

TWO WOMEN:
A STUDY OF THE DEATH THEME
IN EMILY DICKINSON AND EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

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by

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FORWARD

The poems discussed in this paper may
be found in their entirety following
page 62.

Herself, though---fled. . .
Too out of sight. . .
For our hoarse Good Night
To touch her hand.

---Emily Dickinson

I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts
in the hard ground. . .
Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave. . .
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.

---Edna St. Vincent Millay

TWO WOMEN:
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Spring had come to Amherst. The year was 1886. Late afternoon shadows filled the room, which was still except for the drone of an early fly. Emily Dickinson "ceased to breathe. . .just before the whistles sounded six." Vinnie Dickinson placed her sister's hand on the sheets. Looking at the motionless body, she noticed only how young her sister looked. "Lowly as a reed/ Bent to the water", the woman had "Shivered scarce/ Consented, and was dead."

Emily Dickinson was laid in a white coffin in a white dress with violets at the neck; two heliotropes were placed in her hands. The conventional hearse, driven by a "man of the appalling trade", was never summoned. Three days later the casket was carried in the intense April sunlight by six Irish workmen through a field of buttercups to the graveyard. There Emily Dickinson "Took up her simple wardrobe/ And started for the sun."

Emily Dickinson would have approved of her funeral. Death to her was more like a buggy ride in spring than

a dirge in autumn. Not that the final experience was meaningless. But conventional portrayal of it deprived it of much of its essential meaning; it had become trite. The true significance of death was obscured when it was conceived of as an overwhelming trauma, and cluttered with complexity and show. Death was better translated into simple terms, which heightened the implicit majesty and grandeur. And the whimsy of Emily Dickinson's life and poetry was perfectly expressed in her death and funeral. How better noted than in one of her poems:

She died,---this was the way she died,
And when her breath was done
Took up her simple wardrobe
And started for the sun.

.

Over sixty years later, another New Englander was climbing the stairs to bed at Steepletop. Even the glass of wine she held in her hand could not chase the October chill. Feeling dizzy, the woman sat down on the steps, carefully placing her glass on the stair above. She slumped to the floor. No one saw. The dawn of a misty autumn morning found the glass still untouched. The aging face showed signs of struggle.

With all my might
My door shall be barred.
I shall put up a fight,
I shall take it hard.

she had once written. But death had broken in and "dragged her forth." She was found by the milkman at the foot of the stairs late the next afternoon.

The body was placed in a wooden coffin--the face smoothed and the hands unclenched. Three days later it was driven to the cemetery in cold, driving rain. Thus Edna St. Vincent Millay entered "the belly of Death".

So she had died alone; that would have pleased her. She believed in the privacy of the individual, especially in the moment when one is forced to face the end of life. To die without a struggle, without thumbing one's nose at the injustice of death, was to admit weakness. A rebel against authority, Millay could only prove to be an unwilling subject for death. The morbidity and unjust nature of life, in which the only certainty is that it ceases, horrified her. And she vowed to do her best to thwart this certainty. No sunlit day for her funeral. The gloom seemed to characterize the mood in which she submitted to the inevitable, the defiance she had always expressed in her death poetry:

Stained with these grapes I shall lie down to die.
 Three women come to wash me clean
 Shall not erase this stain
 Nor leave me lying purely,
 Awaiting the black lover.
 Death, fumbling to uncover
 My body in his bed,
 Shall know there has been one
 Before him.

.

Two women who lived very different lives, and died very different deaths, whose poetry is proof of the divergent moods which characterized them. Yet both were aware of the need to consider death and its meaning. Both

tried to penetrate the mystique of mortality, to understand more clearly its significance. Time after time they contemplated life's end, which is, in a sense, to "practice dying." These experiences, thoughts, and feelings were recorded in verse.

Some of Dickinson's and Millay's death poetry was written under the stress of immediate loss. These works are the reactions of the poets to the spectacle of death as they observed it. Such works betray the anguish of the living when faced with tragedy.

Other poems were written more as speculations, when the poet thoughtfully considered the subject of death. One can imagine Miss Dickinson jotting down lines as she sat in her garden, or Miss Millay scribbling verses on the New York subway. These poems treat death more rationally, with less passion. They are the thoughtful searchings for meaning in death, the desire to lift the veil which hides death from the living. These poems do not lack feeling; but theirs is feeling of a different kind. It is seeing the end with a clearer vision, less colored by emotional fervor.

As individuals, Dickinson and Millay were quite different, so it is not strange that as poets they arrived at dissimilar answers to similar questions. To one, death was fascinating, an event which involved the possibility of grandeur. To the other it was degrading, an experience to be fought with all one's resources. In both the

personal and contemplative pieces, Emily Dickinson's restrained and whimsical attitude towards death is a fitting contrast to the highly emotional and rebellious reaction of Edna St. Vincent Millay.

In this paper, only the personal poems will be discussed, although reference will be made to several of the contemplative pieces. These personal works are divided into the following categories, which reveal the basic attitudes of the poets towards death: 1) Shock to numbness; 2) Knowledge versus law; 3) Nature and death; 4) Domestic reorganization; 5) Deprivation and loss; 6) Pain and suffering; 7) Resignation and resentment; 8) Observance of the spectacle of death; 9) Rebellion and Acceptance.

Shock to numbness

One of Emily Dickinson's characteristically personal poems is "After great pain, a formal feeling comes." Here, the poet describes the agony experienced by the living when another person dies. The work is a vivid analysis of suffering. The first line economically states what pain is. "Formal feeling conveys numbness and emotions, nerves stretched almost to the breaking point. To prevent any undignified display of feeling, they sit "ceremonious, like tombs", enduring because ceremony preserves them, and like tombs, immobile as stone. Emily Dickinson describes the kind of agony that fumbles on the brink of insanity. Groping for meaning, the "stiff heart" tries to equate its loss with the loss of others. The capital H of "He"

suggests a Messiah image, which contains not only the agony of Christ's crucifixion, but also the sense of loss experienced by those who survived him. The "mechanical feet go round", as on a treadmill, getting nowhere, but intuitively performing a duty. They act from "air of ought." "Ought" was a big word to Miss Dickinson, who saw that propriety must be exercised even when one is in despair. The idea is one which dominates her personal death poems. The "quartz contentment" can only be understood through connotations of the word "quartz". How contented? Like a colorless, translucent crystal-- a qualified contentment, the true nature of which can be detected. This "hour of lead," almost more than one can bear in its anguish and heaviness of heart, may be remembered in later moments, if one is able to "outlive" it. But Dickinson implies that perhaps one will not remember. The agony may be erased from the conscious mind. The poet then employs the superb metaphor of "freezing persons": First the moment of "chill", in which the body shivers at the intensity of the cold; then the "stupor", the dull heavy weight of a tormented body; and finally, the "letting go." Such is pain: The sudden shock, the ensuing numbness, and finally submission to, yet also the recovery from, pain. It is this last stage, the release of emotions, which leads to eventual victory, when anguish is overcome.

On another level, this poem is reminiscent of the

ceremony of the funeral. Words like "tomb" and "stone" support the interpretation. The tread of feet en route to the cemetery are seen in verse two, and "quartz contentment" reflects the immobility of a corpse. The words "letting go" in the final stanza suggest the lowering of a casket into the ground. In such a way, Emily Dickinson has broadened the meaning of the poem; pain becomes synonymous with a kind of death, and the images form an intricate pattern of implications.

Knowledge versus law

Miss Millay, too, wrote of suffering. In "The Solid Sprite" she describes the individual who stoically faces tragedy. The term "solid sprite" pictures a figure whose feet are firmly planted in "oughts". But in its oxymoronic character, it does even more. "Sprite" is a difficult word to understand. It refers to its archaic definition, "ghost", causing the elfin figure to expand to a substanceless, cold character. This contrasts sharply with the word "solid", and suggests the ambiguity of such a character. Miss Millay could not understand how grief and stability could be reconciled. "Sprite" means also a spirit, like herself, yet ironically "solid". Even in the face of a great loss, this person does not lose a step. He "stands alone". The "equal stride" implies not only a sense of balance, but also a quality of heroism. "Grieve though he may", he recovers and continues to live. He too, can weep, but succeeds in finding meaning

in a life which claims his friend. That a man can expect "ten and three score" years is to the sprite a matter for "comfort", not despair. Such rational knowledge is able to provide him with the strength to endure, and even understand; and this "level" man fluctuates little from his calm, detached state.

Up to this point in the poem, Millay has presented the solid sprite as a person worthy of admiration. But now she subtly and masterfully creates a dramatic reversal. She is not "made" like the solid sprite, and this justifies her agony. It is not that she willfully despairs, but that she is "crooked", an imperfect, emotional individual. Stability is incomprehensible to Edna St. Vincent Millay, who cannot find her way out of Dickinson's "letting go" stage. One senses in the developing irony of the next lines that Millay feels a certain pride in her agony, in the paralysis it has caused. (This is made clearer in the final stanza of the poem.) She is unable to "rise", to resume living in the old way. Understanding that the inevitable is inevitable, that "what had to be/ Has been, what lived is dead", fails to provide the incentive. So she will "lie among . . . tears and rust", a phrase which poignantly suggests her feeling of uselessness. The word "rust" is interesting and effective. It implies the deterioration of the mind, the unhealthy results which dwelling on grief can produce. And then Miss Millay offers her final argument: It may not be reasonable to react so emotionally, but she does

so "all because a mortal brain/ That loved to think, is clogged with dust,/ And will not think again." The word "rust" of the previous line is expanded to encompass not only the bereaved, but also the dead, rotting in the grave. Millay has here both justified her position, and intensified the pathos of the mood. Death is too grievous to be wished away by common sense.

This poem becomes Millay's explanation of the variant uses of knowledge, and of her own position regarding grief. Every man must learn that death is a reality. But to know it, to accept it emotionally, is the difficulty. Herein lies the tension of the poem. Words playing against one another, like "lived", and "dead", "solid" and "sprite", "crooked" and "level", help produce this tension between Millay and the more rational view of death.

Millay's poem is true. Emily Dickinson herself would agree. But Edna St. Vincent Millay seems to draw too sharp a line between "solid sprite" and "crooked me". It is interesting to note that both "After great pain a formal feeling comes" and "The Solid Sprite" end in much the same stage of emotional release. Yet Dickinson admitted the need for dignity and restraint, and suggested that "letting go" was for those most private moments. Millay, on the other hand, gives no thought to the possibility that perhaps the "solid sprite" faltered before he could "walk the world". Perhaps he felt with equal agony the loss of a friend, and was not undone.

"Twas comfort in her dying room", by Dickinson, is a suitable companion piece to "The Solid Sprite." Both have essentially the same theme, but Emily Dickinson's expression of it is quite different. Moreover, her poem is a deeper and more complex study of anguish; she subtly interweaves a number of profound implications. Dickinson's poem, like Millay's, suggests some elements which make the death spectacle more endurable, and then, in a reversal at the end, admits that an emotional acceptance is difficult.

One interpretation of this poem is to view it as a whimsical presentation of the problems of overcoming the anguish of observing death. The tension between living and dying is seen through auditory images. The "living clock" brings comfort to the poet. Ironically, this mechanical timepiece seems more alive than the dying person. The wind "boldly" walks up, and has the nerve to rattle the door. Even this is a short relief. The cries of children at play also interrupts the poet's thoughts of death, and their vitality contrasts with the stillness and sense of tragedy in the room. The last three lines present the true tension of the poem. Here Dickinson expresses much the same agony that Millay presented in "The Solid Sprite." The diversions of the clock, the wind, and the children provided welcome relief; yet simultaneously, the poet becomes more aware of the presence of death. Then, somehow, it is wrong that

these elements could have life, while "This"--a friend-- must die. Even the sight of children cannot justify death. In her whimsical personification of the wind, and in her picture of a living clock, Emily Dickinson suggests that it is unfair for these things to appear more alive than the dying person.

The capital T in the word "This" suggest the importance of this person to her friends. The fact that she is called "ours", makes her a part of them. The reader becomes aware of the helplessness and despair of the survivors in the face of death. "Ours" is a bold word, especially since it is implied that Emily Dickinson is the only person in the dying room. Her observations are too private to be shared with others. But the poet often used plural or inexact pronouns to suggest herself, somewhat the same idea as a majority of one. ("Ours" also intensifies the significance of the friend's death to many people, although they are not present in the dying room.)

There is another more complex interpretation of this poem. It views the images as symbols of the knowledge to endure death seen in the cycle of time. One can see the poet standing over her friend's bedside. Suddenly, she is acutely aware of the ticking of the clock in the still room, and the sound comforts her. But another thought comes to Emily Dickinson's mind. The clock is regularly, inevitably measuring out man's life span, ticking away death. It reminds one of the rules of the game, of the inevitable end of life.

The poet hears the happy cries of children at play,

and once again her attention is drawn away from the death scene. But this sound is also more than a diversion. It becomes a knowledge, the same kind of knowledge she apprehended from the clock. For suddenly Emily Dickinson is reminded that youth runs to age and death. The "solid sprite" might cite the clock and the children as justifications for death. But this is not enough. The mere fact that the price we must pay for "these" living children is death, that ironically these children are the law which says man must die, seems wrong. Such knowledge will not fill the empty moments for Emily Dickinson any more than they did for Edna St. Vincent Millay. This is the agony one pays for the death of a friend. It is interesting to note the difference, however, between Dickinson's and Millay's poems. The passionate language and imagery of Millay's work is a sharp contrast to the restraint of Miss Dickinson's. Lying among one's tears and rusting is a completely different approach to the situation than noticing the ticking of a clock or the happy cries of children, and commenting on the injustice of death.

Another implication of the images used in this poem is their unawareness of death. The clock ticks on; the wind "boldly" ignores the fact that someone is dying; the children continue to play. They all refuse to pay homage to death, or even acknowledge it. Yet somehow, at the same time, they portend death as natural symbols of the laws of existence.

Being able to explain death by law is one thing. The heart's acceptance of death is another. One still remembers and grieves. Something is left unsaid in the principle that all life must sometime die. Mere knowledge will not dispel agony. Millay, like Dickinson, was aware of the ambiguity of death. It was the theme of her lovely "Elegy", in which she voices her aversion to the rationale of death.

In the first stanza of the poem, Millay explains that she is not opposed to the burial of the dead person's physical body. The tone of the first lines, "Let them bury your big eyes/ In the secret earth securely" is subtly mocking. For Millay knows that her lover's beauty will return to the earth in one form or another. His "thin fingers" and "soft, indefinite colored hair" will somehow get the best of death, reincarnate. It is not for these things that the poet sits "broken and bereft."

"But the voice. . ." The mystical association of remembrances begins. Somehow the voice validated the man's aliveness. And now that he is dead, Millay realizes that nothing can replace this loss. There is a recognition of finality in her "musings". The voice is compared to images of nature: "rising of the wind/ In the trees before the rain", the "woodcock's watery call", and "the feet of children pushing/ Yellow leaves along the gutters." The poet somehow associates the loved one with these sounds, and the definiteness and random selection of the images suggests that the dead lover at one time commented on them.

Their beauty is now diminished when contrasted to the dear-ness of the voice. There is a universality in the poet's anguished remembrances. One trait, one characteristic, of the deceased assumes gigantic proportions; it becomes a symbol of his vitality. All the beauty of the world cannot replace the sense of loss, irrational as this seems. Millay comments: "The beauty of that sound/ That in no new way at all/ Ever will be heard again" is now gone.

The final verse of the poem draws together the two stanzas which precede it. The body, now "altered fluid", shall return; it will "Bud and bloom and go to seed." there is this consolation for the physical loss of the lover. His death will be transformed into vigor in the growth of weeds and flowers. But Millay reverses the tone from one of acceptance to one of objection. For "your singing days are done." Knowledge cannot heal the heart; there is a dread finality in the word "death". The "Chemistry of the secret earth" cannot restore the dear sound of her lover's voice. And natural laws, though understood, are powerless to console. For "All your lovely words are spoken".

The final lines of the poem use an effective image. They picture an old-fashioned music box. Inside is a lovely bird, which moves with the melody. But "Once the ivory box is broken,/ Beats the golden bird no more." The image suggests not only the conclusiveness of death, but also the delicate beauty of the lost voice. The music of that sound will remain in the secret earth. It, like the

beauty of the music box, is irreplaceably lost. And this Millay cannot accept.

Nature and death

The injustice of an unconcerned world expressed in Dickinson's "Twas comfort in her dying room" is also treated in Millay's "Elegy Before Death". She expresses the great difference death makes to her as contrasted with the indifference of the natural world. The first two verses use words with positive connotations; the only intrusion is the word "dead". The coupling of the "rose", a classic flower, with the showy "rhododendron" is a calculated one, employing assonance and alliteration. The flowers will bloom as usual, even though the loved one is under the same ground that fertilizes them. The buzz of bees in the syringas, a "sunny sound", reminds one of the loveliness of summer. The willows will continue to drip rain, "after the rain has ceased." There will be robins "in the stubble" of winter, and sheep will still roam on the hill. Up to this point, death has not been accused of reducing the beauty of the earth. There has been only the suggestion of nature's indifference. It flourishes even though a human being is dead. Rationally, one expects unconcern from the natural world. But it is emotionally difficult to accept the knowledge that beauty survives.

The next stanza subtly shifts the mood. "Spring will not ail nor autumn falter/ Nothing will know that you are gone." The poet begins to speak in negative terms,

and the ominous words "ail" and "falter" suggest her changing mood, which later emerges more clearly. The next lines are the first reversal. Millay mentions a few of the little changes in the world when seen through the eyes of the bereaved. Only some ploughland, gloomy now that he is dead, that only he walked upon, will sense the loss. And perhaps some weeds and a "useless" wagon will notice the absence. It is ironic and poignant to be cared about by weeds and a wagon. The image of the wagon is reminiscent of the use of the word "rust" which accompanied death in "The Solid Sprite". Words like "useless" and "tumbled" complement the melancholy mood, and suggest the feelings of the poet. The images employed also suggest how close to the earth this man was; and reference to the first two stanzas of the poem, which were made up primarily of nature images, supports this idea. Here was someone to whom the roses and tamaracks, sheep and plough-land were dear, and who noticed even the small and insignificant things.

The last stanza intensifies the tragic mood by a second reversal, which suggests not only the poignancy of the poet's loss, but also the fact that such elements as weeds and a wagon are not unimportant. Millay tragically pronounces the effect of the death on her own sensibilities. "Common water" will lose its "light"; to Millay, ultimate light, and "simple stone" will lose its "grace"; here again, ultimate grace. Even the most elemental things will lack the appeal they once had. The beauty of the earth is dimmed.

In the same mood as "Elegy Before Death" is Millay's sonnet, "Now sits the autumn cricket in the grass." The poet again uses images of nature to suggest her loss. The theme of the poem, the death of a lover, is not directly stated until the final line of the octave. Instead, "autumn cricket" and "chilly bee" suggest the somberness of the poet's mood. The year is almost at an end,

in which has come to pass
The changing of the happy child I was
Into this quiet creature people see
Stitching a seam with careful industry
To deaden you, who died on Michaelmas.

Autumn symbolizes not only the season of death, but also the transformation from the summer of youth into the winter of sober adulthood. It is almost impossible to remain unchanged after one has endured a great loss. To Millay, the tragedy has meant a transition from a child, unaware of the realities of life, into a "quiet creature", doing the things which must be done. The phrase "to deaden you" is an effective one. It suggests that the shroud not only prepares the dead for the grave, but also that it forces the realization of the death on the bereaved.

The next four lines of the poem employ the classic image of autumn as the season of death, and the changes which it brings: The summer flowers have died, and birds have migrated to a warmer climate. The dark hoods of the "purple aconite" are reminiscent of the shroud.

The final couplet of the poem describes the true nature of the loss to Millay. Moreover, it supports the association between the end of summer and the death scene:

"With you the phlox and asters also went;/ Nor can my laughter anywhere be found." Autumn signals the death of natural beauty, as well as the death of the lover. The close of the year symbolically becomes the end of all happiness and laughter. Man ceases to laugh, and beauty dies.

This poem implies a certain sense of dignity and restraint, far more characteristic of Miss Dickinson than of Miss Millay. Unlike her usual anguished cries is her picture of the "quiet creature". The low-keyed expression of the theme adds to its pathos, and makes this poem one of Miss Millay's most poignant works on death. And the use of the symbol of autumn as characterizing the season of death, and the transformation from a "happy child" into a mourning adult is effective in its universality.

Another sonnet by Millay which makes use of nature images is "Mindful of you, the sodden earth in spring." However, this poem presents the opposite pole of the unconcerned picture of natural things found in "Elegy Before Death". Instead of nature not noticing death, Miss Millay employs the pathetic fallacy--the earth reflects the mood of the author. The poem is also a contrast to "Now sits the autumn cricket in the grass", since the theme is expressed in highly emotional terms. She exaggerates the earth's awareness of the death of a lover throughout the piece, rather than working up to a reversal. The entire poem presents nature as sensitive

to the feelings of the individual. The earth recognizes the loss of a "friend", of a man who loved simple, natural things.

Millay uses seasonal images in the first eight lines of the sonnet, and catalogues the things which are "mindful of you." Amongst them are the sodden earth and flowers of spring, the dusty roads and thistles of summer, the departing birds of autumn, and the nests in the barren branches of winter. The poet draws the year together in the lines "And all winds that in any weather blow,/ And all the storms that the four seasons bring." Not until the last six lines of the poem is the reader given a picture of the man who has died.

You go no more on your exultant feet
Up paths that only mist and morning knew;
Or watch the wind, or listen to the beat
Of a bird's wings too high in the air to view.

The lover emerges as a sensitive, humble man, one who knew all the ways of nature. "Watch the wind" is a strange image, yet one which expresses the man's closeness to natural things. Here was a man who loved the winds of the four seasons and the throats that sang all summer. Therefore, it is not unusual that nature should mourn his loss. Millay affirms this idea in the final lines of the poem in a classical use of contrast: "But you were something more than young and sweet// And fair,--- and the long year remembers you." The use of the word "long" in the last line expresses the poet's loss. Time now drags on. That the year seems long also implies that

the bereaved person is comforted by the thought that nature also misses her lover. Nature is unchanged. But her own mind sees it as mourning and joyless. Death has transformed her view of the natural world. And only the thought that she is not alone in her bereavement, that nature too understands her loss, can help salve the agony.

Domestic reorganization

The preceding sonnet has something of the mood expressed in Emily Dickinson's piece, "Except to heaven, she is naught." Both poems eulogize simple, humble people. But the approaches used by Dickinson and Millay to point out the significance of the deceased are different. "Except to heaven she is naught" is a customarily ironic expression of the death theme. It is the attempt to state the worth of an individual, in this case, a woman close to Miss Dickinson who has died. This work, like many classical poems, serves to exalt the dead. However, Miss Dickinson, unlike most of the classical writers, chose as her subject a simple housewife. The poet's mastery of paradoxical expression affirms her worth.

The selection of images is striking, indicating not only a skillful technique, but also the poet's emotional temper. The symbols move freely from heaven and angels, to butterflies, bees, and winds. These are the elements, Miss Dickinson says, which realize the significance of the woman's death. To say that angels wept for a person when she died is indeed a tribute.

But Miss Dickinson says more. She does not depreciate the value of heavenly things by setting them against the simple things of nature. Rather, her total world view caused her to see images of paradise and earth in the same glance. This whimsical twist enhances the poem a great deal.

The final verse contains the reversal of the poem. Up to this point, Miss Dickinson has maintained a rather impersonal, contemplative stance. But the final lines express in touching terms the magnitude of her loss:

The smallest housewife in the grass
Yet take her from the lawn
And somebody has lost the face
That made existence home.

The word "housewife" suggests the close ties of the family. Even though the woman seems insignificant to many, to someone she is synonymous with "home". The use of the philosophical term "existence" as coupled with the highly emotional word "home" is a calculated one. It is also an excellent example of the poet's curious means of expression. Without this woman, Emily Dickinson finds herself merely existing. The feeling of home, with all the connotations of love, warmth, and a deep sense of comfort which it suggest, are now absent. Death seems to rob life of its meaning and value, and leaves one homeless in existence. The pathos of the poem is heightened by the last line.

The problem Miss Dickinson faced in expressing

the significance of a simple person was solved in this poem through the ironical images, which also make it one of her most touching pieces on death. Instead of expressing in ultimate terms the significance of the woman's death, she does it in negative, restrained images, and simplicity of approach and language.

Dickinson and Millay both pictured household scenes in their death poetry. To Miss Dickinson, especially, the word "home" was an important one. For the last years of her life, she never left the family house. Thus, to her, the significance of the family was special. To turn around the words in the last poem, home was to Emily Dickinson her entire existence. But Edna St. Vincent Millay also treated in her death poetry the loss of a member of the family. She often wrote about a woman losing her husband, as in SONNETS FROM AN UNGRAFTED TREE and in "Lament". The latter poem exhibits much the same restraint as "The bustle in the house", but Millay never reaches the affirmation of Emily Dickinson. Nonetheless, this piece is one of Millay's more touching personal death poems. The situation is a mother telling her children of their father's death, and her efforts to comfort them, as well as to ease her own uncertainties about the injustice of the loss. She begins very simply and tenderly, without pretense. "Listen, children:/ Your father is dead." But then, to protect herself from her own

thoughts of the tragedy, she begins to tell the children of all the good things which will now come to them:

From his old coats
 I'll make you little jackets;
 I'll make you little trousers
 From his old pants.
 They'll be in his pockets
 Things he used to put there,
 Keys and pennies
 Covered with tobacco;
 Dan shall have the pennies
 To save in his bank;
 Anne shall have the keys
 To make a pretty noise with."

But all the while, the woman is reminded of her dead husband. Her rationalizations only make the sense of loss more acute. She recognizes the fact that she is deceiving herself. But she continues, now more to herself than to the children:

Life must go on
 And the dead be forgotten;
 Life must go on,
 Though good men die;

A mother must remember her children---and she sternly tells Anne to eat her breakfast, and Dan to take his medicine. The mother tries to shield herself from the impact of the tragedy by resorting to such domestic disciplines. There is a note of self-beguilement in the poem up to this point, a sense of resignation. But suddenly the woman realizes that reason and common sense have no validity now, and the nonsense of death cannot be rationalized. "Life must go on; I forget just why." These are subtle lines. Millay says that, in great despair, one momentarily loses perspective. Although at this time one cannot remember the reasons

for living, one knows that it is the thing to do. The two lines contrast with one another. There is a conflict between the fact in the first statement that life must continue, and the question of "why?" in the second.

"Life must go on;" thereby becomes an absurdity. Somehow, now that the woman's husband is dead, existence is meaningless. And although to the children her arguments may have been enough to make acceptance of death easier, she has not convinced herself that there is any justification for such a loss.

Emily Dickinson felt that in one's reaction to the loss of a loved one was a measure of his courage, as well as his sensitivity. Suffering is a reality, and must be accepted as essential to growth as ecstasy. Both sharpen one's awareness of experience--awaken latent feelings to the intensity of passion. Yet both must be contained, handled with restraint, and above all, dignity. Even in her personal life, Emily appeared as a staid maiden in white, isolated from society. She experienced the loss of many loved ones. Thus she knew the dilemma of such a loss to the living. In her poem, "The bustle in the house", she depicts the changes which must be made the morning after a death has occurred. The word "bustle" implies the hurried adjustments: not only the funeral arrangements, but also the soothing of an anguished mind. The "solemnest of industries," which in the choice of the word "industries" suggests the automatic response and formality which must be

assumed at the crucial time, suggests in the language the necessity of organization and composure. One must appear far calmer than one is. There is something touching in the household terminology of sweeping up the heart and storing love, as though menial tasks might somehow ease the anguish. Also, there is a severe understatement implied in the mechanical manner in which one dispels grief, if it can be dispelled. But suffering must, says Emily Dickinson, be put in its proper place, and the living must continue to live. The final appearance of the word "eternity" suggests that immortality remains, and there one may take out of storage the waiting love. Faith often seems a feeble word to the sufferer, yet the implications of the final line are pointed.

Millay's SONNETS FROM AN UNGRAFTED TREE deal with the lingering illness and death of a husband. The characters are simple country people. The wife, never having faced death before, sees her life completely altered, and is shocked and bewildered by the tragedy. The final two poems in the series are moving pieces on death.

In the first poem, the wife is thinking, immediately after her husband's death, about the arrangements one should make for a funeral. The doctor asks her what she wants done with the body. "And she was shocked to see how life goes on/ Even after death, in irritating ways;/ And mused how if he had not died at all/

'Twould have been easier." The wife finds it strange that she is forced to make decisions about the most exasperating details. It would have been much simpler if he had just not died. This is a rather quaint thought. Often under the stress of a great loss, one does not consider how much the person meant, or what one will do without him. Rather, it is natural to hold back, to face life minute by minute, and remember how uncomplicated everything was before the death.

The wife then thinks of the funeral. Her thoughts contrast with Miss Dickinson's pictures of the same ceremony, and yet both see the need for a certain amount of dignity. To Millay, a funeral involves "stiff disorder", everyone acting from instinct, unnatural and out of place. Her use of the phrase "hideous industry" is reminiscent of Miss Dickinson's use of the word "industry" in "The bustle in the house". Both refer to the same thing, the funeral, but the implications are quite different. To Millay, the ceremony is repulsive; it is not the "solemnest of industries" which sustains one, as seen by Emily Dickinson. It is greeting strangers, and answering prying questions. And once again the speaker thinks how much easier it was, sitting by her ailing husband's bedside, unable to move even if a knocking came at the door.

Finally, the wife feels the doctor's eyes upon her, waiting for her reply to his question. She says,

pitifully, yet in a certain sense, nobly, "I don't know what you do exactly when a person dies." For the wife, it is difficult to know what Emily Dickinson's "air of ought" implies. Death to her is a new and frightening experience. Yet there is in the character whom Millay has portrayed, an element of restraint, and even dignity.

In the second of these poems, and the concluding work in the series, the wife is seated by the bedside, looking at the corpse. She measures the difference between life and death, between the "desirous body" which had once lain beside her, and what ~~is~~ now "severe and dead". And to her it seems strange that the inert body could ever have been the source of a "great heat"---"That had been which would not be again." Now, the "taut nerves" are "loosened forever". This image is reminiscent of Emily Dickinson's picture in "After great pain, a formal feeling comes", in which "nerves sit ceremonious, like tombs." But she was referring to the living. Millay's image suggests the insensitivity of the deceased.

The final eight lines of the poem employ an excellent image which suggests the cleavage between life and death, between the familiar and the alien. The wife gazes at the body, of which she knows every curve and line, formally covered by a sheet. And she does not see the man who was her lover and husband,

but a strange figure:

She was as one who enters, sly, and proud,
To where her husband speaks before a crowd,
And sees a man she never saw before---
The man who eats his victuals at her side,
Small, and absurd, and hers: for once,
not hers, unclassified.

Death has transformed her husband into an incomprehensible, foreign thing. The wife realizes that he is no longer hers, that he has lost his familiarity and humanness.

Deprivation and loss

"Childhood Is the Kingdom Where Nobody Dies", by Millay, distinguishes between a child's and an adult's view of death, and suggest that the transformation from youth into age is a state of mind, brought about by tragedy. The poet denies that childhood is a statistical category of age. Rather, it is "the kingdom where nobody dies./ Nobody that matters, that is." The people who die are usually distant relatives, whom one has only seen once, if at all. And they cannot "really be said to have lived at all." For these people, children are not concerned. Death does not disrupt the young person's life at all. Then Millay describes with realism the death of an animal, as it disrupts a child's life. She pictures a dead cat, with the fleas crawling out the the "reticent fur", slick and knowledgeable of the ways of death, "Trekking off the the living world." She suggests that the fleas know more about death than humans do. They

are aware only of their need to live, not of the anguish of death. "And cats die." Children find a box to bury her in, and "it's much too small, because she won't curl up now:/ So you find a bigger box, and bury her in the yard, and weep." But children forget, and do not spend sleepless nights of suffering, thinking of their loss. "Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies that matters,---mothers and fathers don't die." For children, there is always time, too, to apologize for being irritable or unreasonable. They do not torture themselves with the thought of what might have been. There is "plenty of time to say, 'I'm sorry, mother.'"

Up to this point, Millay has presented what is to her the state of childhood. It is the condition of never really having known death. But in the sixth stanza, in the form of a kind of masque, is the tension of the poem. From the blissful ignorance of childhood, she moves to the agonized realities of adulthood.

To be grown up is to sit at the table with
 people who have died, who neither listen
 nor speak;
 Who do not drink their tea, though they
 always said
 Tea was such a comfort.
 Run down into the cellar and bring up the
 last jar of raspberries; they are not
 tempted.
 Flatter them, ask them what was it they
 said exactly
 That time, to the bishop, or to the
 overseer, or to Mrs. Mason;
 They are not taken in.
 Shout at them, get red in the face, rise,
 Drag them up out of their chairs by their
 stiff shoulders and shake them and yell
 at them;

They are not startled, they are not even
embarrassed; they slide back into
their chairs.

Your tea is cold now.
You drink it standing up,
And leave the house.

The poet is seated at a table alone. The scene unfolds as she remembers another time, seated at the same table, with living, vital people. And suddenly, it is as if these persons are present. But they are not living, and they are not vital. Instead, they are ghostly figures, they are corpse-like. And the speaker tries desperately to call them back to the living, by temptation and flattery. But they do not respond, and have no feeling. So she attempts to reach them by force. But that, too, is ineffectual. And the poet slowly realizes that one never loves enough until it is too late. The ghostly figures can never respond to the efforts of the speaker to reach them. They can never be told now, all the things which were left unsaid while they were alive, sensitive people, easily hurt by an unkind word, and easily pleased by a loving act. There is a note of bitter despair and self-condemnation in this section of the poem. The last three lines picture the speaker, suddenly and finally aware of the futility of trying to call back the dead. One can only leave the house, with all its memories, and try to return to a real world.

This poem expresses in a unique way, the difference

between a child's capacity for suffering and that of an adult. The unawareness of the reality of death characteristic of childhood changes into the recriminating conscience of the adult. Millay succeeded in presenting an inventive and realistic picture of growth and pain as seen in two different views of death.

Dickinson's "We cover thee, sweet face" bears a thematic resemblance to "Childhood is the Kingdom Where Nobody Dies". Emily Dickinson feels, as does Millay, that people never love enough until it is too late. At least, love is too often not expressed. This poem characterizes the dying person as having tired of the living, as hurrying off to another existence. "Remember, as thou flee/ We follow thee until/ Thou notice us no more." The word "flee" suggests E. Dickinson's view of death as an experience which should be met eagerly. For the dying person rushes into it, with little or no hesitation. "We" and "us" shift the attention to the onlookers, and it is with them that the remainder of the poem deals. Those watching the death realize that they are no longer noticed by the dying woman, whom they love so dearly. Reluctantly, they turn their thoughts from the spectacle of death to their own feelings of deprivation. The onlookers study the body before it is covered, hoping to memorize everything about it. After following the loved one to the brink of death, they are made poignantly aware of their own loss..

They chastize themselves, *and*

And blame the scanty love
We were content to show,
Augmented, sweet, a hundred fold
If thou would'st take it now.

When the woman was alive, the onlookers felt they were showing their love enough. But now that she is dead, they feel remorse. The affection they felt for the deceased was always present. But only death forces the realization of how much of it was unexpressed. Now, it is unappreciated and unreciprocated. Could one only move back in time, Miss Dickinson thinks, he would be certain that the dead person would know how significant she is.

There is profound truth in this sentiment. When one experiences the loss of a loved one, it becomes only too clear how much of one's love was unexpressed. And recognition of this fact only makes the agony more acute. But it does even more. Suffering sometimes makes people more knowing, and far more sensitive to the needs of others. One can make it a constructive experience, rather than a crippling one.

Pain and suffering

"Death sets a thing significant", by Dickinson, is not one of her better poems technically or imaginatively. She tends to lapse into a self-pity and passionate anguish foreign to most of her works on death. But it does affirm Miss Dickinson's belief that despair should be released privately. The "oughts"

which carry one through a funeral may be dispensed with later. These ideas are not the weakness of the poem. Tears need not take away from one's dignity, and there is a time and a place for "letting go". But somehow, it seems strange that Emily Dickinson would record this stage in a poem.

This piece is personal, and suggests that the poet had someone specific in mind. The loss has made Emily Dickinson notice things which, had the lady not died, she would have "hurried by." Things which were once taken for granted now become symbol's of the woman's former vitality. This is a natural sentiment. One feels a certain responsibility to "Ponder little workman-
ships". It is as though this pain is the least one can endure before putting love on the shelf and waiting for eternity, as Emily Dickinson expressed it in "The bustle in the house." One perhaps finds a sampler on a dusty closet shelf and thinks, "This was the last her fingers did." And this remnant seems to symbolize the breach between life and death. In the choice of the workmanship "In crayon or in wool", is portrayed an industrious, old-fashioned person with domestic virtue and a sense of duty. Moreover, the detailed manner in which Miss Dickinson describes the needle-
point asserts that in death, small things become large.

But in between the moment when the friend lay down her work is death, and a funeral, and many "oughts".

To support this picture of torment, Miss Dickinson recalls another highly personal experience. She was given a book by a friend, or perhaps a man she loved. He had marked passages that had pleased him, and written a comment here and there in the margin.

"Now at rest his fingers are." The markings in the book, unnoticed before, now represent the absence of the person due to death. And in an untypical anguished cry, Miss Dickinson says,

Now when I read, I read not,
For interrupting tears
Obliterate the etchings
Too costly for repairs.

The restrained and dignified tone of Emily Dickinson is absent in these lines. And the picture of the smeared pages is not nearly so effective, in either style or tone, as many of Dickinson's other personal poems, which express just as much suffering in more poignant terms.

"If anybody's friend be dead", by Dickinson, treats the difficulty of reminiscences, which keep the bereaved acutely aware of her loss. "It's sharpest of the theme" to relive moments one spent with the dead person when she was alive. Yet, at the same time, it is natural to go over time and again every moment one shared with the friend. "Their costume, of a Sunday,/ Some manner of the hair,--/ A prank nobody knew but them." Such unconnected impressions run through the mind of the poet. And she knows that

these attributes of the deceased are lost in the grave.

But she continues to remember,

How warm they were on such a day
You almost feel the date,
So short way off it seems; and now
They're centuries from that.

The reminiscences are so vivid, they don't seem "centuries" away. But the word "centuries" expresses Dickinson's use of exaggeration in a metaphysical way. The woman was alive not long ago. But death is centuries away from life, and eternity has claimed the friend. Rationally, the poet knows that she can never perfectly relive her time with the dead. For she is now far from "warm". Then, the poet remembers something she once said that pleased the person, and tries "to touch the smile/
And dip (your) fingers in the frost." This line depicts the poet standing by the grave of the friend, an idea supported by the earlier image of the sepulchre, in the second stanza. The phrase, "touch the smile" is a poignant one. It implies the attempt to visualize the deceased as she once was; and yet, being unable to forget that she is no longer living. The poet recalls a day when she invited a few friends to tea, and "chatted close with this grand thing". Now, however, Miss Dickinson has been forgotten by the person who died, and realizes that she could now have no conception of the distress which the living endure because of her.

These are a few of the experiences which Emily Dickinson records in a personal way. The flood of

reminiscences only serves to force upon the poet the realization of her separation from the deceased. The last line of each of the preceding verses has denoted the gulf between life and death. The anguish which the remembrances intensify is described in the final stanza of the poem. Just as the dead person is beyond definition or speculation, so is the poet's pain of no calculable kind. Rather it is

Past bows and invitations,
 Past interview, and vow,
 Past what ourselves can estimate
 That makes the quick of woe.

The agony of death is inarticulable. It is far beyond the remembrances of the deceased. It is of infinite character. The suffering is of a basic kind, which knows no equal; and beyond all thoughts of the dead as they were when they walked alive, is the true sense of loss. The "bows and invitations. . . interview and vow" suggest the experiences which Dickinson had with the dead friend. But woe goes deeper than the conscious mind. And by the use of the word "quick", which expresses the center of feelings, the soul of the bereaved, the poet implies the overwhelming nature of her pain.

"Their height in heaven comforts not" by Dickinson, can be interpreted in two ways. One view is to see the poem as a controversy between two conceptions of heaven. Miss Dickinson cannot accept the comforting idea of heaven as a place where streets are paved with

gold, and God sits on a throne. This conventional attitude proves too "insecure". She prefers to visualize heaven as a small town, or a chat with God, as she did in other poems. Her homey view is in keeping with her finite vision, and a more personal sense of what blessing is contented her. Her knowledge of heaven is confirmed by her knowledge of earth, and she bases her conception of paradise on this rather than more ostentatious suppositions. The tension of the poem results from the poet's refusal to go beyond the evidence of earth. It is difficult to accept on faith an idea which cannot be proven by the tangible world.

This interpretation of the poem, however, is not the one which illuminates Emily Dickinson's view of death. The piece may be seen as the poet's attempt to regain her faith, which falters in the presence of tragedy. Taken in this light, the poem is a valuable expression of Emily Dickinson's tortured mind. She begins by questioning the comfort of traditional religion, which finds consolation in hopes of heaven and a better world for the deceased. She says, "Their glory naught to me." An "imperfect" relationship, such as earth offers, means far more to Emily Dickinson than vague thoughts of heaven and paradisial bliss. She is "finite", unable to see the reasoning behind such rationalizations, and unable to accept conventional answers to ease her suffering.

In the second stanza, the poet fancifully presents her view of such answers: "The house of supposition, / The glimmering frontier / That skirts the acres of perhaps." In a whimsical way, she asks how pain can be eased by unsupported hypotheses. To Miss Dickinson, such guesses "show insecure". She had learned to content herself with earthly relationships, even though they lack perfection. Such relationships were so meaningful to her that they overshadowed "larger values". The last two lines are difficult to equate with this interpretation. "This timid life of evidence / Keeps pleading, 'I don't know.'" Perhaps she is suggesting that for her, the anguish cannot be eased by a supposition. And the world, which she sees in despair and uncertainty, offers no evidence of a happier place for the deceased. Miss Dickinson would rather have a person on earth than optimistically wish for her departure to heaven.

If this interpretation of the poem is accepted, it provides an important picture of Dickinson's doubts in the face of agony. Moreover, it is technically a noteworthy piece. The second stanza in particular is a good example of the curious language the poet often used, even when she wrote of suffering.

The pain of loss is elsewhere expressed in "I meant to find her when I came." The first two stanzas of the poem once again display a quaint attitude, and only in the final verse does Emily Dickinson

assert the depth of her emotional feeling. The piece begins with the statement that the poet had hoped to find her friend at a particular time, but Death had claimed the loved one first. "The success was his. . . / And the discomfit mine." "Discomfit" is a severe understatement in view of the last verse. It is typical of Dickinson, and contributes in its ironical implications to the later tension of the poem. The second stanza relates the poet's desire to see her friend just "this single time." Death could not wait, and he held all the cards. The personification of death thus far is interesting. He is presented as a persuasive, powerful character. He told Dickinson's friend how much he longed for her, and she "harkened him." There is no suggestion of force or struggle in this portrayal of Death, but rather an expression of death as a suitor. The poet used this image of death in several of her poems; for instance, "Death is the supple suitor", and "Because I could not stop for death."

The last verse presents the shift of mood, and reveals the distress of the poet. She is bereaved and wandering. Emily Dickinson is suggesting a tortured mind, plagued with tumultuous thoughts, unable to rest. ". . . to rest would be / A privilege of hurricane / To memory, and me". It would be pleasant to rest. "Hurricane" depicts a washing away or obliteration of suffering. But the oxymoronic quality of the word, coupled with the word "rest", suggests that a tumultuous storm would

be a quiet relief if compared to the agony which the poet is now experiencing. A hurricane would seem calm next to the turmoil of despair by which E. D. is now engulfed. In this poem, as in others, Dickinson indicates that death is far more distressing an experience for the living than for those who die. The fanciful portrait of Death, who politely asks for someone's company, is sharply contrasted to the turbulence of the poet's emotions.

Although death was horrifying to Edna St. Vincent Millay, she felt that the misery of living to see others die was almost worse. In an extremely personal reminiscence, she implies that her own death would be more endurable than witnessing the death of a loved one. "At least, my dear,/ You did not have to live to see me die." She continues the poem with a series of remembrances, thinking of all the many wrongs and injustices she did to her lover. The memories cause her to sweat and blush, and she is "unable/ To gather home. . .scattered thoughts that graze the forbidden hills, cropping the mind-band,/ I cut from the hedge for crook the one disservice/ I never did you,--- you never saw me die." Her thoughts are self-torturing, and she cannot call them back from their "forbidden" wanderings. But there is one consolation, one act of love which justifies her many disservices to the deceased. He died first, and was not forced to endure the pain

which Millay feels.

In the next stanza, the poet mentions mementos of the dead lover which she finds in her files and pockets. And these cause such anguish that she says, "A few more moments such as these and I shall have paid all." Of course, she realizes that her attitude about love is not correct. There are no books kept by him which record her inadequacies. Rather, she has listed them herself. The oxymoronic quality of "love inflexible", and "militant forgiveness" denote the poet's ambivalent feelings towards such emotions. Yet it is not they, but her own guilt, which observed her errors. One senses that Miss Millay is once again in a self-pitying mood. Yet there is present in the poem a feeling of the same remorse treated by Miss Dickinson in "We cover thee, sweet face." With Millay, it is expressed in terms almost too emotional to disguise the female torture.

The strength of the poem is in the final stanza. The passionate cry is hushed, and the sense of valid suffering in the face of loss emerges:

It is only that there are moments when for
the sake of a little quiet in the brawling
mind I must search out,
Recorded in my favour,
One princely gift.
The most I ever did for you was to outlive you.
But that is much.

There is an echo of Dickinson's hurricane image--"I meant to find her"--in Millay's plea for peace in the "brawling mind". And the final line of the poem, in

simplicity of language, expresses the pathos of the situation. To survive and endure the death of a lover, and all the associated memories and recriminations, is far more painful than to experience death.

One of Miss Dickinson's most unique descriptions of the groping from suffering to peace of mind is found in "This that would greet an hour ago". The poem contrasts the silence and immobility of a corpse with the torment of the bereaved. It denotes the difference between life and death in images of motionlessness versus activity.

The first verse characterizes the inert body. Only an hour ago, (a distinction which suggests the "narrow time" in "The last night that she lived",) the dead person was alive and vital. Now it is "quaintest distance", a phrase which depicts the curiously strange look of the dead. Moreover, it is interesting that throughout the poem, Emily Dickinson refers to the deceased as "it", which implies the unclassified nature of the corpse. He or she is no longer a person. The poet continues by saying that even if "it" had a guest from paradise, it could not glow with pride or bow in humility at the honor. There is absolutely no circumstance which could call the dead back to life. Even an angel would go unnoticed, so how could Miss Dickinson expect the inert body to be aware of her presence or agony. The first lines of the second verse suggest the same kind of immobility and unawareness

of the corpse: "Had it a summons from the noon/ Nor beam would it, nor warm----". The use of the word "warm" contrasts with the chill of the dead body, and the word "beam" contrasts with its gray pallor.

The last two lines of the poem, however, are its strongest. At this time the speaker makes her feelings known, asking for a reprieve from her painful emotions: "Match me the silver reticence!/ Match me the solid calm!" The language in these lines expresses in exact terms the contrast of the dead with the living. The word "silver" means eloquent, and the word "reticence" suggests the quality of reserve and silence of the corpse. "Solid" expresses a firmness and soundness, and reflects once again the immobile body. How unlike the dead person is the mourner, whose torment cannot be calmed, and whose anguish cannot remain silent.

This is one of Miss Dickinson's most memorable descriptions of death and suffering. She faces with dignity the misery which accompanies a great loss. And her presentation of this theme is handled in her usual controlled manner and unusual choice of words.

Resignation and resentment

Edna St. Vincent Millay, in the midst of agony, often expressed a disdain for death, but even more characteristically, a horror of it. In a lyric written in memory of Elinor Wylie, she bitterly resigns herself

to death's reality. It is necessary to discuss the background in which this poem was written. Millay and Wylie became acquainted after Miss Millay wrote a letter to the other poet praising one of her pieces. They carried on a very limited correspondence. At one time, Millay wrote a scathing letter to the League of American Penwomen for insulting Wylie. Apparently the two poet's met several times, and Miss Millay professed a deep admiration for her fellow poet. Elinor Wylie died on the sixteenth of December, 1928. In February, Millay wrote the following letter: "This. . . can't go on any longer without speaking of Elinor. How shall we bear it? How can we manage without her? There was only one of her. I was in New York at the time it happened. . . somebody who didn't know that I even knew her, casually mentioned that she had died. How do we bear these things? How do we manage?" Later, Miss Millay recorded her sentiments in "Gone Over to the Enemy Now" as one of six memorial poems to the dead poet. The piece displays the same sense of despair and disbelief revealed in the letter. A tone of self-pity deprives the poem of some of its power, but some of the images are well-done. A sense of betrayal pervades this piece. The poet attempts to assert her own dignity by picturing herself as the only rebel against death. The scene is a medieval town, surrounded by a wall. Millay is forced to try to save the city, symbolic of

life, alone. Everyone else has surrendered to the enemy Death. She has little hope against Death's terrific odds. She explains how the town got into this situation: "Someone within these walls has been in love with Death longer than I care to say;/ It was not you! . . .but he gets in that way." The unobtrusive insertion of "longer than I care to say", in its melancholy, almost resentful tone, adds depth to the poem. It not only suggests the quality of resentment, but also is significant in its simple expression. The section as a whole is Millay's reply to a Dickinsonian acceptance of death. Edna St. Vincent Millay would probably support her theory of Miss Dickinson's unnatural love of death by citing some of the poem's in which Emily Dickinson pictures death as a lover or suitor. Such a feeling towards death was incomprehensible to Millay. Moreover, it was treasonable towards life, and all those who value it. It was not Elinor Wylie who betrayed the entire city, but Death's mistress. She opened the door for her lover. The next stanza describes the people within the city who have become Death's allies.. They leave the city in darkness, the time when one needs courage most; the darkness also classically suggests treachery and ignorance. And behind the traitors is a running track. They are like animals, scurrying fearfully about, lacking the courage to face death bravely. They leave also "the mark of a dusty paw on all our splendour",

ruining the peace and purity of the fortified town. And ironically, those who join Death's party are the ones who hit the table with their fists at the city council meeting and say, "I will not have it so."

The odds are too great, even for an angry rebel like Millay. She will have to submit. "What hope have I?/ And you too, led captive and without a cry." The last lines obviously refer to the death of Wylie, whom Millay thought was her last support in the battle against life's enemies. If Death could capture her best friend, and lead her off with no warning at all, without even giving the victim the chance to signal Millay, then resistance against him is useless.

This poem is a typical expression of Millay's conception of death, to her, a grotesque beast who should be fought with all one's strength. This work is also an outright condemnation of people like Emily Dickinson, who consider death anything but monstrous. To Millay, such individuals were weak and cowardly traitors against life.

Dickinson's "I shall know why, when time is over" is a statement of resignation in the face of suffering. The poem describes an agony fully as overwhelming as Millay's, yet it is tempered with acceptance and patience in despair. Dickinson explains in the first stanza that at the present time the justification for pain is obscure. She cannot fully understand why one

must endure it. But when "time is over", and she has passed out of the jurisdiction of finitude, she will "have ceased to wonder why." Paradoxically, when the present distress is no longer important, it will be explained. In an assertion of faith, Emily Dickinson says "Christ will explain each separate anguish/ In the fair schoolroom of the sky." To the modern reader, the image of heaven as school, where the questions about life are answered, seems trite. But perhaps when the poem was written, the metaphor was more original.

The second verse lends itself to more than one interpretation:

He will tell me what Peter promised,
And I for wonder at his woe,
I shall forget the drop of anguish
That scalds me now, that scalds me now.

"His" in the second line may mean either Christ's or Peter's woe. If the word refers to Christ's suffering, the implication is that the knowledge that Peter would betray Him could not salve the agony he experienced when the event actually took place. However, this view does not seem too plausible, since Emily Dickinson almost always capitalized references to Christ. Further, she would be more likely to compare herself to the apostle than to the Messiah. If this interpretation is taken, the woe is that of Peter, when he realized that he had rejected his Lord, and broken a solemn promise. Emily Dickinson is suggesting that Christ points out to her

that now the apostle's anguish is gone. But the most significant element of the disclosure of Peter's torment is that the poet recognizes that in comparison to her own pain, that of the apostle was far more significant; Her agony will someday seem like a drop, although now it scalds her. Only the future can lessen the pain she must endure at present, and it will appear ignominious in relation to that of Peter. A sense of dignity characterizes Emily Dickinson's realization that her grief is not ultimate, and that it will someday be justified by Christ.

Observing the spectacle of death

Both Dickinson and Millay were present at the death scene of a loved one. Both accompanied the dying person to the instant which separates life from death. To Dickinson, as in "To know just how he suffered would be dear", dying was a fascinating experience, even if one must endure the ensuing distress. To Millay, as in her sonnet "Your face is like a chamber where a king", the spectacle was depressing.

The mystery surrounding death, and the preconceived ideas, fears, and desires one might derive from it, is the theme of "To know just how he suffered would be dear." The initial line is another of the many examples of Dickinson's irony. Normally one would not consider it "dear" to be aware of the pain which the dying must experience. The subject of the poem is a man who died; apparently the poet was not present at the death bed. And the following are some of the

questions she would like to ask the deceased: When his gaze wavered in fear and uncertainty, were there any human eyes closeby "to whom he could intrust" his own, before he glimpsed Paradise? Was dying the way he thought it would be, and if so, was he content? Did he consider what the reactions of others might be when they heard he had "ceased human nature". Or instead, was he thinking of God? Did he have any wishes? (If so, says E. D., she could have detected them by a sigh.) Was the day sunny, a question which suggests the poet's sense of death. What name was first on the dying man's lips, and to whom was he speaking when he became drowsy with death? Was he afraid?

The catalogue of questions might appear needless. But the wide range of subjects and feelings they encompass is important. Emily Dickinson wished to know answers not just to philosophical questions about death. She also wished to be aware of even the most insignificant things which surround the spectacle of death. She was not afraid to know the suffering, the doubts, the uncertainties which accompany death. But she also desired information about the pleasures and joys associated with it.

The final four lines of the poem are both a question and an affirmation about death. They express Emily Dickinson's hopeful attitude towards it.

Might he know
 How conscious consciousness could grow,
 Till love that was, and love too
 blest to be,
 Meet--and the junction be Eternity?

Associated with death is not only pain, but also transformation into a state of perfect awareness of the love of earth, and a divine love. To Emily Dickinson, eternity was the conjunction of these two loves.

This poem is contemplative as well as personal. The personal aspect of the poem is apparent in her choice of a subject. It seems likely that Emily Dickinson had a specific person in mind when she wrote the piece. But from this individual, the poem moves to a thoughtful study of death. It lacks much of the emotional fervor of the personal death works.

This poem forms a contrast to Millay's sonnet, "Your face is like a chamber where a king". The dignity and optimism which Emily Dickinson expresses when she regards another's experience of death is in opposition to Millay's pessimism. Millay uses the following image to describe the look on a dying person's face: It is like a room in which a king is dying, alone; he upholds the dignity of his office and character by stifling the "crude moan which speaks too loud of mortal perishing." And in the darkness of his suffering and anguish, he rises on his elbow and weakly chants a light tune. The ditty is one which everyone sang in the olden days, when he was young and full of life,

and victories in battle and in love were his. But now the tune is "out of season."

The final six lines of the poem refer to Millay's dying lover, and her analysis of his thoughts. The ailing person notices that he is being watched by the poet, and knows that she is aware of the truth-- that he is dying. For beyond the "moment's pause" from forced conversation and gaiety, he and Millay both see "The sunny sky, the skimming bird beneath, / And, fronting on your windows hopelessly, / Black in the noon, the broad estates of Death."

The dying lover symbolizes man trying to hold on to memories of youth in order to face death. He sings an old song which reminds him of his days of vigor. Above all, he tries to hide his fear. There is truth in this action. Often, when death seems near, one hides from it in the shelter of remembrances. These remembrances make the darkness seem less ominous.

The bleakness of Millay's portrayal of age and death is heightened by the hopelessness of the final couplet of the poem. The "moment's pause" becomes a moment of reprieve. And it is made more tragic by the glimpse of the "sunny sky", a clear view of the beauty and joy of life and youth. But this glimpse is blotted out by the assurance of death which the dying person sees only too clearly.

"The last night that she lived", by Emily Dickinson,

is another poem which records the way death looks to those who observe it, and the difficulty of accepting it. The first lines employ understatement: "The last night that she lived,/ It was a common night,/ Except the dying." The poet goes on to say that the death scene made nature seem different. The experience changes the onlookers' view of life. They begin to notice insignificant things which, had circumstances been different, would have gone unnoticed. But now, everything about the night, the room, and the dying person is "italicized" because of "this great light upon our mind". The last phrase is interesting. It implies that the spectacle of death is an enlightening one. Moreover, it contrasts with Edna St. Vincent Millay's frequent use of darkness to describe the same situation.

The third verse of the poem depicts the grief of the spectators. They are jealous that the woman could die, and is "so nearly infinite", while they must continue to exist. The onlookers question the justice of her death, while others less worthy live.

Then Dickinson describes the woman's last living moments in an ingenious way. "We waited while she passed" is a calm, untraumatic statement. "It was a narrow time", is a typically Dickinsonian phrase, in its compactness, understatement, and implications. It is the short time and space which divides life from death. Moreover, it implies the tenseness of the

living as they observe a loved one dying. The spectators' souls were "too jostled. . .to speak". The word "soul" depicts the persons' whole being, and the extent of the chaotic condition which now characterizes the mourners. There was nothing to be said, for the shock of realization which accompanied the friend's death leaves them mute. Finally the "notice" came. Emily Dickinson does not say where the signal which calls one to death comes from. Nevertheless, the word "notice" is an interesting one; it is a formal word which denotes a call, which is naturally, not rebelliously, responded to. The next few lines are one of Miss Dickinson's most vivid descriptions of the actual moment of death, and the manner in which they should be faced.

She mentioned, and forgot;
Then lightly as a reed
Bent to the water, shivered scarce,
Consented, and was dead.

There is no indication of suffering, and the only suggestion of a hesitancy to die is in the word "shivered". But "shivered" gives the poem a human quality, and makes the dying subject more than a personification of fearlessness in the face of death. The woman, after showing the slightest fear, meets the end in a calm, assured manner, rather than trying desperately to hold on to existence. She agrees to die without a struggle. Adjustment is left to the living.

The final verse is a poignant reminder of the suffering of the living. It is they who must arrange the hair and the lifeless body, and prepare for the funeral. But this is not the most difficult time. Rather, it is when they are no longer busy that they must rearrange their own faith:

And we, we placed the hair
And drew the head erect;
And then an awful leisure was,
Our faith to regulate.

This is not hysteria. It is a dignified search for consolation and meaning by people who must face the loss of a loved one. Clearly, this poem concerns the survivors view of the death and its significance to their lives. Emily Dickinson carefully understates her theme, even in the final lines. But the intensity of feeling is present. The mourners were brought to the very edge of death, and must regain a sense of stability in life and go on living again. The restraint of the poet's presentation of such a tormenting experience heightens the pathos. Emily Dickinson faces the agony of loss with dignity.

Emily Dickinson considered death an exciting experience. Its mystery attracted her. However, she was aware of its ambivalent character to the survivors. They are faced with the knowledge that perhaps death is desirable. But they are also faced with the task of overcoming grief. Emily Dickinson treats this dilemma in "So proud she was to die". "Proud" expresses the poet's attitude

towards dying. The experience was an ennobling one. She said elsewhere that one must "claim the rank to die", and called death the "one dignity delayed for all". The mourners feel shame that their selfish desire that the woman might not die is so foreign to her own wishes. For she is "satisfied to go/ Where none of us should be". This expresses the paradox. It seems to the onlookers strange that the dying person should be so content to leave them, when they are so eager to have her remain. Seeing this, Dickinson says, "Immediately, that anguish stooped/ Almost to jealousy". The dignity and anticipation with which the woman meets death, almost makes the onlookers forget their own feelings and feel envious that ahead of the dying person is an experience which evokes so much pride and desire. That the anguish "stooped" to jealousy implies that Miss Dickinson considers suffering too a beneficial experience, which sometimes gives way to a lesser emotion. Again the poet affirms her belief in the hopefulness of death. Though to the mourners it might seem undesirable and unworthy of their loved one, to those who face it with courage it becomes an ennobling event.

Acceptance and rebellion

The last two poems I shall treat are characteristic of the general attitudes towards dying which I have tried to point out in this paper. "Dirge without Music",

by Millay, is a bitter condemnation of the justice of death. On the other hand, "Twas an old road", by Dickinson, is a calm, dignified picture of death, and the restrained suffering which accompanies it.

Millay often lashed out against the unfairness of death. An acceptance of the law was impossible for her in light of the destruction it could produce. There was no excuse for the anguish of loss. "Dirge Without Music" expresses the poet's position. "I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground." This might well be Edna St. Vincent Millay's most characteristic statement about death. She realized that it is part of the natural order. It is not just that the dust claims all, the best as well as the worst of men. The dead person becomes "one with the dull, the indiscriminate dust./ A fragment of what you felt, of what you knew,/ A formula, a phrase remains." The living will remember words and deeds of the deceased. But this is nothing when compared with the loss. It is as meaningless as the trite obituary uttered at his funeral--"A good man". And although one can remember a formula, "the best is lost." The agony remains in spite of any knowledge of death one possesses. Into the earth the dead go to feed the roses. Here again, Millay relates death to nature. Roses are elegant and fragrant. But that is not enough. One cannot approve of death by citing laws.

"More precious was the light in your eyes than all the roses in the world." Laws will not ease the pain. Suggested in the image of the roses is a casket covered with flowers. The next line, "down, down, down into the darkness of the grave", complements the idea. The flowers go with the loved one into the earth. But they will return. He will not. All men are mortal. "The beautiful, the tender, the kind" all go quietly into the ground, for they have no more life in them to fight death. But the poet, in a final rebellious cry, will oppose death for them. She will be the one to question the justice of the law: "I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned."

"Twas an old road" is a curious and attractive picture of death. It is an excellent poem, and one which deserves careful consideration. The poet presents dying as it might be seen through the eyes of the living; and, most important, as it was seen by Miss Dickinson herself. She follows the trail of death, and exactly catches the mixed emotions which accompany it. The transition from life to death is seen as an "old road/ Through pain." It is not an easy path, but one full of briars and curves. It is "unfrequented". The implication here is not that few people travel the road, but that each must travel it alone. The experience was, to Miss Dickinson, one which must be endured in solitude. The poem goes on to assert that the road

"stops at Heaven", and suggests that the ruggedness of the way is compensated for by its destination. A woman is travelling the path of death in the next verse. She stops in a small town to rest. This portrayal of death by Dickinson shows her lack of fear and dismay at the prospect. It is a quaint thought that one may pause for a moment on the way towards death and renew one's vigor. The poet continues to watch the trail--the footsteps are closer together. After resting for a moment, the woman hurries on to her destination. But then, "not so swift,/ Slow---Slow--as feet did weary go,/ Then stopped,---no other track." The hesitation of the dying person at this point shifts the mood. As she nears heaven she becomes tired and frightened. And then, almost as if she were taken up by angels, the tracks end. The living can trace the route of the dying no further. The mystery of death and heaven cannot be revealed to an onlooker.

The next stanza is significant in its meaning. The poet notices objects which the dead has left behind her. Her book has "The leaf at love turned back", suggesting that the deceased had a great capacity for love. And nearby is one of her hats, and "this worn shoe that fits the track--Herself, though,---fled." The dying woman divested herself of all earthly things as she approached death and heaven. She left behind, when she died, everything, even her shoes. The track

stopped. And the woman, eager to meet death, rushed with open arms, it is implied, into death. The word "fled" in this poem, is reminiscent of the phrase "as thou flee" in "We cover thee, sweet face." The suggestion, too, is the same. When one gets close to death, and sees it clearly, one will embrace it.

The final verse affirms the personal nature of this poem, as well as presenting another simile for the phenomena of death. It is compared to going to sleep:

Another bed, a short one
 Women make tonight
 In chambers bright,
 Too out of sight, though
 For our hoarse Good Night
 To touch her hand.

The body is covered in her bed. Also suggested in this image is the grave. But in another realm, women make up a bed which will not be used long; for the woman will awaken from death in the splendour of heaven. Emily Dickinson's last three lines picture her suffering. The "hoarse Good Night" exactly expresses her pain. And the glorious room of heaven is too far away for the deceased to hear the choked farewell, and feel the touch of a loving hand on her own still one.

Such is death: A short peaceful sleep. And the agony which accompanies it should not be expressed by a passionate display by the bedside. Rather, it is simply pictured as saying a last "Good Night", full of dignity and restraint, as well as pain. This is

a key poem in an understanding of Emily Dickinson's feelings both of death and of one's reactions to the loss of a loved one.

The death poems of Emily Dickinson and Edna St. Vincent Millay denote different views of life. For poetry is the way it is written, and the attitudes it exhibits; and a philosophy of life usually expands into a philosophy of death. Emily Dickinson saw little of the outside world. She was a shy, quiet lady who claimed to see life "New Englandly". Even though she led a secluded life, she was anything but naive about death. Instead, she had the strength of a knowledge of how one should die. Millay, on the other hand, had a less certain grasp of life. She is to be admired for her qualities as a fighter, and for the poignancy displayed in many of her poems. Also, she often displayed an understanding of the character of grief. But on the whole, her poetry lacks the depth and dignity of Miss Dickinson's.

Contrasting moods caused the two women to write different kinds of poems. Perhaps it is the fact that Emily Dickinson held back her emotions, that she had an "air of ought" which Edna St. Vincent Millay lacked, that causes her to emerge as the greater poet. Her anguish upon viewing the spectacle of death was fully as overwhelming as Millay's. But her treatment of this anguish was far more constructive

and universal. And the self-pity and shrill cries of grief which sometimes pervade Millay's death pieces are absent in Dickinson's.

Where death was degrading to Millay, it was ennobling to Dickinson. Millay fought death; Dickinson welcomed it. Where Millay expressed her agony emotionally, Dickinson met the experience of suffering with restraint. Millay rebelled; Dickinson accepted.

I shall die, but that is all I shall do
for Death! ---

---Edna St. Vincent Millay

How pomp surpassing ermine
When simple you and I
Present our meek escutcheon
And claim the rank to die!

---Emily Dickinson

POEMS DISCUSSED IN THIS PAPER

1. "After great pain, a formal feeling comes"
2. "The Solid Sprite Who Stands Alone"
3. "Twas comfort in her dying room"
4. "Elegy"
5. "Elegy Before Death"
6. Sonnet clxxiii
7. Sonnet iii
8. "Except to heaven she is naught."
9. "The bustle in the house"
10. "Lament"
11. SONNETS FROM AN UNGRAFTED TREE-XIV
12. SONNETS FROM AN UNGRAFTED TREE-XVII
13. "Childhood is the Kingdom where Nobody Dies"
14. "We cover thee, sweet face"
15. "Death sets a thing significant"
16. "If anybody's friend be dead"
17. "Their height in heaven comforts not."
18. "I meant to find her when I came"
19. "Gone over to the enemy now"
20. "At Least, My Dear"
21. "I shall know why"
22. "To know just how he suffered would be dear"
23. Sonnet xxxvii
24. "The last night that she lived"
25. "So proud she was to die"
26. "This that would greet"
27. "Dirge Without Music"
28. "Twas an old road"

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?

The feet, mechanical, go round--
A wooden way
Of ground, or air of ought--
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like stone--

This is the hour of lead--
Remembered, if outlived,
As freezing persons recollect the snow--
First the Chill, then the Stupor, then the letting go.

.

THE SOLID SPRITE WHO STANDS ALONE

The solid sprite who stands alone,
And walks the world with equal stride,
Grieve though he may, is not undone
Because a friend has died.

He knows that man is born to care,
And ten and threescore's all his span;
And this is comfort and to spare
For such a level man.

He is not made like crooked me,
Who cannot rise nor life my head,
And all because what had to be
Has been, what lived is dead;

Who lie among my tears and rust,
And all because a mortal brain
That loved to think, is clogged with dust,
And will not think again.

.

'Twas comfort in her dying room
To hear the living clock,
A short relief to have the wind
Walk boldly up and knock,
Diversion from the dying theme
To hear the children play,
But wrong, the mere
That these could live,---
And This of ours must die!

.

ELEGY

Let them bury your big eyes
In the secret earth securely,
Your thin fingers, and your fair,
Soft, indefinite-colored hair,--
All of these in some way, surely,
From the secret earth shall rise;
Not for these I sit and stare,
Broken and bereft completely;
Your young flesh that sat so neatly
On your little bones will sweetly
Blossom in the air.

But your voice. . . never the rushing
Of a river underground,
Not the rising of the wind
In the trees before the rain,
Not the woodcock's watery call,
Not the note the white-throat utters,
Not the feet of children pushing
Yellow leaves along the gutters
In the blue and bitter fall,
Shall content my musing mind
For the beauty of that sound
That in no new way at all
Ever will be heard again.

Sweetly through the sappy stalk
Of the vigorous weed,
Holding all it held before,
Cherished by the faithful sun,
On and on eternally
Shall your altered fluid run,
Bud and bloom and go to seed;
But your singing days are done;
But the music of your talk
Never shall the chemistry
Of the secret earth restore.
All your lovely words are spoken.
Once the ivory box is broken,
Beats the golden bird no more.

ELEGY BEFORE DEATH

There will be rose and rhododendron
When you are dead and under ground;
Still will be heard from white syringas
Heavy with bees, a sunny sound;

Still will the tamaracks be raining
After the rain has ceased, and still
Will there be robins in the stubble,
Grey sheep upon the warm green hill.

Spring will not ail nor autumn falter;
Nothing will know that you are gone,--
Saving alone some sullen plough-land
None but yourself sets foot upon;

Saving the may-weed and the pig-weed
Nothing will know that you are dead,--
These, and perhaps a useless wagon
Standing beside some tumbled shed.

Oh, there will pass with your great passing
Little of beauty not your own,--
Only the light from common water,
Only the grace from simple stone!

.

clxxiii

Now sits the autumn cricket in the grass,
And on the gravel crawls the chilly bee;
Near to its close and none too soon for me
Draws the dull year, in which has come to pass
The changing of the happy child I was
Into this quiet creature people see
Stitching a seam with careful industry
To deaden you, who died on Michaelmas.
Ages ago the purple aconite
Laid its dark hoods about it on the ground,
And roses budded small and were content;
Swallows are south long since and out of sight;
With you the phlox and asters also went;
Nor can my laughter anywhere be found.

.

Mindful of you the sodden earth in spring,
 And all the flowers that in the springtime grow;
 And dusty roads, and thistles, and the slow
 Rising of the round moon; all throats that sing
 The summer through, and each departing wing,
 And all the nests that the bared branches show;
 And all winds that in any weather blow,
 And all the storms that the four seasons bring.
 You go no more on your exultant feet
 Up paths that only mist and morning knew;
 Or watch the wind, or listen to the beat
 Of a bird's wings too high in air to view,--
 But you were something more than young and sweet
 And fair,--and the long year remembers you.

.

Except to heaven, she is nought;
 Except for angels, lone;
 Except to some wide-wandering bee,
 A flower superfluous blown;

Except for winds, provincial;
 Except by butterflies,
 Unnoticed as a single dew
 That on the acre lies.

The smallest housewife in the grass,
 Yet take her from the lawn,
 And somebody has lost the face
 That made existence home!

.

The bustle in a house
 The morning after death
 Is solemnest of industries
 Enacted upon earth,---

The sweeping up the heart,
 And putting love away
 We shall not want to use again
 Until eternity.

.

LAMENT

Listen, children:
Your father is dead.
From his old coats
I'll make you little jackets;
I'll make you little trousers
From his old pants.
There'll be in his pockets
Things he used to put there,
Keys and pennies
Covered with tobacco;
Dan shall have the pennies
To save in his bank;
Anne shall have the keys
To make a pretty noise with.
Life must go on,
And the dead be forgotten;
Life must go on,
Though good men die;
Anne, eat your breakfast;
Dan, take your medicine;
Life must go on;
I forget just why.

.

SONNETS FROM AN UNGRAFTED TREE

XVI

The doctor asked her what she wanted done
With him, that could not lie there many days.
And she was shocked to see how life goes on
Even after death, in irritating ways;
And mused how if he had not died at all
'Twould have been easier--then there need not be
The stiff disorder of a funeral
Everywhere, and the hideous industry,
And crowds of people calling her by name
And questioning her, she's never seen before,
But only watching by his bed once more
And sitting silent if a knocking came. . .
She said at length, feeling the doctor's eyes,
"I don't know what you do exactly when a person
dies."

.

XVII

Gazing upon him now, severe and dead,
It seemed a curious thing that she had lain
Beside him many a night in that cold bed,
And that had been which would not be again.
From that desirous body the great heat
Was gone at last, it seemed, and the taut nerves
Loosened forever. Formally the sheet
Set forth for her today those heavy curves
And lengths familiar as the bedroom door.
She was as one who enters, sly, and proud,
To where her husband speaks before a crowd,
And sees a man she never saw before--
The man who eats his victuals at her side,
Small, and absurd, and hers; for once, not hers,
unclassified.

.

CHILDHOOD IS THE KINGDOM
WHERE NOBODY DIES

Childhood is not from birth to a certain age and
at a certain age
The child is grown, and puts away childish things.
Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies.

Nobody that matters, that is. Distant relatives
of course
Die, whom one never has seen or has seen for an hour,
And they gave one candy in a pink-and-green striped
bag, or a jack-knife,
And went away, and cannot really be said to have
lived at all.

And cats die. They lie on the floor and lash
their tails,
And their reticent fur is suddenly all in motion
With fleas that one never knew were there,
Polished and brown, knowing all there is to know,
Trekking off into the living world.
You fetch a shoe-box, but it's much too small,
because she won't curl up now:
So you find a bigger box, and bury her in the
yard, and weep.

But you do not wake up a month from then, two months
A year from then, two years, in the middle of the night
And weep, with your knuckles in your mouth, and say
Oh, God! Oh, God!
Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies that
matters,--mothers and fathers don't die.

CHILDHOOD IS THE KINGDOM--Cont.

And if you have said, "For heaven's sake, must you
always be kissing a person?"
Or, "I do wish to gracious you's stop tapping on
the window with your thimble!"
Tomorrow, or even the day after tomorrow if you're
busy having fun,
Is plenty of time to say, "I'm sorry, mother."

To be grown up is to sit at the table with people
who have died, who neither listen nor speak;
Who do not drink their tea, though they always said
Tea was such a comfort.

Run down into the cellar and bring up the last jar
of raspberries; they are not tempted.
Flatter them, ask them what was it they said exactly
That time, to the bishop, or to the overseer, or to
Mrs. Mason; They are not taken in.
Shout at them, get red in the face, rise,
Drag them up out of their chairs by their stiff
shoulders and shake them and yell at them;
They are not startled, they are not even embarrassed;
they slide back into their chairs.

Your tea is cold now.
You drink it standing up,
And leave the house.

.

We cover thee, sweet face.
Not that we tire of thee,
But that thyself fatigue of us;
Remember, as thou flee,
We follow thee until
Thou notice us no more,
And then, reluctant, turn away
To con thee o'er and o'er,
And blame the scanty love
We were content to show,
Augmented, sweet, a hundred fold
If thou would'st take it now.

.

Death sets a thing significant
The eye had hurried by,
Except a perished creature
Entreat us tenderly

To ponder little workmanships
In crayon or in wool,
With "This was last her fingers did,"
Industrious until

DEATH SETS A THING SIGNIFICANT--Cont.

The thimble weighed too heavy,
The stitches stopped themselves,
And then 'twas put among the dust
Upon the closet shelves.

A book I have, a friend gave,
Whose pencil, here and there,
Had notched the place that pleased him,--
At rest his fingers are.

Now, when I read, I read not,
For interrupting tears
Obliterate the etchings
Too costly for repairs.

.

If anybody's friend be dead,
It's sharpest of the theme
The thinking how they walked alive,
At such and such a time.

Their costume, of a Sunday,
Some manner of the hair,--
A prank nobody knew but them,
Lost, in the sepulchre.

How warm they were on such a day;
You almost feel the date,
So short way off it seems; and now,
They're centuries from that.

How pleased they were at what you said;
You try to touch the smile,
And dip your fingers in the frost;
When was it, can you tell,

You asked the company to tea,
Acquaintance, just a few,
And chatted close with this grand thing
That don't remember you?

Past bows and invitations,
Past interview, and vow,
Past what ourselves can estimate,--
That makes the quick of woe!

.

Their height in heaven comforts not,
Their glory nought to me;
'T was best imperfect, as it was;
I'm finite, I can't see.

The house of supposition,
The glimmering frontier
That skirts the acres of perhaps,
To me show insecure.

The wealth I had contented me;
If 't was a meaner size,
Then I had counted it until
It pleased my narrow eyes.

Better than larger values,
However true their show;
This timid life of evidence
Keeps pleading, "I don't know."

.

I meant to find her when I came;
Death had the same design;
But the success was his, it seems,
And the discomfit mine.

I meant to tell her how I longed
For just this single time;
But Death had told her so the first,
And she had hearkened him.

To wander now is my abode;
To rest,--to rest would be
A privilege of hurricane
To memory and me.

.

Gone over to the enemy now and marshalled against me
Is my best friend.
What hope have I to hold with my narrow back
This town, whence all surrender?

Someone within these walls has been in love with Death
longer than I care to say;
It was not you! . . .but he gets in that way.

Gone under cover of darkness, leaving a running track,
And the mark of a dusty paw on all our splendour,
Are they that smote the table with the loudest blow,

GONE OVER TO THE ENEMY---Cont.

Saying, "I will not have it so!"

No, no.

This is the end.

What hope have I?

You, too, led captive and without a cry!

.

At least, my dear,
You did not have to live to see me die.

Considering now how many things I did
that must have caused you pain,
Sweating at certain memories, blushing
dark blood, unable
To gather home my scattered thoughts
that graze the forbidden hills,
cropping the mind-bane,
I cut from the hedge for crook the one
disservice
I never did you,---you never saw me die.

I find in my disorderly files among unfinished
Poems, and photographs of picnics on the
rocks, letters from you in your bold hand.
I find in the pocket of a coat I could not
bring myself to give away
A knotted handkerchief, containing columbine-
seeds.
A few more moments such as these and I shall
have paid all.

Not that you ever---
O, love inflexible, O militant forgiveness,
I know
You kept no books against me! In my own hand
Are written down the sum and the crude
items of my inadequacy.

It is only that there are moments when for
the sake of a little quiet in the brawling
mind I must search out,
Recorded in my favour,
One princely gift.
The most I ever did for you was to outlive you.
But that is much.

.

I shall know why, when time is over,
And I have ceased to wonder why;
Christ will explain each separate anguish
In the fair schoolroom of the sky.

He will tell me what Peter promised,
And I, for wonder at his woe,
I shall forget the drop of anguish
That scalds me now, that scalds me now.

.

To know just how he suffered would be dear;
To know if any human eyes were near
To whom he could intrust his wavering gaze,
Until it settled firm on Paradise.

To know if he was patient, part content,
Was dying as he thought, or different;
Was it a pleasant day to die,
And did the sunshine face his way?

What was his furthest mind, of home, or God,
Or what the distant say
At news that he ceased human nature
On such a day?

And wishes, had he any?
Just his sign, accented,
Had been legible to me.
And was he confident until
Ill fluttered out in everlasting well?

And if he spoke, what name was best,
What first,
What one broke off with
At the drowsiest?

Was he afraid, or tranquil?
Might he know
How conscious consciousness could grow,
Till love that was, and love too blest to be,
Meet---and the junction be Eternity?

.

Your face is like a chamber where a king
 Dies of his wounds, untended and alone,
 Stifling with courteous gesture the crude moan
 That speaks too loud of mortal perishing,
 Rising on elbow in the dark to sing
 Some rhyme now out of season but well known
 In days when banners in his face were blown
 And every woman had a rose to fling.
 I know that through your eyes which look on me
 Who stand regarding you with pitiful breath,
 You see beyond the moment's pause, you see
 The sunny sky, the skimming bird beneath,
 And, fronting on your windows hopelessly,
 Black in the noon, the broad estates of Death.

.

The last night that she lived,
 It was a common night,
 Except the dying; this to us
 Made nature different.

We noticed smallest things,--
 Things overlooked before,
 By this great light upon our minds
 Italicized, as 't were.

That others could exist
 Whiler she must finish quite,
 A jealousy for her arose
 So nearly infinite.

We waited while she passed;
 It was a narrow time,
 Too jostled were our souls to speak,
 At length the notice came.

She mentioned, and forgot;
 Then lightly as a reed
 Bent to the water, shivered scarce,
 Consented, and was dead.

And we, we placed the hair,
 And drew the head erect;
 And then an awful leisure was,
 Our faith to regulate.

.

So proud she was to die
 It made us all ashamed
 That what we cherished, so unknown
 To her desire seemed.

So satisfied to go
 Where none of us should be,
 Immediately, that anguish stooped

SO PROUD SHE WAS TO DIE--Cont.

Almost to jealousy.

.

This that would greet an hour ago
Is quaintest distance now.
Had it a guest from paradise
Nor glow would it, nor bow;

Had it a summons from the noon
Nor beam would it, nor warm--
Match me the silver reticence!
Match me the solid calm!

.

DIRGE WITHOUT MUSIC

I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving
hearts in the hard ground.
So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been, time
out of mind:

Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely.
Crowned
With lilies and with laurel they go; but I am not
resigned.

Lovers and thinkers, into the earth with you.
Be one with the dull, the indiscriminate dust.
A fragment of what you felt, of what you knew,
A formula, a phrase remains,--but the best is lost.

The answers quick and keen, the honest look, the laughter,
the love,---
They are gone. They are gone to feed the roses.
Elegant and curled
Is the blossom. Fragrant is the blossom. I know.
But I do not approve.
More precious was the light in your eyes than all
the roses in the world.

Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the
kind;
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the
brave.
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not
resigned.

.

Twas the old road
Through pain,
That unfrequented one
With many a turn and thorn
That stops at Heaven.

This was the town
She passed;
There, where she rested last,
Then stepped more fast,
The little tracks close pressed.

Then--not so swift,
Slow--slow--as feet did
Weary go,
Then stopped--no other track.

Wait! Look! Her little book
The leaf at love turned back,
The very hat
And this worn shoe
Just fits the track---
Herself, though--fled.

Another bed, a short one
Women make to-night
In chambers bright,
Too out of sight, though,
For our hoarse Good Night
To touch her hand.

.