Universidad Zaragoza
1542

Undergraduate Dissertation

Emily Dickinson and Trauma: in the Search of Healing in the Apeirogon of the Theme of Death

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June 2023

Abstract: This dissertation focuses on Emily Dickinson's poetry to substantiate how trauma, arisen from her environment, affects both the content and form of her poems. As a trauma writer, the poetess resorts to the powers of scriptotherapy to be able to cope with reality by means of providing boundless interpretations on the theme of death. For that, Dickinson deviates from the traditional association of death with hell and supplies it with diverse meanings: a thunderous path towards a soothing rebirth, a relief, a ruthless enemy, or a caring figure who offers one's liberation from the handcuffs of trauma. Sometimes, trauma is embodied in the figure of death as a theater of mortality, a witty insect who mercilessly kills a defenseless tree, or a kind suitor who takes the poetic speaker on a date. Therefore, Dickinson's infinite portrayals of death mirror her relentless attempts to write about and heal the trauma that was very much present in her life and works.

Key Words: Trauma — Death — Poetry — Scriptotherapy

Resumen: Este trabajo se basa en la poesía de Emily Dickinson para evidenciar cómo el trauma, surgido en su entorno, afecta tanto el contenido como la forma de sus poemas. Como escritora del trauma, la poeta recurre a los poderes de la escritura terapéutica para poder lidiar con la realidad por medio de infinitas interpretaciones sobre el tema de la muerte. Para ello, Dickinson se desvía de la asociación tradicional de la muerte con el infierno y le impregna diferentes significados: un estrepitoso sendero que culmina en el apaciguador renacimiento, un alivio, un enemigo despiadado o una figura solícita que ofrece la liberación del preso, desencadenándole de las esposas del trauma. A veces, el trauma se personifica en la figura de la muerte como un teatro de la mortalidad, un ingenioso insecto que mata sin piedad a un árbol indefenso o se disfraza de un pretendiente amable que lleva al yo lírico a una cita. Por lo tanto, las representaciones infinitas de la muerte reflejan los intentos persistentes de Dickinson de ilustrar sobre papel y curar el trauma que es tan presente en su vida y obras.

Palabras clave: Trauma — Muerte — Poesía — Escritura terapéutica

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INTRODUCTION

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (1830-1886) is one of America's most celebrated female poets and despite her short life, her eccentric mysteriousness has elicited fathomless scholarly works. Her literature has been explored from many perspectives. Burbick examines the influence of religion in the content and form of her poetry (62); Ourfali analyzes Dickinson's role as a pioneer feminist (17), and Pohl investigates the identity of the source of inspiration in her love poems (468). However, as I will analyze in the first chapter of this dissertation, trauma, brought on by the constant presence of death in both Dickinson's life and poetry, is one of the approaches that has received less attention. Although a traumatic event is easy to identify, Dulmus and Hilarski state that there is no consensus about what can be considered "a trauma-producing event", because the meaning of trauma consists of "one's perception of an event that when combined with their attributional response clearly individualizes when an event will be a trauma-producing occurrence" (29). Therefore, it can be said that the poetess experienced many stressors of trauma from juvenescence: unloving parents, seclusiveness, patriarchal society, nearby deaths, melancholia, and eye disease. These stressors can be contemplated as factors that have contributed to having a trauma. Consequently, Dickinson acquired a special affinity for and obsession with death which helped her overcome the situation. In fact, Logan states that the poetess wrote one hundred and fifty poems that start with the pronoun I, out of which some have the theme of death as central, and this makes the act of dying a very personal experience (542). The ceaseless presence of such a theme given in her poems can be translated into an unveiled trauma which she tried to overcome by providing different interpretations of it. That is, Dickinson attempted to heal her trauma by means of writing about it and giving her poems so many perspectives on death that such a quantity can be compared to an apeirogon, i.e. a geometrical figure with boundless sides. Moreover, if we consider her distinctive writing style, trauma is also reflected in the form of

her poems. Thus, she used literature as therapy to better understand her trauma that is difficult to verbalize with exactitude and directly, since more often than not, she extrapolates her experience to the poems in an oblique way.

This paper analyzes the notion of trauma in Emily Dickinson and how it is reflected through the different interpretations of death used in both the form and content of her poems as a way of scriptotherapy. In order to support this claim, a theoretical approach to explain and comprehend Dickinson's trauma will be introduced in the following section. It attempts to exemplify the importance of trauma in her poems through the theme of death and how the poetess uses it as scriptotherapy in order to deal with reality. This section will be followed by three chapters that explore Dickinson's intricate and unique interpretations of her trauma process symbolized by the theme of death. Simultaneously, the chapters will first provide a literal interpretation of the poems, which will be followed by another perspective from the standpoint of trauma studies which will explain how the poetess encrypts her trauma in the poems. Therefore, the first chapter presents death as a new cycle. The poetess adds the connotation of triumph to it because the traumatic life can be overcome by writing about it or it can be considered as the beginning of a new self. The subject of the second chapter is the antithesis of death as a paradise after an agonizing life and an impending enemy destined to ruthlessly kill people. The third chapter focuses on Dickinson's personification of death as a theater, a kind gentleman and an insect. Lastly, the final remarks will round off the main points about trauma and how it affects the poem's content and form.

CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL APPROACH: UNDERSTANDING EMILY DICKINSON'S TRAUMA

"There are wounds that never show on the body that are deeper and more hurtful than anything that bleeds."

—*Laurell K. Hamilton* (Mistral's Kiss)

As explained in the introduction, trauma is not only about an overwhelming event but also one's perception about it. There are several trauma stressors (patriarchal society, unloving fathers, eye disease or melancholia) in Dickinson's life and poetry and this enables us to consider the poetess as a trauma writer. However, if we consider that she was born in a century of devastating illnesses, death is undoubtedly one of the most important stressors. Moreover, it has to be added that Dickinson was marked by her mother's severe paralytic psychic shock. This will affect some of her letters and poems, in which she presents herself as a mad person with suicidal attempts (Wells 317). For example, in "I Felt a Funeral in My Brain" (280), the poetic speaker's reason is overwhelmed by irrationality and her/his body is metaphorically treated as a funeral or a shock after a traumatic experience, since there is a dissociation between body and mind. Due to these factors, Dickinson developed such a special affinity for death and pain which, according to Hect (29:12-29:42), made Dickinson write from the perspective of the dead, as if she did it posthumously.

The terror she felt in September 1862 can be considered as one of the most conclusive evidence of Dickinson's potential trauma: "I had a terror since September, I could tell to none; and so I sing, as the boy does by the burying ground, because I am afraid" (Johnson 172). This piece of letter is one of the most cryptic, yet most studied because of its ambiguous meaning. In the process of deciphering it, some scholars argue that the reason for her terror could be her unrequited love, her oppressive home situation (Archer 256) or her eye ailment,

exotropia (Wand and Sewall 402). However, after examining the poem "The first Day's Night had come—" (410), written in the same year as the letter, Legarda associates the terror that destroyed Dickinson's soul with a possible sexual assault, finding it very concerning. Moreover, after reading and analyzing her complete works, Legarda arrives to the conclusion that the poetess suffered several episodes of sexual assault which she silenced and "bandaged" (l.17); ergo, they can be considered as trauma. This is conveyed in "Rearrange a 'Wife's" affection!" (1737), where Dickinson strongly wishes to embody masculinity to be able to secure her safety and prevent future sexual assaults.

On this basis, it can be said that the standpoint on trauma studies is useful to illustrate the trauma in Dickinson's poetry and how she used it as a way to cope with reality. Trauma is defined as "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events" (Caruth 4). Furthermore, Herman defines it as "an affliction of the powerless", since its colossal impact leaves the individual vulnerable (24). As a result, when a person undergoes trauma, the mind is not able to process the import of the harrowing event because its "mechanism of awareness and cognition are destroyed" (Leys 4). It is important to note that trauma is only assimilated or confronted dilatorily because firstly, it is repressed and then, it haunts the individual insistently and unwillingly.

It can be said that living with trauma is composed of two crucial moments: acting out and working through. Theorists like LaCapra define the former as being the aftermath of trauma in which its victims "become 'stuck' in the past and live a restricted life characterized by hypervigilance and a desire for security" (Schick 1842). In this unconscious process, trauma manifests in the repetitive emergence of "intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event" (Caruth 4). Additionally, the individual is unable to distinguish the past from the present because, for Crownshaw, trauma "defies witnessing, cognition, conscious recall and representation" (219). Such a process of acting out can be

applied to Dickinson because of the following. Firstly, most of her poetry is saturated with the theme of death. Secondly, the different interpretations of such a theme mirror the poetess' inability to give a definite and ultimate definition of what death represents for her. For example, in "A Death blow is a Life blow to Some" (816), death symbolizes renaissance from a life full of agony; in "A Clock stopped—" (287), death is presented as a malevolent non-selective enemy that devours its prey, or in "Unit, like Death, for Whom?" (408), death is presented as a theater. This can be equated to the process in which a traumatized person tries to tell or recall the traumatic event. That is, due to the impossibility of verbalizing with exactitude a traumatic event (the narration and the chronological order are continuously interrupted), the victim will retell it in different ways, ending up in a ceaseless inconclusiveness.

The poems that are going to be analyzed in this paper can be considered as a process to work through grief, i.e trying to overcome and heal the trauma by means of narrativizing it. This method, subsequent to acting out, is known as the working-through phase. Kurtz, taking Freud's definition, portrays this concept as "the process by which a patient could move past neurotic repetition by means of the restoration of memory, a proper mental ordering of the past in temporal relation to the present" (34). Moreover, Herman in her three stage model, states that this reconnection of the fragmented self by means of therapeutic usage of literature is important because it allows for the possibility of creating a "new self [...] and new relationships" (141). Simultaneously, she stresses the importance of the mourning stage because "the failure to complete the normal process of grieving perpetuates the traumatic reaction" (50). That is, the act of verbalizing and reconstructing the story in a detailed way is key to overcoming the trauma because otherwise, the victim will be stagnated in a constant acting out.

On this basis, the ever-present death and the poet's traumatic experiences led Dickinson to use poetry as her response and vehicle to be able to confront her harrowing experiences and/or environment. Pennebaker and Smith point out that scriptotherapy is a process of consciously internalizing and analyzing those experiences (21). This would explain the recurrent theme of death in Dickinson, since trauma is a complex process that requires time to be overcome. Moreover, using literature as healing, for Kurtz, is a unique and productive vehicle because it allows the possibility of expressing one's trauma in a different way from the normal language (8). In this case, Dickinson expressed her trauma by using several interpretations of death. In letter 265 from June 1862, Dickinson alludes to the therapeutic qualities of writing for her psychological condition: "I felt a palsy, here—the Verses just relieve" (in Johnson 174). Added to that, in another letter from June 1869 (330), Dickinson explicitly expresses the strong and unique bond she has developed with her writing: "A Letter always feels to me like Immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend" (in Johnson 196). Therefore, because of her analogy in which she identifies an eternal relationship between her writing and her mind, Dickinson decided to use her writing as her "empathic listener" which, as Caruth affirms, is necessary for the traumatized person to depart from a harrowing experience (10).

Scriptotherapy also shapes her poetic form which, without a shadow of a doubt, is part of Dickinson's idiosyncrasy. Although her style cannot be encapsulated in a few words, some of the most outstanding elements comprise elocutionary punctuation, e.g. inconsistent and erratic use of dashes, unconventional capitalization, hymn meter, obliqueness, telegraphic sentences joined unexpectedly and where each word is vivid due to the variety of symbolism attached to them. Nevertheless, one of the most pivotal elements is compression. The few but enough words in some poems give space for endless interpretations; ergo, an ultimate conclusion is never reached. Therefore, her uniqueness, which was strongly criticized for

being unconventional and unformed due to the usage of unorthodox constructions, can be regarded as her way to cope with her "thorn in the spirit" (Kurtz 3). This is reflected in "Tell all the truth but tell it slant" (1129), where she expresses that the truth should be told in different and covert ways because humans are susceptible to its blinding effect. Moreover, her irregular punctuation—which many have referred to as "talking punctuation" (Wylder 221)—can be connected to a sense of dissociation of the self towards her contemporary writing conventions. Thus, this poem can be interpreted as the epitome of her process of writing, because the rupture of the language, the violent and transgressive punctuation, and the usage of dashes produce a fragmentation which is related to the impossibility to represent experiences that are difficult to grasp.

In conclusion, she used literature as therapy for a better understanding of her traumatic experiences that are difficult to verbalize. This will have an impact on both the content of her poems as she attempts to deal with her trauma through a multitude of ambivalent and complex perspectives on death, and the form of her poems by using unorthodox constructions.

CHAPTER 2: DEATH AS A NEW CYCLE

Death is a recurring theme in Dickinson's poetry. However, her interpretation of it transcends the widespread and negative connotation as the cessation of one's life. Due to her particular affinity for this subject, she puts it in a central position, offering original interpretations (death being a relief or a path towards rebirth) while disguising her trauma. Therefore, this chapter will analyze "How many times these low feet staggered—" (187) and "A Death blow is a Life blow to Some" (816) by providing first a traditional interpretation of the poems and then a reading from the perspective of trauma studies.

In "How many times these low feet staggered—" (187), Dickinson presents the theme of death through mechanical imagery as a relief. The poetic speaker illustrates the demise of an exhausted "Housewife" (l.12) whose feet were often "staggered" (l.1) because of the immense workload around the house. Death has transformed her from a beautiful and energetic woman to motionless because her human ribcage is deprived of life and transmuted into immovable iron materials that are used for making a coffin: "rivet" (l.3) and "hasps of steel" (l.4). Moreover, the "forehead" that once was "hot so often" now is "cool" (l.5), her "fingers" are as rigid as "adamantine" (l.7) and the "thimble" (l.8) that represents the mitigated work done with clothes will never be worn. Although she occupied herself with maintaining the house pristine, she has fallen into oblivion since no one cares to lift her hair or hold her fingers. Furthermore, after her death, she has left behind a house that is empty, mucky, and even the sun must be brave to penetrate through the windows of her house. The last stanza depicts the act of dying as a relief from her regular housekeeping duties or from her circumstances because only death can rescue her from the house given the fact that women in the 19th century were relegated to the domestic sphere.

From the perspective of trauma studies, the text can be interpreted as Dickinson expressing her working-through phase. She puts herself in the figure of a "Housewife" (l.12)

who has always repressed her emotions—"Only the soldered mouth can tell" (l.2)—, inferring that she has carried a burden of trauma similar to Christ's wobbling while carrying the cross. Besides, this allusion suggests that trauma is something external to her, the rest of her environment being the root for her condition. As trauma, a tremendous and external event affects the individual, provoking the mind to stumble. Moreover, the woman is transformed from a living being into a rigid corpse made of metal, indicating the heaviness of the burden and how trauma divests of everything that has life attached to it. Also, when she dies, no one cares to care for her ("—if you care—")– (l.6)–. This can be an analogy to the apathy of the poet's parents regarding Dickinson's mental health, since her diseases were only treated with the rest cure. Once Dickinson has depicted the effects of the trauma on the victim, she provides an image of the status of the mind when inhabited by it: so dark that even the sun hesitates to enter, and there are flies and a "cobweb swings from the ceiling" (l.11). It is interesting to note that the word "Flies" (l.9) in the *Emily Dickinson Lexicon* figuratively refers to "letter writer". This may allude to Dickinson because she also wrote a great amount of letters throughout her life. Moreover, in the same dictionary, "Buzz" (l.9) symbolically means "exhale". As a result, "Buzz the dull flies" (l.9) may refer to the poetic speaker encouraging herself to give vent to her feelings by means of writing as a gateway out of trauma. In the last stanza, after a life of misery, the woman can now lay "in Daisies" (l.12), which typically represent new beginnings and joy. Surprisingly, throughout the letters written in 1862, Dickinson self-referred as Daisy (Logan 557). Therefore, such a word can be interpreted as her transformation into a new self thanks to poetry. Overall, the poetess uses this poem to indicate her working-through phase (explained in chapter one) thanks to the therapeutic powers of scriptotherapy. She manages to transform the trauma's ability to permute everything in grayish colors into a healing process where she can again enjoy the colorfulness of life and "lain" (l.12) in peace. Moreover, the literal meaning of the triumphant

portrayal of the housewife's dying as a deliverance from obscurity relates to her successful accomplishment of being able to get out of trauma's darkness and the victorious feeling that she experiences once she has resorted to scriptotherapy.

In the short poem "A Death blow is a Life blow to Some" (816), Dickinson distances herself from the long-established perspective of death as closure. Instead, she perceives it as a path towards rebirth and growth. Interestingly, the poem conveys the feeling that she is writing from the perspective of a deceased person, because, for her, life only begins at death. As nothing with Dickinson is straightforward and clear, this poem offers room for interpretation. At first sight, the poem refers to her suicidal attempts, hoping that death will bring her some sense of relief and peace, given the fact that Dickinson was surrounded by death and illnesses. However, if trauma studies are applied, the poetic speaker can be identified with Dickinson. She associates trauma with "A Death blow" (l.1) which does not let people feel alive until the "Life blow" (l.1) comes. The latter corresponds to the killing of trauma by writing about it, so that a new cycle begins. Moreover, the poetic speaker conveys the specialness of this moment because it is only at this point, when trauma is overcome through scriptotherapy, that the traumatized victim knows that s/he is alive. This is because at this moment, "Vitality" (l.4) begins and this would be consistent with her poetry, which flourished out of her trauma. This poem can be related to T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, because death is a prerequisite for the "Lilacs" (l.2) or in this case, the fallen mind as a result of trauma, to grow out of the "dead land" (53).

In conclusion, in this chapter Dickinson conceals her trauma under a variety of interpretations of the theme of death. In "How many times these low feet staggered—" (187), the poetess compares the trauma's cosmic load to the weariness of a homemaker which can only be relieved by death. Additionally, the triumphant feeling of overcoming the housewife's difficult life resembles Dickinson's victory over trauma. In "A Death blow is a Life blow to

Some" (816), Dickinson displays death as the beginning of a peaceful path, which counteracts the agony caused by trauma through scriptotherapy.

CHAPTER 3: DEATH AS THE TRIUMPHANT PARADISE VS THE CRUEL ENEMY

Among her attempts to deal with her traumatic experiences in her poetry, Dickinson presents a captivating antithesis of death. On the one hand, she opposed the widely held association of death with hell (McNaughton 208), and in some poems she embodies it as a formidable foe who relentlessly haunts the individual until their soul belongs to him. On the other hand, it is portrayed favorably as a ticket to paradise, a reward that every person should bestow. In this chapter, the poems "I've dropped my Brain—My Soul is numb—" (1046) and "A Clock stopped—" (287) will be given a conventional interpretation and then an analysis which will demonstrate how the poems change their meaning when trauma studies are applied.

In "A Clock stopped—" (287), the literal reading uses the conventional metaphor of the clock (associated with the cycles of life) to indicate death's malevolence when a person is within an ace of passing away. The poetic speaker states that a clock has stopped functioning and it cannot be mended even by Geneva's best professionals. However, it is specified that it is "Not the Mantel's" (l.2), i.e. the physical clock traditionally placed above the fireplace but a clock that represents life. Facing this situation and death's arrival, the figures of the clock experience fear and agony. Moreover, his cruelty transforms the clock from being able to move —"puppet bowing" (l.4)— to lifeless because it is dangling "still" (l.5). Besides, the figures of the clock "quickered out of Decimals—Into Degreeless noon—" (ll.8-9), where the word "Decimals" (l.8) refers to the time of a dying person whose minutes and seconds run out. Consequently, the dead body is left in an absolute coldness because of the analogous movements between "Pendulum of snow" (l.11) and a human heart beating. Despite the attempts of the "Doctors" (l.10) or the clock owner to try to bring the body or the clock to life, the situation cannot be reversed. This brings at the end of the final stanza an anagnorisis for the clock owner. Due to the relationship they had based on "Decades of Arrogance" (l.16),

he has taken clock's life for granted and only now when lifeless he can appreciate its worthiness.

Nonetheless, a second reading from the perspective of trauma studies can be given to this poem. Dickinson wittingly depicts the process and effects of trauma and stresses the inevitability of it in the metaphor of a clock. Firstly, it is noteworthy that the mechanisms of both a clock and a mind can be considered analogous because of the frequent representation of the mind being composed of a clockwork's wheels whose tickings resemble that of a clock's "bowing" (l.4). Therefore, on this basis, the clock corresponds to the healthiness of an individual's mind. The poetess begins the poem by illustrating that when trauma (personified by death) enters the life of a person, their psyche, as the clock, stops working properly. This is because the mind is haunted by invasive memories that are "perpetually re-experienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present" (Leys 2), just as the clock repeats its patterns after completing the twenty-four-hour cycle. That is, as trauma revives past events and impregnates in the individual's mind against their will, the clock's needles will perpetually follow the same route. Therefore, Dickinson uses the clock as a metaphor to illustrate the acting-out phase which stagnates the individual in what Nietzsche calls the myth of the eternal return. Yelle cites his definition of it as "the unconditional and infinitely repeated circular course of things" (179). Thus, both the clock and the traumatized mind live in an endless cycle from which they cannot escape because of the determinism attached to it. Moreover, the poetess reinforces such an idea twice. Firstly, in the several "Nos" (l.13) from the parts of the clock—"Gilded pointers" and "Seconds slim" (ll.14-15)—after the shop-owner's demands for it to function. This oxymoron implies a contradiction because of the unusual action which is attributed to the verb to nod since its meaning is always affirmative. Yet, the negation is not understood by the "Shopman" (l.12) because of the clock's natural condition whose movements only allow right-left. This can also be interpreted as the impossibility of verbalizing a harrowing

experience. However, although the “Shopman” (l.12), who is the owner of the clock and the mind, insists on the clock to function, to overcome trauma, his demands are in vain because the real owner is the mind, since trauma enters first through it. Therefore, the shop owner understanding it as a negation, indicates trauma’s determinism and its inevitability. Secondly, the rhyme that is created with other words such as “noon” (l.9) and “snow” (l.11) strengthen the predestination of a traumatized person to overcome distressing events.

As a consequence of acting out, the mechanisms of both the clock and the mind enter a process of a shivery paralysis which also affects the form of the poem. Dickinson resorts to a frequent repetition of dashes to indicate the victim’s sense of isolation and helplessness when death/trauma knocks at their door, since God’s skill and power are as ineffective as that of the clockmakers in Geneva. Moreover, the isolation of the word “pain” (l.7), located between dashes, highlights the agony the victim suffered during this process and it resembles the “hunch” (l.7) of the clock’s figures. Also, death/trauma incites fear in its victims because of its inevitability and it is beyond their control. Lastly, the message from the last stanza refers to the continuous, arrogant battle when dealing with trauma between the body and the owner of it, that is, the mind.

In contrast, in “I’ve dropped my Brain—My Soul is numb—” (1046), the literal interpretation of the perception of death is rather optimistic. The poetic speaker, who once was “A Breathing Woman” (l.7) experiences a dissociation of both mind and soul which is reinforced by the introduction of a dash. As a result, her veins enter a state of paralysis (cf. letter 265) and her vitality is lifeless because it “is Carved and Cool” (l.5). However, her condition improves when Death sculpts “Carrara” (l.13) in her body, that is, when He exhibits what He can provide her. His offerings awaken a feeling of freedom and liberation which are represented by the act of dancing and the bird. Then, she alludes to the future which she refers to as “Centuries beyond” (l.18). In the future, she will strive to achieve her goals “to Being”,

“Motion” and “Breath” (l.17), even if it will take her decades to overcome any obstacle that will intervene. Moreover, it is at this moment in which she will “shiver” (l.20), that is, will feel movement, alive.

The poem can also be analyzed through the lenses of trauma studies. Dickinson may have extrapolated the woman’s experience from the poem to hers because of the similarity between the paralysis and acting out and the relief from death and the working through phase. The first two stanzas correspond to the effects of trauma’s arrival and how much it can alter a person. Before entering the healthy mind, Dickinson was “Endowed with Paradise” (l.8). However, once the trauma is experienced, she undergoes an acting-out phase in which the mental and spiritual paralysis restrain her from freedom. Her relief to this palsy, which is associated with dancing and feeling as free as a bird, comes when she gets acquainted with writing poetry, and this is referenced as “Death” (l.15). In the literal perspective, the poem states that “Death” (l.15) sculpted “Carrara” (l.13) in her, which can be interpreted that it is poetry that sculpted her to be a new self. Thus, she uses poetry for therapeutic means as a gate for working through her traumas. Moreover, Dickinson mentions the beneficial powers of scriptotherapy, because it allows her to “Being”, “Motion” and “Breath” (l. 17), aspects that trauma wrenched from her. Besides, once she has overcome the trauma thanks to writing poetry, the poetess feels empowerment which, Herman states, constitutes the basis of recovering from trauma (94). This feeling gives her determination to conquer any limit in order to accomplish her goal, even if it is “a Decade” (l.19) because it will provide her the “shiver” (l.20) that trauma once stole from her.

Therefore, in this chapter, Dickinson opposes two unusual concepts of death. On the one hand, death is presented literally as a cruel enemy that inevitably devours its prey, or metaphorically, it symbolizes the acting out phase in which the victims are trapped in an endless repetition, agony, and impossibility of escaping. On the other hand, it can be a ticket

for a rebirth or, in a figurative sense, the discovery of writing as a tool for overcoming a traumatic experience.

CHAPTER 4: EMBODYING DEATH

One of the most alluring and creative interpretations that Dickinson provides of death consists in embodying it. This chapter will explore and analyze the literal and figurative interpretations of the poems "Unit, like Death, for Whom?" (408), "Death is like the insect" (1716), and "Because I could not stop for Death" (712), showing that the personifications of this theme can be considered another approach to dealing with her traumatic experiences where death is a personification of trauma.

In "Unit, like Death, for Whom?" (408), the poetess portrays an imaginative description of death as a theater of mortality in which out of the two tickets that are provided, only one person is allowed to have a seat to see the "performance". The poem begins with the poetic speaker, in a funeral and standing in front of a "unit" (l.1)—coffin—and pondering whose owner it is. This question will never be answered because the grave is "strict" (l.5) and "tells no secret" (l.3). Then, the poetic speaker states that the two tickets that are given belong to the "Bearer" (l.7) and to the "Borne" (l.8), but only the latter is allowed to have a seat in the theater/coffin. In this case, the "Bearer" (l.7) would be death, who acts as a servant, in charge of carrying the corpse to the grave and the "Borne" (l.8) would be the deceased person. After assigning the seats, there are three types of people in the funeral: the "Living" (l.10) who are able to speak; the "Dying" (l.11) who can only moan, and the "Coy Dead" (l.12) who are the speechless dead that "tell no secret" (l.3) because they are the ones that are in the actual vault. Through these three lines, which are overflood by dashes and thus convey fragmentation, the gradual process of experiencing trauma is displayed. It is worth mentioning that the funeral can be a metaphor of the death of the mind. Therefore, the first type that attends this "funeral" is referred to as the "Living" (l.10), and this is an equivalent to her situation previous to the contact with trauma. Dickinson, before getting acquainted with death, is a mentally healthy, talkative person. Once she undergoes several traumatic

experiences, she enters the second phase which coincides with the "Dying" (l.11). This stage is marked by her gradual seclusion and isolation from both family and society. The third phase would correspond to her complete withdrawal/dissociation of the self. This is characterized by the inability to verbalize the respective trauma as the speechless dead who involuntarily attend the funeral. This idea of numbness, being at a loss of words, is further reinforced with the line "No Chatter—here—no tea" (l.13). The word "here" (l.13) may refer to her state of mind while being traumatized, or her own room, where she spent most of her spare time. Nevertheless, "here" (l.13) may also make reference to the funeral per se. Generally, funerals are defined by grieving and a lack of speech on the part of the people attending it. In this poem, on line 15, the funeral is characterized by the following nouns separated by dashes: "Gravity" (of the funeral or even of her own state of mind), "Expectation" (of the events that may happen in the future or to her trauma), and "Fear" (of death). Also, the structure of the poem requires special attention because it begins with a question mark and ends with a statement of complete uncertainty "that All's not sure" (l.16). This can be compared to the effects of trauma in the acting-out phase on the individual's mind. That is, when a mentally healthy person, who at first may have some doubts, experiences trauma, s/he becomes confused about their surroundings, unable to distinguish between past and present and the mind becomes a labyrinth of uncertainties since what at first seems to be undoubtable and solid suddenly becomes unstable.

In "Death is like the insect" (1716), Dickinson embodies Death as a witty insect, who desires to kill the tree. She has decided to portray it as a diminutive object because it is the becoming of existence. That is, death only appears when life has ended and it comes as easily as the insect to the tree. However, the poetic speaker tries to resist Death's intentions by fighting with whatever means, i.e. "Bait it with the balsam" (l.5) or "Seek it with the saw" (l.6). Yet, if Death finally conquers the tree, the individual should surrender since Death

bends the plan to his will because death is not selective. Nonetheless, if the poem is interpreted from the perspective of trauma studies, it evinces Dickinson's acting-out phase where it is implied that although she uses writing as a therapy for overcoming traumatic experiences, her attempt is still unsuccessful. The poetess uses Death as the personification of an insect (a small traumatic event) which harms and haunts the tree until its expiration. Even though the insect/trauma is small in size, it can provoke the absolute decay of a healthy mind. Besides, the insect is the epitome of trauma because it is such a small thing that cannot be predicted. In contrast, the tree is associated with life, prosperity, power, and wisdom, and all of this is eventually killed by the cold-blooded insect/Death. With this poem, Dickinson wants to convey that if a traumatized person exhaustively tries to overcome past experiences and still fails at preventing their mind from entering an abyss, then, the mind should be left at trauma's will. This is because it cannot be overcome, although the individual has attempted to tackle the trauma, even if it costs "Everything you are" (l.8), referring to the healthiness of her mind. Therefore, in the last stanza, she recognizes that faith sometimes wavers since some circumstances are inevitable, as trauma enters one's mind.

Lastly, one of her most eminent poems, "Because I could not stop for Death" (712), has elicited different interpretations, among which, through an extended metaphor, death is personified as a kind suitor that takes the poetic speaker on a date where her grave is the final destination. Although the expected tone is one of anguish and despair, the poetic speaker has a collected attitude and sees her encounter as something to be accepted, as trauma entering someone's life. Dickinson begins the poem by stating that she could not choose the moment to die, although she wondered about it all her life. This doubt is finally resolved when the courteous "Death" (l.1), accompanied by "Immortality" (l.4), arrives at her home in a carriage to pick her up. The latter word can be related to the existential awareness that people are born to die, so death is immortal because it will always be part of the cycle of life. In the second

stanza, the poetic speaker is seduced by death's "Civility" (l.8) and develops such a special love for him that she prioritizes the respective drive over her "labor" and "leisure" (l.7). This can be connected to Dickinson's particular sensitivity towards death. However, although she almost feels thrilled about the denouement of her date, she feels cold and unprepared because of the beautiful garments she wears: "Gossamer", "Gown" and "Tippet" which is made of "Tulle" (ll.15-16). Apart from the capitalization, the use of dashes plays a crucial role because not only do they separate the different words but also makes special emphasis on the word "Tulle" (l.16). This material is employed to make bride dresses and considering Dickinson's life, it may recall the ancient tradition where celibate, pure, young girls were buried in them. This implies that she has not fully enjoyed her life and thus, she is not prepared for this end considering that she secluded herself most of the time in her father's home. At the end of the poem, both Death and the poetic speaker arrive at her grave. Overall, the poem may convey that, given her circumstances, she had developed such a close and strong relationship with death that accepting it was her only possible choice.

If the poem is scrutinized from the perspective of trauma studies, it resembles Dickinson's experience with trauma. Death is a figurehead of her trauma, who "kindly stopped—" (l.2) for her and together they initiate a journey. Also, the poetic speaker's composed attitude implies that there is no other option for trauma but to be accepted. Moreover, the company of "Immortality" (l.4) reinforces the impossibility of a traumatized person to fully overcome a trauma once it is experienced. As a consequence of this arrival, the poetic speaker, through an ironic tone, portrays its effects on her. For example, she is unable to carry out some tasks that she previously enjoyed in her pastime because, with trauma, her character has undergone a change too. Also, she has internalized her trauma so much that she uses an ironic tone by characterizing Death as being courteous. With the passing of time (stanza three), she makes an allusion to another effect of trauma: it leaves its

victims cold and shivering for the new cycle. This feeling of iciness is reinforced by the enumeration of the white garments that Dickinson herself invariably wore since the symbolism attached to this color indicates the state of iciness or the numbing effect experienced by trauma victims. In the last two stanzas, the end of the date which is represented as her grave being "scarcely visible" (l.19) over the ground alludes to her wish to encounter a pinch of hope for her traumatic experience to end, although her desire is in vain. This is expressed in the reference to the "Cornice" which was supposed to be on top of the "Ground" (l.20) but is actually in it. Moreover, she conveys that this trauma happened eons ago, but because of the everyday suffering due to trauma, it "Feels shorter than the Day" (l.22). This feeling of agony is exemplified in her supposition that the "Horses's Heads Were toward Eternity—" (ll.23-24). This image makes reference to the attempts of a traumatized person to heave the traumatic burden throughout their lives. The word "Horses" (l.23) refers to the act of constantly dragging the immense trauma until the ride is over and the "Heads" is the main part of the body, which indicates the body the path to follow. Moreover, during the ride, she supposed that the person could walk "toward Eternity" (l.24), i.e. the realms of faith. Also, as the poem progresses, there is a larger number of caesuras which coincide with the description of the ride and their arrival at her tomb. This can be interpreted as her dissociation of the self from the body, which is a consequence of trauma or the despair of not being able to cope with her condition.

In conclusion, Dickinson personifies death to allude to her trauma and to the fact that she is in an acting-out phase. She uses death as the theater of mortality in which the different types of participants resemble the different stages of trauma. However, this trauma is not overcome because she is stagnated in the acting-out phase since she is unable to articulate her trauma and the boundaries between reality and fantasy dissolve. Secondly, Dickinson uses the binary death/trauma as an insect that is ready to devour the healthy tree/mind until death

triumphs over it, indicating the impossibility of overcoming a trauma. Thirdly, trauma is a kind suitor who constantly persecutes the agonizing individual until s/he arrives at their final destination: the grave.

FINAL REMARKS

Despite having a brief lifespan, Dickinson successfully manages to allure the public by exploring the experience of death in a compelling way. The distinctive writing conventions, which set her apart from her contemporaries, allows her to provide ambivalent and complex perspectives of the theme of death among which trauma studies can be applied. In other words, the incessant references to death can be associated with the poetess undergoing the acting-out phase which she tries to overcome by resorting to scriptotherapy in order to heal her wounds.

Dickinson links death and the deteriorating effect of trauma in "How many times these low feet staggered—" (187) where both transform the vivid into lifeless. In light of this, she is able to see a glimmer of hope in death because it offers salvation to the housewife's condition. Metaphorically, the triumphant way in which death is depicted can be associated with the poet's possibility of entering the realm of poetry due to her personal traumas. In "A Death blow is a Life blow to Some" (816), Dickinson depicts death as positive since it resembles a path leading to the rebirth of a new self and poetry which sprouts after a life of agony caused by trauma.

Moreover, the poetess masterfully manages to write an entrancing antithesis of death, deviating from the traditional belief of death as hell or a promised afterlife in "A Clock stopped—" (287), and "I've dropped my Brain—My Soul is numb—" (1046). In the former, Dickinson's equation of a person's impending death to that of a clock, in reality reflects the trauma's ability to paralyze a person's mind making them be stuck in a constant acting-out phase. However, the poetess sees a pinch of hope in her condition because in the latter poem, Dickinson provides death with a victorious interpretation. The literal triumph of the housewife over her miserable life is disguised under the author's success to eradicate the shouldering of a trauma's burden by means of the powers of scriptotherapy.

When applying trauma studies to “Unit, like Death, for Whom?” (408), “Death is like the insect” (1716), and “Because I could not stop for Death” (712), the various personifications of death resemble the personification of trauma. In this sense, in a conventional interpretation, what seems to be death represented as a theater of immortality is actually the stages of entering a trauma until the victim is unable to distinguish between past and present; what appears to be Death incessantly killing the tree until its expiration is the trauma’s effect on its victims followed by the cessation of the mind, and what looks like a ride with the seducing death is actually Dickinson’s experience/ride with trauma.

Therefore, it can be concluded that this paper attempts at analyzing the notion of trauma in Dickinson and how her traumatic process is portrayed in her poems, affecting both their content and form. Although her poems do not offer explicit information about having a trauma, the poetess artistically manages to disclose her acting-out process which is encrypted in her different interpretations of death and unorthodox conventions. As a result, she overcomes such a process by resorting to the beneficial powers of scriptotherapy as a way of coping with reality and a better understanding of her traumatic experiences.

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ANNEX OF DICKINSON'S POEMS AND LETTERS

187
How many times these low feet staggered—
Only the soldered mouth can tell—
Try—can you stir the awful rivet
Try—can you lift the hasps of steel!

Stroke the cool forehead—hot so often—
Lift—if you care—the listless hair—
Handle the adamantine fingers
Never a thimble—more—shall wear—

Buzz the dull flies—on the chamber window—
Brave—shines the sun through the freckled pane—
Fearless—the cobweb swings from the ceiling—
Indolent Housewife—in Daisies—lain!

280
I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading—treading—till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through—

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum—
Kept beating—beating—till I thought
My Mind was going numb—

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space —began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here—

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down—
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing—then—

287
A Clock stopped—
Not the Mantel's—
Geneva's farthest skill
Can't put the puppet bowing—
That just now dangled still—

An awe came on the Trinket!
The Figures hunched, with pain—
Then quivered out of Decimals—

Into Degreeless Noon—

It will not stir for Doctors—
This Pendulum of snow—
This Shopman importunes It—
WhIle cool—concernless No—

Nods from the Gilded pointers—
Nods from the Seconds slim—
Decades of Arrogance between
The Dial life—
And Him—

408
Unit, like Death, for Whom?
True, like the Tomb,
Who tells no secret
Told to Him—
The Grave is strict—
Tickets admit
Just two—the Bearer—
And the Borne—
And seat—just One—
The Living—tell—
The Dying—but a Syllable—
The Coy Dead—None—
No Chatter—here—no tea—
So Babbler, and Bohea—stay there—
But Gravity—and Expectation—and Fear—
A tremor just, that All's not sure.

410
The first Day's Night had come —
And grateful that a thing
So terrible — had been endured
I told my Soul to sing —

She said her Strings were snapt —
Her Bow — to Atoms blown —
And so to mend her — gave me work
Until another Morn —

And then — a Day as huge
As Yesterdays in pairs,
Unrolled its horror in my face —
Until it blocked my eyes —
My Brain — begun to laugh —
I mumbled — like a fool —
And tho' 'tis Years ago — that Day —
My Brain keeps giggling — still.

And Something's odd — within —
That person that I was —
And this One — do not feel the same —
Could it be Madness — this?

712
Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality.

We slowly drove—He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility—

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—In the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Seting Sun—

Or rather—He passed Us—
The Dews drew quivering and chill—
For only Gossamer, my Gown—
My Tippet—only Tulle—

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice—in the Ground—

Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity—

816
A Death blow is a Life blow to Some
Who till they died, did not alive become –
Who had they lived, had died but when
They died, Vitality begun.

1046
I've dropped my Brain —My Soul is numb—
The Veins that used to run
Stop palsied— 'tis Paralysis
Done perfecter on stone

Vitality is Carved and cool.
My nerve in Marble lies—
A Breathing Woman
Yesterday—Endowed with Paradise.

Not dumb—I had a sort that moved—
A Sense that smote and stirred—
Instincts for Dance—a caper part—
An Aptitude for Bird—

Who wrought Carrara in me
And chiselled all my tune

Were it a Witchcraft—were it Death—
I've still a chance to strain

To Being, somewhere—Motion—Breath—
Though Centuries beyond,
And every limit a Decade—
I'll shiver, satisfied.

1129
Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—

1716
Death is like the insect
Menacing the tree,
Competent to kill it,
But decoyed may be.

Bait it with the balsam,
Seek it with the saw,
Baffle, if it cost you
Everything you are.

Then, if it have burrowed
Out of reach of skill—
Wring the tree and leave it,
'Tis the vermin's will.

1737
Rearrange a 'Wife's" affection!
When they dislocate my Brain!
Amputate my freckled Bosom!
Make me bearded like a man!

Blush, my spirit, in thy Fastness —
Blush, my unacknowledged clay —
Seven years of troth have taught thee
More than Wifehood ever may!

Love that never leaped its socket —
Trust entrenched in narrow pain —
Constancy thro' fire — awarded —
Anguish — bare of anodyne!

Burden — borne so far triumphant —
None suspect me of the crown,
For I wear the "Thorns" till *Sunset* —
Then — my Diadem put on.

Big my Secret but It's *bandaged* —
It will never get away
Till the Day its Weary Keeper
Leads It through the Grave to thee.

261

To T. W. Higginson 25 April 1862

Mr Higginson,

Your kindness claimed earlier gratitude—but I was ill—and write today, from my pillow.

Thank you for the surgery—it was not so painful as I supposed. I bring you others—as you ask—though they might not differ—

While my thought is undressed—I can make the distinction, but when I put them in the Gown—they look alike, and numb.

You asked how old I was? I made no verse—but one or two—until this winter—Sir—

I had a terror—since September—I could tell to none– and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground—because I am afraid You inquire my Books—For Poets—I have Keats—and Mr and Mrs Browning. For Prose—Mr Ruskin—Sir Thomas Browne—and the Revelations. I went to school—but in your manner of the phrase—had no education. When a little Girl, I had a friend, who taught me Immortality—but venturing too near, himself—he never returned—Soon after, my Tutor, died—and for several years, my Lexicon—was my only companion—Then I found one more—but he was not contented I be his scholar—so he left the Land.

You ask of my Companions Hills—Sir—and the Sundown—and a Dog—large as myself, that my Father bought me—They are better than Beings—because they know—but do not tell—and the noise in the Pool, at Noon—excels my Piano. I have a Brother and Sister—My Mother does not care for thought—and Father, too busy with his Briefs— to notice what we do—He buys me many Books—but begs me not to read them—because he fears they joggle the Mind. They are religious—except me—and address an Eclipse, every morning—whom they call their "Father." But I fear my story fatigues you—I would like to learn—Could you tell me how to grow—or is it unconveyed like Melody—or Witchcraft?

You speak of Mr Whitman—I never read his Book—but was told that he was disgraceful—

I read Miss Prescott's "Circumstance," but it followed me, in the Dark—so I avoided her—

Two Editors of Journals came to my Father's House, this winter—and asked me for my Mind—and when I asked them "Why," they said I was penurious—and they, would use it for the World—

I could not weigh myself—Myself—

My size felt small—to me—I read your Chapters in the Atlantic—and experienced honor for you— I was sure you would not reject a confiding question—

Is this—Sir—what you asked me to tell you?

Your friend,
E - Dickinson.

265

To T. W. Higginson 7 June 1862

Dear friend.

Your letter gave no Drunkenness, because I tasted Rum before Domingo comes but once—yet I have had few pleasures so deep as your opinion, and if I tried to thank you, my tears would block my tongue—

My dying Tutor told me that he would like to live till I had been a poet, but Death was much of Mob as I could master—then—And when far afterward—a sudden light on Orchards, or a new fashion in the wind troubled my attention—**I felt a palsy, here—the Verses just relieve—**

Your second letter surprised me, and for a moment, swung—I had not supposed it. Your first—gave no dishonor, because the True—are not ashamed— I thanked you for your justice—but could not drop the Bells whose jingling cooled my Tramp—Perhaps the Balm, seemed better, because you bled me, first.

I smile when you suggest that I delay "to publish"—that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin—If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her—if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase—and the approbation of my Dog, would forsake me—then—My Barefoot-Rank is better—

You think my gait "spasmodic"—I am in danger—Sir–

You think me "uncontrolled"—I have no Tribunal.

Would you have time to be the "friend" you should think I need?

I have a little shape—it would not crowd your Desk—nor make much Racket as the Mouse, that dents your Galleries—

If I might bring you whnt I do—not so frequent to trouble you— and ask you if I told it clear—'twould be control, to me—

The Sailor cannot sec the North—but knows the Needle can —

The "hand you stretch me in the Dark," I put mine in, and turn away—I have no Saxon, now—

As if I asked a common Alms,
And in my wondering hand
A Stranger pressed a Kingdom,
And I, bewildered, stand—
As if I asked the Orient
Had it for me a Morn—
And it should lift it's purple Dikes,
And shatter me with Dawn!

But, will you be my Preceptor, Mr Higginson?

Your friend
E Dickinson—

330

To T. W. Higginson June 1869

Dear friend

A Letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend. Indebted in our talk to attitude and accent, there seems a spectral power in thought that walks alone—I would like to thank you for your great kindness but never try to lift the words which I cannot hold.

Should you come to Amherst, I might then succeed, though Gratitude is the timid wealth of those who have nothing. I am sure that you speak the truth, because the noble do, but your letters always surprise me. My life has been too simple and stern to embarrass any.

"Seen of Angels" scarcely my responsibility

It is difficult not to be fictitious in so fair a place, but test's severe repairs are permitted all.

When a little Girl I remember hearing that remarkable passage and preferring the "Power," not knowing at the time that "Kingdom" and "Glory" were included.

You noticed my dwelling alone—To an Emigrant, Country is idle except it be his own. You speak kindly of seeing me. Could it please your convenience to come so far as Amherst I should be very glad, but I do not cross my Father's ground to any House or town.

Of our greatest acts we are ignorant—

You were not aware that you saved my Life. To thank you in person has been since then one of my few requests. The child that asks my flower "Will you," he says—"Will you"—and so to ask for what I want I know no other way.

You will excuse each that I say, because no other taught me?

Dickinson