

SUFFERING IN EMILY DICKINSON'S SELECTED POEMS

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Abstract

This research examines the theme of suffering in Emily Dickinson's selected poems, focusing on her unique poetic approach and the profound emotional resonance her work evokes. Emily Dickinson, a pivotal figure in 19th-century American literature, frequently explored themes of death, pain, and existential questions. Despite her reclusive life, her poetry is rich with personal imagery and symbols, reflecting her deep preoccupation with mortality and the human condition. The study utilizes a structural analytical approach, combining library research with descriptive qualitative analysis. This method involves a thorough examination of relevant literary critiques and an in-depth textual analysis of Dickinson's poems. The aim is to uncover how Dickinson's portrayal of suffering contributes to a deeper understanding of human experience. Findings indicate that Dickinson's treatment of suffering is multifaceted, often depicting pain as a necessary aspect of the human soul's development and a precursor to joy and peace. Her poems suggest that pain and suffering are integral to personal growth and resilience. Dickinson's ability to articulate the complexities of suffering through her innovative use of language and metaphor makes her work both timeless and universally relatable. Overall, Emily Dickinson's exploration of suffering provides a profound insight into the human experience, highlighting the interconnectedness of pain, joy, and personal growth. Her poetry remains a significant contribution to American literature, offering a nuanced perspective on the inevitability of suffering and its role in shaping the human soul.

Keywords: *distress; emotional pain; physical pain; unfulfilled desires*

1. Introduction

Emily Dickinson is the most important American poets of the nineteenth century and is considered by many critics as one of America's greatest and most original poets of all time (Omar, 2020, 16-21). The poetry of Emily Dickinson reveals very personal images and symbols; hence, there is a need to be familiar with her life for it has some bearing on her poems (Gido, Barbecho, Arias, Dacanay, Nemenin, 2018). Her poems explore the issues of life and eternity from many sides, with the significance of finding the true nature of life and revealing the true meaning of life (Zhou, 2023).

Dickinson views death as the provider of comfort, a rescuer from the worldly pain and agony, a solacer in the world of despondency, a way out to the world of perpetual bliss and what not (Tiwari & Khanday, 2017). Emily Dickinson was obsessed with the subject of death and immortality; about third of her poems feature this enigma which baffles not only the ordinary multitudes but also those great thinking minds throughout the human history (Liu, 2016). Death is the end of tragedies and many poets wrote elegies to eulogize their loved ones (Jassim, 2022). In her views, death is not dead; rather death is beautiful, fantastic and mystical. Death is inevitable for all of us from the moment we come to this world (Somatkar, 2016). Transcendentalism is the other factor that contributes to Dickinson's preoccupation with death as indicated in her poems (Sadeq, 2017).

Dickinson's works pose a separate phenomenon in the poetry of 19th century (Zawadzka, 2019). Her poetry, with profound implications and unique styles, has made immortal contributions to the prosperity and development of world literature. Her ingenious poems in her whole life, covering numerous themes, such as nature, love, life, God and friendship and so on focusing on multiple subjects of her poetry, interpreting her distinctive outlooks on nature, love and life, through which, the wild and ferocious nature, the happy and sorrowful love as well as the hasty and deliberate life will be reflected (Mei, 2021). More than 500 Emily Dickinson's poems are directly or indirectly related to nature and ecology. The poems express her attitude and thought represented in nature poetry (Zuo, 2019).

Dickinson took pain as a touchstone for estimating the depth of the human soul. Her outlook on pain and suffering was that pain humanized human soul and it was necessary to have a better life after death (Menonimus, 2023).

Emily Dickinson's poetry is unique (Zhou, 2022). The poems of Dickinson are a constant appeal to experience, motivated by an arrogant passion for the truth. "Truth is so rare a thing," she once said, "it is delightful to tell it." (Hussain & Qaddawi, 2013). As a poet with varied writing styles and extra-ordinary talent, Emily Dickinson occupied a very prestigious position in the field of American literature. Her poetry deals with a unique and large number of thematic expressions including death, love, nature, immortality, pain and suffering (Aldabaleeh, 2018).

2. Literature Review

Sharma (2017) highlights that American literature had a long period of apprenticeship. The nineteenth century American poetry has been represented by the three great poets- Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. Emily was one of the great poets of all time, perhaps, the greatest of all American women poets. She wrote about 1800 poems, only seven of which were published during her lifetime, five of them in the Springfield Republican. Though she was not a philosopher, nor even a consistent thinker, she strikingly illuminated hidden recesses in the human soul. Themes and imagery of her poems are borrowed from ordinary life Amherst of her time, her father's influence, the loss of her near and dear ones, and the ordinary things around her like. Even a cursory glance at her themes reveals an extreme preoccupation with the reality of God, the possibility of faith, the effect of death, the problems of immortality, the nature of the soul, love, passion, pain, social scene and nature.

Unlike most other American poets, she was religiously oriented. With a great spirit of religious unorthodoxy, Dickinson relies more on her soul to lead her to Heaven and to God than all the sermons and church-goings that conventional religion

recommends. Her written comments show how distressed she was by the religious pressures. In fact she discarded the sway of religion and relied more on intuition and imagination. She could not accept the harsh dogmas of innate depravity, arbitrary election and predestination, or revere the Bible as true history and the only moral guide for man.

If human love and spiritual bliss were one side of life's coin, the reverse showed pain and loss or death. For Emily Dickinson as for Hawthorne and James, the knowledge of pain became a touchstone for estimating the depth of a human soul. Primarily she notes that true pain becomes such an essential part of one's being that its departure causes a deeper loneliness in the soul. Since pain's intensity is unrelenting, one can never master it, nor even hope for time to assuage its power.

Aldabaleeh (2018) posits that, to shape and formulate Emily's poetic attitude towards nature, love, death, pain and suffering Dickinson borrowed images and concepts from her predecessors and the contemporaries.

3. Research Method

This research is structured to uncover the suffering within Emily Dickinson's selected poems. To achieve this goal, a structural analytical approach is employed, involving a comprehensive review of literary research to gather relevant data. The collected data undergoes meticulous examination and analysis to fulfil the objectives of the research.

The chosen strategy relies on library research, wherein all pertinent information and literary reviews pertaining to the topic are compiled and utilized as sources of information. An approach, in this context, serves as the fundamental concept or element that one employs when engaging with a literary work.

This research is also conducted by using descriptive qualitative research with text analysis design. Frankel and Wallen define that descriptive method is a method used to explain, analyse and classify something through various techniques, survey, interview, questionnaires, observation, and text. It is seen that qualitative method focuses on describing to the main issue which is limited in research scope and for main issue which is analysed from a certain literary works more detail (Frankel and Wallen, 1993).

4. Discussion

In some of her poems, Emily Dickinson talks about suffering in a deep and emotional way. She uses words really well to explore how people feel pain, sadness, and tough questions about life. Her poems show that suffering is something everyone goes through, and they make you understand and care about other people's feelings. Dickinson's way of talking about suffering in her poems leaves a strong impression and makes you feel a deep connection to the difficult parts of life.

Suffering, here begins to "Joy to have merited the Pain" which is a meditation on the relationship between joy and pain. It marks the journey towards finding joy in having earned the lessons from pain.

Joy to have merited the Pain —
To merit the Release —
Joy to have perished every step —
To Compass Paradise —

Pardon — to look upon thy face —
With these old fashioned Eyes —
Better than new — could be — for that —
Though bought in Paradise —
(Johnson, 2017: 395)

Pain is something we all feel at times, and while it might not feel good, it can serve a purpose. Think of it like this: when we touch something hot, the pain we feel makes us pull our hand away quickly, protecting us from getting burned badly. So, pain can be a signal that something is wrong and can help us avoid danger or harm. In life, going through tough times or facing challenges can also teach us important lessons and make us stronger in the end. So, while pain isn't pleasant, it can sometimes lead to good outcomes or help us grow as people.

Because they looked on thee before —
And thou hast looked on them —
Prove Me — My Hazel Witnesses
The features are the same —

So fleet thou wert, when present —
So infinite — when gone —
An Orient's Apparition —
Remanded of the Morn —
(Johnson, 2017: 395)

When we go through hard times, it makes the good times even better. The happiness we feel isn't just a prize for getting through tough times, it's proof that we've been strong and resilient.

Pain is something we all feel at some point in our lives, whether it is physical or emotional. It's like a signal that something is wrong or needs attention. While pain isn't pleasant, it serves a purpose. Think of it like this: Imagine if you never felt any pain when you touched something hot. You might end up seriously burning yourself without even realizing it. Pain helps us protect ourselves and avoid harm.

The Height I recollect —
'Twas even with the Hills —
The Depth upon my Soul was notched —
As Floods — on Whites of Wheels —

To Haunt — till Time have dropped
His last Decade away,
And Haunting actualize — to last
At least — Eternity —
(Johnson, 2017: 395)

Pain also teaches us important lessons. When we go through tough times, it can make us stronger and more resilient. It helps us appreciate the good things in life even more because we know what it's like to struggle. Pain is not fun, it's a natural part of being human. By facing it and learning from it, we can grow and find more joy in life.

Emily Dickinson seems to suggest that memories or emotions can haunt us for a very long time, maybe even forever. It's like they stick around and keep affecting us, even as time passes. The poetess talks about how these hauntings can bring both pain and joy. So, it's like reliving both the good and the bad moments over and over again, almost as if they become a part of us that lasts forever.

The next poem concerns to friends can bring both joy and heartache.

Are Friends Delight or Pain?
Could Bounty but remain
Riches were good —

But if they only stay
Ampler to fly away
Riches are sad.
(Johnson, 2017: 541)

This poem is asking if having friends brings more happiness or sadness. It suggests that if good things, like having lots of friends or being rich, lasted forever, then having lots of friends or being rich would be great. But because these good things often go away, it's like they make us sad. Nice things can sometimes make us feel happy, but when they disappear, it can make us feel sad. This means that when friends leave, it can feel like a loss, even though having them around was valuable. It's like having something precious and then losing it, which can make you feel sad, even though having it made you happy before.

The hallowing of Pain
Like hallowing of Heaven,
Obtains at a corporeal cost —
The Summit is not given
(Johnson, 2017: 388)

This poem compares the reverence or sacredness of pain to that of heaven. It is uttered that both pain and heaven come with a cost, especially in terms of physical suffering. The "Summit" refers to the highest point or ultimate goal, implying that reaching it requires enduring pain and sacrifices, and it's not something that's simply handed to us easily.

To Him who strives severe
At middle of the Hill —
But He who has achieved the Top —
All — is the price of All —
(Johnson, 2017: 388)

This part of the poem talks about two different situations. The first is about someone who is working hard halfway up the hill, struggling but still pushing forward. The second situation is about someone who has already reached the top of the hill. For the person in the middle of the hill, they have to put in a lot of effort and endure challenges. But for the person who has reached the top, everything they've experienced, including the pain and struggles, was worth it because they achieved their goal. Whether you're still climbing halfway up or already at the top, the hard work and sacrifices you make along the way are what you give up in exchange for achieving success.

Pain — expands the Time —
Ages coil within
The minute Circumference
Of a single Brain —
(Johnson, 2017: 463)

Pain can make time feel like it is stretching out endlessly. When we're in pain, it's like time slows down and feels longer. Even though it's just happening in our own mind, it can feel like ages pass within just a moment. No wonder when we're in pain, time feels like it's dragging on forever, all within the confines of our own mind.

Pain contracts — the Time —
Occupied with Shot
Gamuts of Eternities
Are as they were not —
(Johnson, 2017: 463)

When we are hurting, we tend to concentrate a lot on that feeling. Because of this, time can seem to pass quickly because we are not paying much attention to anything else. So, being in pain can make it feel like time is going by faster than usual.

If pain for peace prepares
Lo, what "Augustan" years
Our feet await!
(Johnson, 2017: 44)

Enduring difficult or painful experiences can often pave the way for greater peace and prosperity in the future. By weathering challenges and hardships, individuals may ultimately find themselves in a more tranquil and prosperous state. It is akin to the notion that enduring present difficulties can yield a brighter and more peaceful tomorrow.

If springs from winter rise,
Can the Anemones
Be reckoned up?
(Johnson, 2017: 44)

"If springs from winter rise" relates to good things can come after difficult times, just like how spring comes after winter, which is a tough and cold season, good things can also come after we've faced hard times or challenges. It means that after we go through hard or tough times, better and happier things can happen. It is like how after the cold and dark winter, spring brings warmth, growth, and new life. Even when we're facing challenges or suffering, we can have hope that better times are ahead.

If night stands fast — then noon
To gird us for the sun,
What gaze!

When from a thousand skies
On our developed eyes
Noons blaze!
(Johnson, 2017: 44)

When we go through tough times, it helps us become stronger and better prepared for happier times. So, when the good times finally come, we can fully enjoy them and appreciate how far we've come. The wonder and amazement we might feel when we realize how much we have grown and how much better things have become after enduring pain.

Miss Emily expresses that if we've gone through many challenges and have become stronger and more experienced, we can fully enjoy and appreciate the brightness and warmth of happy times. It is said that after enduring lots of difficulties or pain, we are able to see and enjoy the beauty and brightness of good times even more.

After great pain, a formal feeling comes —
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs —
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?
(Johnson, 2017: 173)

This poem is called "After great pain, a formal feeling comes" by Emily Dickinson, talking about how intense suffering can make someone feel disconnected from everything as well as what happens after someone goes through a lot of emotional pain. It describes feeling numb and distant, like being in a serious ceremony. The heart feels stiff and wonders if it really experienced the pain, and it's not sure if the pain happened recently or a long time ago.

The Feet, mechanical, go round —
A Wooden Way
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought —
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone —
(Johnson, 2017: 173)

The words of this poem capture the sensation of being trapped in a difficult or painful situation, where even memories of it can feel cold and numbing. It is like a picture or a story that shows how it feels when we're stuck in a really tough or painful situation. It's like being in a cold, icy place where everything feels numb, even when we think back to those tough times.

This is the Hour of Lead —
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow —
First — Chill — then Stupor — then the letting go —
(Johnson, 2017: 173)

This poem describes a powerful portrayal of the stages of grief or deep emotional pain as it's a feeling of intense sadness or grief, comparing it to the experience of being frozen in the snow. The "Hour of Lead" represents a moment of heaviness and despair. The poetess says that this feeling will be remembered by those who survive it, just like how people remember being freezing in the snow. The progression of emotions is described as starting with a chilling feeling, then a state of numbness or stupor, and finally, a sense of release or letting go.

There is a pain — so utter —
It swallows substance up —

Then covers the Abyss with Trance —
So Memory can step
Around — across — upon it —
As one within a Swoon —
Goes safely — where an open eye —
Would drop Him — Bone by Bone.
(Johnson, 2017: 305)

Pain is an inevitable part of the human experience, manifesting in both physical and emotional forms. Whether it stems from bodily injury, illness, grief, or adversity, its impact varies greatly from person to person. For some individuals, even minor discomforts can be overwhelming, akin to the intense sensation felt when stubbing a toe. Conversely, others possess a higher threshold for pain, able to navigate through challenging situations with relative ease. This diversity in pain tolerance underscores the unique nature of each individual's experience. Consider, for instance, the sensation of touching a hot surface—while some may immediately feel a sharp, intense pain, others might perceive it to a lesser extent or not at all. This variability parallels the differing preferences individuals have for spicy food—whereas some relish its fiery taste, others find it intolerable.

Think of pain as a kind of alarm inside us that goes off when something is wrong. It can happen because we're hurt or upset, either physically or emotionally. It's like our body's way of telling us that we need to pay attention and take care of ourselves.

How we feel pain can be different for each person and can be affected by lots of things. Things like the traits we get from our parents, the experiences we've had before, and even how we're feeling or thinking at the moment can all play a part. Even though pain is something we all go through, it's also something that's special and different for each of us

I cried at Pity — not at Pain —
I heard a Woman say
"Poor Child" — and something in her voice
Convicted me — of me —

So long I fainted, to myself
It seemed the common way,
And Health, and Laughter, Curious things —
To look at, like a Toy —
(Johnson, 2017: 298)

The speaker reflects on their emotional response to witnessing empathy towards others. Rather than shedding tears due to personal pain, they are moved to tears by the empathy felt towards the person receiving pity. A moment of realization occurs when they overhear a woman's compassionate utterance, "Poor Child," prompting them to contemplate their own emotional tendencies. They come to understand that their propensity to faint or nearly faint in response to pity is not a universal experience, contrary to their previous assumption. Furthermore, they ponder the transformative effect of pity on their perception of life's joys and sorrows. Concepts such as health and laughter, typically associated with happiness, lose their significance in the shadow of

constant consideration of pity. Ultimately, the poem delves into themes of self-discovery, emotional introspection, and the profound impact of empathy on one's perspective.

To sometimes hear "Rich people" buy
And see the Parcel rolled —
And carried, I supposed — to Heaven,
For children, made of Gold —

But not to touch, or wish for,
Or think of, with a sigh —
And so and so — had been to me,
Had God willed differently.
(Johnson, 2017: 299)

This poem explores the themes of wealth and the afterlife. Wealthy individuals purchase material possessions with the intention of sending them to heaven, envisioning them as gifts for celestial beings. However, they recognize the inherent limitation that they cannot physically touch or desire these objects once they reach their heavenly destination. They come to terms with the understanding that material wealth cannot accompany them in death. Despite this acceptance, they are left pondering the hypothetical scenario of what it would be like if circumstances were different. The poem grapples with the notion that while earthly riches hold little value in the afterlife, the curiosity and contemplation about their significance persists.

I wish I knew that Woman's name —
So when she comes this way,
To hold my life, and hold my ears
For fear I hear her say

She's "sorry I am dead" — again —
Just when the Grave and I —
Have sobbed ourselves almost to sleep,
Our only Lullaby —
(Johnson, 2017: 299)

The poem evokes profound emotions of fear and sorrow as the speaker grapples with the possibility of losing someone dear indefinitely. It poignantly portrays the challenges of unravelling the essence of a woman, particularly one of significance, amidst the looming spectre of mortality. The prospect of her demise instils a deep sense of dread and sorrow in the speaker, reflecting the profound impact her absence would have on their emotional well-being. References to the grave and tears underscore the depth of the speaker's affection and the profound sadness that would accompany the loss of their beloved.

Transitioning to the analysis of the final poem, "To Learn the Transport by the Pain," it encapsulates the struggle of comprehending and experiencing life's complexities without direct sensory perception. Whether navigating through hardship or yearning for fulfillment, the poem captures the essence of grappling with intangible concepts and emotions that elude tangible grasp. It speaks to the inherent challenge of

understanding and traversing life's journey, particularly when faced with adversity or ambiguity.

To learn the Transport by the Pain
As Blind Men learn the sun!
To die of thirst — suspecting
That Brooks in Meadows run!
(Johnson, 2017: 90)

In the above poem, Emily Dickinson explores the notion of perceiving and comprehending the world through unconventional means, particularly in situations where direct sensory perception is unavailable. For instance, she illustrates how individuals who are visually impaired may grasp the concept of the sun through emotional or descriptive accounts from others. This underscores the idea that learning and experiencing can transcend traditional sensory boundaries, emphasizing the multiplicity of ways in which we can understand our surroundings beyond mere sight.

In the opening stanza, the reference to "To learn the Transport by the Pain" metaphorically alludes to gaining insight into life's journey. This understanding often arises from adversity or challenging experiences, analogous to attempting to comprehend the sun without the ability to see it first-hand. Thus, the poem suggests that profound lessons about life's journey are often gleaned during times of hardship, mirroring the way blind individuals may grasp the sun's essence through indirect means. It underscores the significance of learning from adversity rather than solely from moments of ease or happiness.

To stay the homesick — homesick feet
Upon a foreign shore —
Haunted by native lands, the while —
And blue — beloved air!
(Johnson, 2017: 90)

The second stanza talks about dying of thirst while suspecting that there are streams or brooks running through meadows nearby. This could symbolizes feeling deprived or lacking something essential, like water, while having a sense that there might be abundance or fulfilment somewhere nearby.

This is the Sovereign Anguish!
This — the signal woe!
These are the patient "Laureates"
Whose voices — trained — below —

Ascend in ceaseless Carol —
Inaudible, indeed,
To us — the duller scholars
Of the Mysterious Bard!
(Johnson, 2017: 90)

The poem, *Sovereign Anguish* delves into the profound depths of the poet's sorrow and suffering. Through the use of irony, the poet employs the term "Laureates" to ironically refer to individuals who silently endure immense suffering, a stark departure from its conventional association with achievement and accolades in the arts.

By subverting this term, the poet sheds light on the often-overlooked anguish experienced by those who bear their burdens in silence.

The imagery of "trained voices" evokes a sense of mastery in expressing pain, suggesting that despite the profound suffering endured by these individuals, they have developed a refined ability to articulate their anguish skillfully. However, this anguish remains largely unnoticed or misunderstood by others, akin to a silent symphony that plays continuously in the background of life, yet goes unheard by those who are either indifferent or unable to comprehend its depth.

The poem offers a poignant commentary on the pervasive nature of suffering, underscoring the contrast between outward appearances and inner turmoil. It challenges readers to recognize and empathize with the silent struggles of others, urging a deeper awareness of the profound anguish that often goes unnoticed amid the noise of everyday life.

5. Conclusion

Emily Dickinson's poems offer a profound and vivid examination of suffering, adeptly capturing the essence of human pain and emotional upheaval. Through her masterful use of evocative language and striking imagery, she paints a raw and unfiltered portrait of experiences such as loss, grief, and existential anxiety. This honest and intense depiction resonates deeply with readers, providing a timeless and universal reflection on the nature of suffering.

Dickinson's poetry highlights the notion that suffering is an intrinsic and unavoidable part of the human condition. It is through these painful experiences that individuals gain a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them. By confronting and articulating the complexities of suffering, Dickinson's work suggests that individuals can cultivate resilience. Moreover, her exploration of suffering fosters a profound sense of empathy and connection with others who endure similar trials.

Through her poems, Dickinson invites readers to not only witness but also to reflect on their own experiences of suffering. This engagement with pain and turmoil serves to enhance one's emotional and psychological resilience, ultimately contributing to a more compassionate and interconnected human experience. Her work stands as a powerful testament to the enduring impact of poetry as a medium for understanding and navigating the profound depths of human suffering.

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