

“I Heard a Fly Buzz -- When I Died” : From Being-towards-Death to Existentialism

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ABSTRACT

Emily Dickinson's "I Heard a Fly Buzz -- When I Died" is one of the more renowned poems within her oeuvre that addresses the theme of death. Meanwhile, Heidegger's concept of "being- towards-death" in *Being and Time* stands as a central pillar of his philosophy of death, offering a unique perspective on mortality. This paper aims to explore Dickinson's poetry through the lens of Heidegger's philosophy of death. Initially, it briefly outlines Heidegger's views on death, distinguishing them from universal notions of mortality; subsequently, as the core content of this article, it specifically analyzes the construction of "being-towards-death" in "I Heard a Fly Buzz - When I Died" through the application of Heidegger's philosophical insights.

KEYWORDS

Emily Dickinson; "I Heard a Fly Buzz -When I Died"; Heidegger; "Being Towards Death"; Existentialism.

1. INTRODUCTION

A legendary 19th-century American poet, Emily Dickinson led a largely reclusive life that was simple and monotonous yet harbored a rich literary creativity, producing nearly 1,800 poems. Her poetry is renowned for its unique style-concise language and profound meanings, with deep thoughts underlying her work. Dickinson's themes are broad and profound, encompassing death, love, nature, and friendship. Among her works, "I Heard a Fly Buzz - when I died" stands out as particularly emblematic of her exploration of the theme of death. This poem delicately portrays the quiet and solitude brought about by death and the subtle, blurred line between life and death, conveying the poet's profound emotions and philosophical reflections.

Current research on Emily Dickinson's "I Heard a Fly Buzz - When I Died" has largely centered on literary and linguistic analysis, encompassing approaches from the philosophy of anti-logocentrism and phenomenological semiotics which engage in transcending, suspending, and reducing. These analyses attempt to probe the deep meanings and the processes of text generation through the exploration of linguistic structures and symbolism within the poetry. However, shifting the analytical focus directly onto "death" itself opens a new dimension of understanding, allowing for a more profound philosophical and existential discourse on Dickinson's work. This article enlightens us by not only providing a fresh interpretative framework but also by enhancing the understanding of the deep cultural and philosophical significance of poetry, which holds substantial academic value and necessity across the fields of literature, philosophy, and interdisciplinary studies. This approach moves beyond the superficial layers of language to touch upon the poet's fundamental exploration of existence by engaging with theories such as Heidegger's "being towards death", thereby opening new avenues in literary research. This interdisciplinary method can bring novel interpretive angles to the poetry, offering greater insights into the conditions of human existence and the meanings of life.

This paper will delve deeply into the depiction of death in this poem in conjunction with Martin Heidegger's philosophy of death. While extensive and authoritative research exists on both subjects individually, the intersection of Dickinson's poetry with Heidegger's thought remains largely unexplored. This paper will argue the feasibility of this approach based on existing literature and will be divided into eight sections to elaborate on Heidegger's philosophy of death, content analysis, and symbolism in the context of Dickinson's poetry. This study aims to provide a novel perspective by synthesizing these two profound approaches to the existential topic of death.

2. DEATH AS A UNIVERSAL PHENOMENON

Death is widely considered an eventful phenomenon that is ubiquitously speculated in a subject-object dichotomy. Epicurus offers a pragmatic view: "When people exist, death is non-existent. However, when death exists, people cease to exist" (Chi,2021,p42). This viewpoint reflects a fundamental distinction between the state of being alive and the state of being dead. Epicurus' assertion is grounded in the observation that the experience of death is fundamentally inconceivable to the living, as death, by definition, is a state devoid of consciousness and experience. Normally when people argue the topic, people will dissolve in the exemplar of thanatopsis in biology, medicine, psychology, history, and theology. It may lead us into a vulgar "cognito" (pre-reflection) (Zhang, 2017) as Sartre suggests which would cover and restrain us from thinking towards death itself. However, all these reflections aiming at pragmatism or moral edification, fail to trace back the metaphysical roots that generate and dominate such thinking. Just as every affirmation is already negated in dialectical logic, every manifestation is already obscured. When death is recognized as an objective event, and when it is reduced to various conceptions of death at different epistemological levels, this leads to a series of stipulations and meanings about the essence of death that also conceal the original basis upon which all views of death construct themselves, obscuring the true significance of death in human existence.

This standard approach to thanatopsis-the contemplation of death-typically fails to engage with the metaphysical underpinnings of mortality. According to dialectical logic, as posited by philosophers like Hegel (The essence of Hegel's Logic does not lie in the dichotomies of "being" and "non-being", "quality" and "quantity", "contingency" and "necessity", or "content" and "form". Rather, it is found in the transitions from "being" to "non-being", from "quality and quantity" to "essence", and from "essence" to "concept". The crux of Hegelian dialectics is the ability to perceive the interconnectedness and dynamic movement within these categories. If one merely articulates these conceptual categories, observing their operations in isolation without grasping their interconnectedness through logic, this approach remains within the realm of metaphysics, not dialectics. (Niu,2022,p778), each affirmation is inherently accompanied by its negation; similarly, every conventional portrayal of death carries within it the seeds of its obscurity. When death is treated merely as an objective event, its exploration across different epistemological domains results in a tapestry of interpretations that, while diverse, often miss the fundamental essence of death. These interpretations generate stipulations and meanings that fail to capture the original basis upon which they are constructed and conceal the profound existential significance of death.

The common understanding of death, whether it is viewed as a natural or social phenomenon, a physiological occurrence, or a transcendent event, fundamentally lies in its perceived absence in the living. In popular discourse, death is regarded as an 'already-existed thing', a phenomenon continually presented to those who have yet to encounter it personally. This perspective leads to a paradox where death, constantly conceptualized and discussed, remains an external, observed reality rather than an experienced one.

The "eventuality" of death, thus perceived, is manifest in its objectivity—observable through the lenses of illnesses, disasters, and other external forces that cause cessation of life. This objective stance enables a variety of conceptual frameworks to be constructed around death, from the clinical and detached to the profoundly spiritual. However, these frameworks often overlook the intrinsic

nature of death as a deeply personal and existential event, one that defies the simplicity of external observation and demands a more nuanced understanding that encompasses both the inevitability and the individuality of the dying process.

In Heidegger's philosophy, the looming presence of death compels Dasein (Heidegger redefines "Dasein" as both the immediate presence of being and the being that is present, interpreting it as "being-in-the-world". This concept contrasts sharply with traditional views of the subject as merely cognitive, whether sensory-perceptive, rational-logical, or encompassing absolute concepts and spirit. Additionally, Heidegger moves beyond the notion of the "transcendental subject" of pure conscious activity, positioning "Dasein" not just as a subject of knowledge, but as an entity whose existence is fundamentally interwoven with the worldly context in which it resides. This shift emphasizes an ontological understanding of being that transcends mere cognitive definitions of existence. (Wang,2021,p8) to face its most fundamental existential conditions. This situation forces a break from all conventional ties and relationships, leaving Dasein isolated in confronting its ultimate reality. Heidegger emphasizes that death demands a reorientation of one's life in alignment with one's most authentic potential ability-to-be (Seinkönnen) (Heidegger,2014,p303) which indicates one must personally experience and assume one's death; no one can take away another's death, nor can anyone die on behalf of another. Death is a responsibility to oneself. Similarly, Freud once said, "Our death is unimaginable, and whenever people try to imagine it, people perceive that people are still present as spectators"(Freud,205,p3). This process is not about succumbing to the ordinary but about embracing a profound existential reflection that redefines the individual's existence from a more genuine perspective. Heidegger's concept of death challenges the individual to confront their existence beyond societal norms and expectations. It propels Dasein to embrace its true potential, severing the superficial attachments that define everyday life. This existential confrontation with death serves as a catalyst for profound personal growth, where Dasein is compelled to redefine their priorities and values based on a more authentic understanding of their own mortality and capabilities.

Heidegger describes being toward death as having three dimensions: mood (Befindlichkeit), understanding (verstehen), and discourse (Rede). These elements collectively determine how Dasein interacts with the world, uncovering the meanings of existence. Dasein discovers how the world relates to it, shapes meanings through discourse, and transcends daily existence to engage with the world in a more foundational way, thereby establishing a shared space of meaning. The awareness of mortality enriches Dasein's engagements, imbuing everyday experiences with deeper significance and prompting a reevaluation of life's priorities from a more grounded, existential perspective.

Heidegger further explains that 'being towards death' transcends the daily states of concrete beings, positioning Dasein within a 'clearing'(Lichtung) (Sheehan,2015,p148) that allows for the possibility of meaning-making. This metaphysical space enables Dasein to endure and maintain existential meanings while also being open to and resonating with the essence of being itself. This process allows for a deeper engagement with the inherent groundlessness and purposelessness of the world, accepting and articulating it through existential living. The concept of 'Lichtung' or clearing, where Dasein finds itself in Heidegger's philosophy, is central to understanding the transformative impact of being towards death. In this metaphorical space, Dasein is both isolated from and deeply connected to the essence of existence, which is fundamentally ambiguous and uncertain. This existential solitude is paradoxically a source of profound connectivity, as it allows Dasein to engage with the fundamental truths of being in a direct, unmediated fashion, fostering a unique existential resilience and creativity.

The structure of 'being-towards-the-end' is not about guiding Dasein towards death but about urging it to transcend the limitations of everyday life and pre-emptively engage with its existential potential. This pre-emptive engagement is not just a transcendence of life but a profound affirmation of existence itself. Heidegger believes that through this process, Dasein can genuinely confront and experience the essence of being, thereby redefining its existence and the world around it. Heidegger's notion of 'being towards the end' implies a proactive engagement with the existential possibilities that precede the actual occurrence of death. It is about living in a state of heightened awareness and

preparedness for death, which paradoxically enhances the quality and intensity of life. This anticipation of death does not lead to despair but to a more vital and authentic mode of being, where Dasein actively shapes its existence in acknowledgment of its finite nature, thereby achieving a deeper understanding and appreciation of life's ephemeral beauty.

3. THE ATTITUDE OF THE SURROUNDING PEOPLE TOWARDS THE DYING SUBJECT

“Death” is the “not-yet” of Dasein; without experiencing death, Dasein cannot reach completeness. However, once death is experienced, Dasein ceases to exist. In other words, one cannot experience one's own death in its true sense. Those who have been near death and recovered have not truly died in the strictest sense, and thus cannot speak of having experienced death. Therefore, the epistemological understanding of death falls into a predicament. Although one cannot experience one's own death, one can experience the death of others, especially the death of family members, relatives, or friends who have a significant impact on oneself. The shock effect forces Dasein to confront death. “Dasein can gain a certain experience of death, especially because it inherently coexists with others.”(Heidegger,2014,p276).

The first two stanzas of “I Heard a Fly Buzz - When I Died-” create a near-static scene of imminent death, where everyone holds their breath, seemingly awaiting a significant signal—the announcement of death. It is treated in the most common and mundane manner. The scene is almost like watching a play, awaiting the grand entrance of the "king," who symbolizes death itself. This dramatic expression of death through a significant rupture (the king's entrance represents the moment of death, where the individual is completely dissolved) is striking.

The line “The Eyes around - had wrung them dry”(Dickinson,1998,p465) suggests a desensitization or emotional exhaustion related to the act of witnessing death. This observation reflects a resignation, perhaps due to the repetitive exposure to death, which may lead observers to a state where emotional responses are spent and only a stark, perhaps uncomfortable, acceptance remains.

“I willed my Keepsakes - Signed away, What portion of me be, Assignable”(Dickinson,1998,465)- illustrates a transactional aspect of death where the dying person must address the distribution of their tangible assets and settle their legal and social identities. This preparation for death is not just a personal contemplation of mortality but also an engagement in societal rituals that ensure her roles and responsibilities are transferred in accordance with social customs.

The bystanders' contemplation of death appears conventional and detached. For them, death is primarily an interruption, a dramatic halt in the routine flow of life that requires formal acknowledgment and the execution of duties such as witnessing and validating the transfer of possessions and roles. This approach treats death as an event within the social and legal frameworks, focusing more on the procedural aspects and less on the existential implications.

David Porter once argued that Dickinson used the incomprehensibility of death as a poetic setting, without any simulation at all. He writes, "Death is the situation in which she performs language" (Dickinson,1981,p188).

4. THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF THE FLY

Clive S. Lewis (Lakoff,1980,p4) once said that metaphor is the life of poetry, the main text and glory of poets. Without metaphor, there would be no poetry. As people can see in “There interposed a Fly -, With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -, Between the light - and me -”.(Dickinson,1998,p465) Fly, the most significant symbol in this poem, could possess a multitude of inherent meanings, if people can take a glance through a different lens.

“I heard a Fly buzz-when I died-” is composed of four stanzas, each containing four lines. Although the poem's first line mentions the fly, Dickinson spends the first three stanzas depicting the scene of the speaker's death; the fly's entrance is not described until the end of the third stanza. Prior to the fly's arrival, the room's atmosphere is still and solemn: the speaker signs her will, and the mourners prepare themselves to witness her passing. The arrival of the fly, with its “Blue-uncertain-stumbling Buzz,” introduces tension to the otherwise quiet scene. In the poem's final line, the speaker describes her death, stating that she “could not see to see.”

4.1. Fly as the Symbol of Existential Disruption

The presence of the fly, an ordinary and often irritating creature, disrupts the solemnity typically associated with death. In the perception of the dying person, the fly's buzzing is so clear and annoying that it creates a significant sensory impact for the reader. The fly's presence and the sound it makes are detailed enough to shift the attention from the expected grandiosity of death to the triviality of the fly. The sound of the fly interrupts the poet's final thoughts and her quiet anticipation of death. This interruption symbolizes the unpredictability of death; it can intervene at any moment, abruptly disrupting the continuity of life. This imagery in Dickinson's poetry serves to underline the random and intrusive nature of death, highlighting its capacity to sever the threads of thought and existence without warning. This juxtaposition challenges the traditional symbolism associated with death, suggesting that life's end, like its course, can be permeated by seemingly insignificant yet disruptive elements.

Death is an ultimate destiny and something unavoidable Heidegger argues that authentic existence is “being towards death”, namely, acknowledging the inevitability of death, which informs and shapes one's living. Dickinson's poem, through the fly's trivial interruption, portrays death not as a grandiose transition but as a moment filled with the ordinary—thereby questioning the coherence and unity often imposed on the experience of dying. In the emotional state of “Angst”, people grasp that the world is inherently meaningless, groundless, and without ultimate cause and that humans are drifting and homeless. This compels Dasein to “burst forth and exist”, to reassign meaning to the world, and to seek a place of dwelling for themselves. The fly, thus, serves not merely as an irritant, but as a symbol of the “call of conscience” (Ruf des Gewissens), a reminder of the raw reality that death, much like life, is seldom as people anticipate or idealize. It is through this confrontation with the “uncanny” (Unheimlichkeit), where the familiar becomes estranged, that Dasein is compelled to face its own authenticity, embracing the inevitability of death and the absurdity of existence.

4.2. Fly as the Symbol of the Imminent Death

Fly in many cases means rotten and filth, the occurrence of which may directly indicate that death is the sword of Damocles. As people can infer from the word “blue” in the next line, Greg Johnson notes that “blue” serves as a symbol for non-embedded, inhuman forms of perception in Emily Dickinson's poetry, a motif that recurs in her other works as well. For instance, in the poem “Three Times People Parted-breath-and I” (Dickinson,1985,p1531),blue can be interpreted as a representation of profound, often ungraspable, experiences that transcend ordinary human interactions and perceptions, emphasizing the abstract and elusive nature of such experiences.

The fly, by intruding upon the deathbed scene, represents the ever-present possibility of death that Heidegger suggests people must confront to live authentically. It reminds us that death can come at any moment, often unexpectedly, and potentially filled with the trivialities and absurdities of life, just as it is filled with its solemnities, highlighting the inherent tension between our idealized views of death and the often-mundane reality. While people might expect death to be a significant, transformative experience, it is also intertwined with the trivial aspects of existence, as symbolized by the fly's interruption. Heidegger's view that being authentically toward death involves embracing its inevitability and randomness is mirrored in the poem's depiction of the fly, which disrupts the

expected narrative of death and forces both the speaker and the reader to confront death in its full, unadorned reality.

4.3. Fly as a Symbol of Interruption

Here's a famous example of Heidegger and I quote it here to illustrate for us to better understand the notion of interruption. When a worker is fully immersed in his task, the sudden breakdown of his tool interrupts this immersion. Prior to the malfunction, he was completely engrossed in the activity, unaware of himself as a distinct entity. The abrupt incident precipitates a self-awareness from his experience, as well as a consciousness of the division between subject and object. This disruption highlights how routine engagement can mask self-perception, and how unexpected events can bring about an acute realization of one's separateness and agency within the world (Heidegger, 1991,p66). The breakdown shifts this state to "present-at-hand" (Vorhandenheit), where the tool is no longer an extension of the worker's will but an object of contemplation, separate and distinct. The worker is in the state of "Pure Experience" where the subject and object are unified and integrated into one (Kitaro Nishida,2012,p66). This experience illustrates Heidegger's notion of the "call of conscience" or the awakening to one's authentic self. Consciousness is not an isolated or intrinsic mental state, but is realized and experienced through dynamic interactions with the world, others, and the socio-cultural environment.

As to the dying subject, the sudden fly buzz interrupts the successive experience of the dying progress and turns visual perception into auditory perception. It immediately drives the dying subject thrown into (Geworfenheit) a subject-object dichotomy situation, where the subject realizes that everything (people around, portion signed to donate, social status, etc) could be meaningless when facing death and the only authenticity is death itself, then it caused a severe contradiction between not only visual and auditory but also traditional thanatopsis and ultimate one. In this moment, the dying subject confronts the stark "nothingness" that Heidegger describes as the core of Dasein's being-the realization that the structures and meanings people impose on the world may ultimately be devoid of inherent significance. Heidegger's analysis of death culminates in an insight into the "nothingness" inherent in Dasein (being there). Anxiety serves as Heidegger's simulacrum for the experience of death because it embodies the encounter with the meaninglessness or absurdity of our existence. Anxiety, distinct from fear in that it is not directed at anything specific, represents a fundamental disorientation and dislodging from the world as people understand it. This state strips away the layers of meaning people ascribe to our roles, activities, and achievements, revealing a world that is, in its essence, indifferent to our designs and desires. This encounter with meaninglessness is characterized by a pivotal realization: "The world has nothing more to say to us". This phrase underscores the profound alienation and existential isolation that surfaces when conventional meanings and purposes fall away, confronting individuals with the silent, indifferent nature of the world. It is in this breakdown-the realization of the triviality of the surrounding social constructs and the omnipresence of death-that the subject is potentially able to encounter the true authenticity of being.

5. DERIVATION OF LIFE'S MEANING FROM DEATH

Heidegger argues that the study of being should primarily focus on "Dasein", or "being in the world", and specifically on "being with others", or "co-existence". The premise for this focus is fundamentally based on the fact that humans are mortal; if humans are immortal, a world devoid of people would never come into question. The mortality of humans ties subjectivity to time. As beings with finite existence, living is essentially a movement toward death; thus, "being toward death" becomes the everyday state of Dasein. Time, initially perceived as infinite, becomes finite through its encounter with the subject. Humans experience "Angst" and fear because they cannot "comprehend" or "grasp" the totality of Dasein, including the existence of others that surpass their own. Consequently, they find themselves perpetually "concerned" and "toiling" (Heidegger, 2012,p282).

The poem "I Heard a Fly Buzz - When I Died" by Emily Dickinson can be analyzed through this Heideggerian lens to uncover the nuanced dynamics of life and the omnipresence of death. The poem subtly interweaves the imminence of death with the vibrancy of life, underneath the abrupt stop of "I could not see to see", remaining us to think, suggesting that life's final moments are imbued with existential significance, rather than mere cessation. This dialectical approach suggests that life emerges from the very essence of death, challenging the reader to discern the underlying vitality even in the throes of death's despair. Acknowledging death consciously does not lead to despair but enhances our appreciation of life's inherent value and urgency, urging us to live with a renewed sense of purpose and presence.

Death draws meaning from the living because if there is no existence of living, death loses its necessity to be. If people take a further delve into Heidegger and this poem, people might be able to see the dynamic of life beneath the despair of death. In this poem, it seems to say that there is not a tiny bit of life but the very last moment of death. Dialectically, life emerges from absolute death, so as to when people read this poem despite the smothering sense of death people can also seize the reflection of how people live. A conscious acknowledgment of death does not lead to despair but rather enhances our understanding of life's value and urgency. The authentic engagement with our mortality compels us to live with renewed purpose and presence. That life and death are not binary opposites but are intricately connected. The poem's subtle undercurrent of life amid death reflects Heidegger's idea that being truly alive involves a continuous, conscious encounter with death. This encounter is not morbid but is a vital part of living authentically. Heidegger's concept of "being towards death" aims to remind us that every moment of existence is precious; it challenges us to find meaning and significance in our actions, precisely because they are temporally bound.

It could be more profound than this could navigate ourselves to the interrogation of nihilism and deconstructionism which reveal to us the meaninglessness of life itself. Consequently, in today's world, Nietzsche's declaration that "God is dead" (*Der Gott ist tot.*) signifies the complete destruction of old values where traditional metaphysical certainties are dismantled, leaving individuals in a landscape devoid of intrinsic meaning, the dissolution of a unified set of values, and the structuring of decentralized authority. In the Middle Ages, people firmly believed that their existence was for the purpose of atoning for sins and living for God. Their lives had a fixed direction. However, now, as people gradually become aware of the absurdity and meaninglessness of the world, there is no longer a guiding meaning to direct their lives. Camus suggests that the only serious philosophical question is suicide, which arises from this realization.

This act of creation in the face of meaninglessness is also reflected in Derrida's concept of deconstruction. Deconstruction does not merely seek to tear down existing structures of thought and meaning but rather to open up spaces for new interpretations and understandings. It encourages a continuous questioning of our assumptions and the meanings people construct, highlighting the fluidity and contingency of meanings rather than their fixed nature.

Thus, confronting the existential reality of death and the recognition of life's inherent absurdity, as emphasized by Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Camus, becomes an opportunity not for nihilism but for redefining our existence. This existential challenge calls for a profound engagement with life, where each individual is tasked with the continuous creation of meaning in a world where old certainties no longer hold sway. In this light, the poem and the philosophical discourse around it encourage us to see the interplay of life and death not as a cause for despair but as a canvas for existential creativity and the pursuit of authentic existence.

6. CONCLUSION

The integration of Heideggerian existentialism with Dickinson's poetic narrative underscores the complexity of mortality and the multifaceted nature of human existence. By doing so, Dickinson's

poem not only enriches our understanding of death but also prompts us to reflect on the essence of life and our own being in the world. This synthesis of literature and philosophy provides a rich tapestry for further scholarly inquiry, inviting researchers to explore the profound connections between literary expression and philosophical contemplation of the ultimate questions of human existence.

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