cluster *st* appears in “stillness” [twice], “Storm,” “last,” and “stumbling”; the *s* sound—in all of the previous words, plus “Onset,” “witnessed,” “signed,” “assignable,” “interposed,” “uncertain,” and “see to see.” The *z* of “Buzz” occurs twice. But “Buzz” is also part of another sound group that includes “be,” “blue,” “between” (twice), and “Breaths.” A smaller group of *k* sounds belong to two words denoting certainty: “King” and “Keepsakes.” The *f* first seen in “Fly” recurs in “firm,” in “Fly” again, and then in “failed.” It should also be noted that the inexact rhymes in the first three stanzas give way to the regular rhymes “me” and “see” in the final stanza, creating a tenuous sense of closure, at variance with the openness of “see to see—.” “I Heard the Fly Buzz” comes out as a statement of nihilism that ironizes the notion that death is transcendence and hence tantalizing as it seems *prima facie* in “Because I could Not Stop for Death.”

The poem “I Heard a Fly Buzz” merits comparison with another written in 1863, “I’ve Seen a Dying Eye,” in which the speaker watches in frustration as the eye of the dying person searches desperately for something it dimly sees, and then closes “Without disclosing what it be/ ‘Twere blessed to have seen—.” Only by putting herself in the place of the dying one can the poet satisfy her hunger to know. But there is nothing obviously blessed about what she sees; and it is the lack of any transcendent vision at the final moment that makes this poem so ironic, given the fascination with death in the poem “Because I could Not Stop for Death.”

In “I’ve seen a Dying Eye” Dickinson uses the device of synecdoche, the representation of a whole by one of its parts, for ironic effect. Her evocation of “a dying

eye” representing a dying person proves dehumanizing in this instance, casting the deathbed scene in a grotesque light. Images of the eye or eyes are ubiquitous in Dickinson; like images of the face she often uses them to express the desire for direct communion with a beloved human being. Here, however, she does something very different. The speaker sees the Eye, but the Eye is involved in its own frantic drama: “I’ve seen a Dying Eye/Run round and round a Room—.” This Eye suggests nothing so much as a demented rodent of some sort racing desperately in circles. It is “In search of something—as it seemed”—a goal, perhaps clear to the Eye, but vague to the speaker. This vagueness then overcomes the Eye itself, which becomes “Cloudier,” then “obscure with Fog,” and in a final grim image “soldered down.” For scholar Jane Eberwein, “A kind of anger smolders in this poem about the cruel insensitivity of the dead to the questions of the living whom they are luring toward circumference, without giving adequate insight into the journey’s goal” (212). The anger is reflected in the speaker’s total lack of sympathy for the disembodied Eye and her refusal to perceive the dying person to whom it belongs. Her only regret is that it has shut down without revealing its secret: “what it be / ‘Twere blessed to have seen—.” This last line is ambiguous. We never know, not only what the Eye has seen, but whether it has seen the thing for which it searched. This tormenting indeterminacy is reminiscent of the ending of “I Heard a Fly buzz—when I died”: “And then the Windows failed—and then/I could not see to see—.” In this equally terrifying work, the dying Eye belongs to the speaker, and there is every indication that it has seen nothing more illuminating at the moment of death than a blue-bottle fly. Thus this poem too ironically undercuts the fascination with death seen in the poem “Because I could not Stop for Death.”

Another poem that ironically subverts the attraction for death is “I Felt a Funeral in My Brain” which presents a manifestly disturbing portrayal of death. With the detailed

presentation of a complete funeral as felt through the ebbing sensations of a dead person, this poem borders on the morbid in portraying the terrible struggle that separation of the soul from the body occasions. The funeral in the speaker's brain is her obsession with what she called the "flood subject" of death and immortality. The question of what comes after death, pounding relentlessly in her brain, weakens the foundations of her inner world and sends her plunging downward. Here is no hope of immortality, only a despairing plunge into eternal abyss. These death poems dialectically ironize "Because I could not Stop for Death."

Written in 1861 at the beginning of Emily Dickinson's most prolific period as a poet, "There's a Certain Slant of Light" portrays nature as a distant, alien, and indifferent force fraught with reminders of death's universal presence in ironic contrast to Emerson's Romantic spiritualization of nature. Dickinson's poem lays open the dialectic between outer nature and the inner self and places the source of meaning firmly within the interpretive self. In other words, all of the physical and psychological impressions that natural phenomena exert upon human consciousness only receive significance within the individual mind, where the meanings are. "There's a Certain Slant of Light" also exemplifies Dickinson's poetic treatment of grief and loss present in so many of her works. On the surface, the poem explores the depression that light deprivation may inflict upon the mind during winter. And yet it also opens out to a cluster of associations that are specific to Dickinson herself. Indirectly, for example, the poem reveals Dickinson's ambivalence toward God, the force behind this winter light as well as the rest of nature. But overall, this work discloses the feelings of isolation and alienation all grieving people suffer "After great pain." In brilliantly ironic language, "There's a Certain Slant of Light" casts light upon the quiet desperation that misery knows. This poem tells all the truth about pain but tells it "slant," or with ironic indirection.

The winter light of this poem oppresses, not as a passing mood, but as a permanent deformation of the soul, a knowledge that, once admitted, can never be removed. Speaking of Dickinson's work as a whole, scholar Charles R. Anderson notes that "[s]he . . . separates the lesser pains that will heal from the greater pains that will not and chooses the latter as her special concern, noting with precision their qualities and above all their effects" (10). Dickinson's astonishing feat in this poem is that she somehow transforms light, an image deeply embedded in the human psyche as an emblem of joy, hope, happiness, and salvation, into the "Seal" that signifies existential despair and locks it within the soul. Her certainty of the universality of this experience, reflected in her use of the plural "we," has been justified by her many readers who have reacted to the poem with a shock of recognition.

The transformation begins in stanza 1, where Dickinson uses synesthesia, the merging of images dependent upon different senses, to evoke the light's impact:

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons—
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes—

By describing the emotional impact of the light (a visual image) as akin to the heft (a tactile image) of Cathedral tunes (an aural image), she forces the reader into unfamiliar associative territory, while deepening the sensual reality of the experience. Dickinson's earliest editors did the poem a disservice by replacing *Heft*, a provincial word that, in her lexicon, denotes something ponderous that requires great effort to lift, with the neutral word *weight*. The oppressive, ponderous tunes belong not to a familiar "church," but to an imposing "Cathedral," evoking the quality of organ music resonating through great empty spaces. Farr suggests that *Heft* "conveys the difficulty of lifting up the heart, of believing

in what cathedrals stand for.” She makes a further, intriguing connection between this poem and the paintings of cathedrals by the English painter John Constable, which were well-known in Dickinson’s region. Juxtaposed to Constable’s cathedrals bathed in light and his notion that painting was both poetry and prayer, this poem stands as an ironic antithesis. For the very next words, “Heavenly Hurt” links the notions of ecstasy and pain. The phrase, with its repeated *h* sound (picking up the *h* of *Heft*), has the breath release of a sigh which implies that the hurt feels heavenly, sublime.

Dickinson is describing a wound that cannot be influenced from outside and thus remains forever fixed. She might be talking about the kind of recalcitrance modern psychology associates with untreated neurotic syndromes. But, although many of Dickinson’s discoveries about the inner life anticipate what modern psychology would uncover, she lived within a different, more spiritual universe of reference. For her, the wound was the “Seal Despair,” a biblical reference to the seven seals of Revelations. Dickinson’s “eighth seal” belongs with the plagues that are sent to afflict mankind. By alluding to an apocalyptic, visionary text, Dickinson suggests a cosmic dimension to her experience. But her “vision” does not go beyond itself, that is, it leads to nothing but the psyche’s awareness of its own pain, as it endures the “imperial affliction” (a variant of “Heavenly Hurt”), whose source is the insubstantial “Air.” This is the poem’s central insight: the irony that we live in the iron grasp of the ungraspable, so that our deepest convictions are shaped by subtleties of perception of which we are scarcely aware.

In the fourth stanza the poet returns to the surface level of a winter afternoon and draws the natural world into her sense of things, employing a pathetic fallacy—the poetic device that attributes human feelings to nature. The listening landscape and shadows holding their breath share the poet’s apprehension and awareness that something momentous is coming (“It” is once again the “certain Slant of Light”). The effect of these

lines is to heighten the sense of mystery and suspense, which culminates in the poem's stunning final image: "When it goes, 'tis like the Distance / On the look of Death—." The absence of the "certain Slant of Light" is still a terrible presence. The image contains two attempts to place Death at a distance; it says both it is not Death but the *look* of death and it is not the look of death but the distance on the look of death. But the ironic effect of such distancing is to bring death palpably close.

Chapter Four

Conclusion: Dickinson as a Dialectical Ironist

Emily Dickinson's ironic method, as it emerges from its exploration in her death poems, is dialectical in nature. As a dialectical ironist, Dickinson makes a statement that is open to ambivalent interpretations, that is, interpretations of opposite weights and meanings. The meaning that she seems to construct in the poem "Because I Could not Stop for Death" turns out to be ambivalent seen from the perspective of her other significant death poems. She challenges her readers to create meanings for themselves. Such irony helps her dramatize the contradictions within her social perception of death. Moreover, because irony also stresses the interplay between levels of awareness, Dickinson the ironist is able to incorporate into her analysis both her own perspective and those of readers.

That the readers' perspective is invited by Emily Dickinson is clear from her poetic technique of capitalization and dashes. This technique requires readers to come up with their own responses. When this happens, their responses are juxtaposed with the perspective of the poet, thereby yielding in a dialectical meaning of the text. Looked at from this perspective, Dickinson's irony also becomes dialectical.

Dickinson's dialectical irony becomes available not as much locally in a poem but as globally in respect to her poetry. For example, ironies are not as many there as in her individual poem like "Because I Could not Stop for Death." Her ironic vision becomes clear when we read this poem dialectically against other of her death poems like "I Felt a Funeral in My Brain" "I have seen a Dying Eye" and "I Heard a Fly Buzz." These three poems dialectically ironize her fascination with death in the poem "Because I Could not

Stop for Death.” Cumulatively the idea of death that emerges from Emily Dickinson's death poems, because of the use of dialectical irony, is that death promises immortality but at the same time it remains a terror. In Emily Dickinson, dialectical irony exists somewhere in the gap that obtains between the terror of death and the assurance of immortality.

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