

# Death, Deception and Distress Made Compatible with Womanhood: A hematic Exploration on Emily Dickinson's Select Poetry

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## **Abstract**

Emily Dickinson is one of those prolific minds of the nineteenth century in America. Born in the 1830, her assertive tone and pointed capitalizations have been noted for her unique style in composing poems dealing with themes of mortality, Gender challenging societal norms. This paper will take an attempt to investigate how Emily connects the traits of womanhood with Death and themes of Deception and Distress. To establish the afore concern the paper shall include her 'Because Could not stop for death', 'I'm wife, I've finished' that and 'They shut me up in prose'. All of these poems vividly bring out her distress in what the society expects her to be, being a woman. The tone of the poetry with its bashful words doesn't just want to challenge the society rather asserts her stance of femininity and freedom. Further, she makes Death to become the Immortal and Kind companion which makes her belief of not believing men exposed. Her interpretation of Death, advocacy of Distress and elucidation of Deception through gender roles makes her tone womanhood gallant and reflective. However, this paper leaves an evident gap for other researchers to seek traits of Spirituality and courtship, Nature and Humanity from these poems of Dickinson.

Key words:

Mortality, Gender, Death, Deception, Distress, Societal norms, Femininity, Freedom, Courtship, Humanity.

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), the enigmatic Amherst poet of America, is often noted for her courageous and explicit tone that transformed the abstract terrors of death, distress, and deception into intimate, unsettling art. Through her innovative use of symbolism, irony, and fragmentation, Dickinson subverts conventions, rendering these themes not as distant abstractions but as lived experiences. She takes a subjective tone to be not just a voice of representing gender subjugations rather her own resentful past. This paper examines how "Because I could not stop for Death," "I'm 'Wife' — I've Finished That," and "They Shut Me Up in Prose" stands a proof of having Death, Deception and Distress compatible with life in general and womanhood in particular. Her assertive tone and pointed capitalizations have been noted for her unique style in composing poems dealing with themes of mortality, Gender challenging societal norms. This paper will take an attempt to investigate how Emily connects the traits of womanhood with Death and themes of Deception and Distress. To establish the afore concern the paper shall include her 'Because Could not stop for death', 'I'm wife, I've finished' that and 'They shut me up in prose'. All of these poems vividly bring out her distress in what the society expects her to be, being a woman. The tone of the poetry with its bashful words doesn't just want to challenge the society rather asserts her stance of femininity and freedom. Further, she makes Death to become the Immortal and Kind companion which makes her belief of not believing men exposed. Her interpretation of Death, advocacy of Distress and elucidation of Deception through gender roles makes her tone womanhood gallant and reflective. However, this paper leaves an

evident gap for other researchers to seek traits of Spirituality and courtship, Nature and Humanity from these poems of Dickinson.

Aspects of Humanizing Death in Dickinson's poem 712, "Because I could not stop for Death", mark a vivid illustration of having "Death" as a company through the journey of life. This unusual company brings a distinct question of "why death?" which gets one to the examination of her exhaustive tone throughout the poem.

*Because I could not stop for Death —  
He kindly stopped for me —  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves —  
And Immortality. (Dickinson 350-351)*

The usage of 'He' in her poem, personifies Death with Gender to get the world realize that the even the uncontrollable shall be under control with the personal will. The traits of gentleness of He, The death, halting for the speaker, projects the irony in reality where deception and distress alone get along the carriage that symbolizes the journey of life. Further, the deliberate movement of carriage and poet's surrender in the second stanza reports how the poet submits her to death, inevitably for life ruling over one's will. The passing of the images of School and other locations provides a vivid Imagery of the stages of life that waits for none but passes. She extends to unveil her vulnerability in the fourth stanza through her thin attire and the image of the inevitably embraced unceremonious death. However, Emily gets back to the modest tone of courage by reflecting on death's permanence, and trait of acceptance replacing fear for the same.

*I'm "Wife" — I've finished that —  
That other kind —  
A Wife — and "Wife" is sweet —  
The other — is a haze of Hell —  
'I'm Czar - I'm 'Woman' now - It's safer so,' (Dickinson Fr225, 7-8)*

On the hand, critical interpretations of the mentioned verses strongly support the theme of Deception. The speaker's statement, 'I'm Czar - I'm 'Woman' now - It's safer so,' suggests the adoption of a rigid, elevated societal role ('Czar'/'Woman') as a survival mechanism or a disguise, making the 'wife' identity a construct rather than an authentic self. The academic work confirms that Dickinson's use of quotation marks around 'wife' and 'woman' emphasizes the artificiality and imposed nature of these labels, which is a key element of the deception. The structure of the poem reinforces the psychological reality of confinement. The repetitive phrasing "I'm wife," "I've finished that" contributes to a sense of unyielding social pressure and leads to a "sense of monotony, suggesting that the speaker feels trapped in her role". This pervasive sense of entrapment constitutes the lived experience of existential distress. Further, The "soft" component represents the Deception: it signifies a gentle, ostensibly pleasant obscurity—the false sense of comfort, protection, or the "sunny side" safety provided by the institution of marriage. The "Eclipse" component represents the Distress: it universally signifies darkness, shadowing, and the total temporary blotting out of light or life. It confirms the symbolic death of the independent self, the complete shadowing of the autonomous "Girl's life". The "soft Eclipse" is thus a psychological construct where the deceptive comfort is directly purchased by the violent suppression of the speaker's critical, vital existence.

*They shut me up in Prose —  
As when a little Girl —  
They put my new Dress in the Attic —  
And left me there to stare —*

*They shut me up in Prose —  
A Prison, with a Key —  
And left me there to wonder —  
What could it be?*

*They shut me up in Prose —  
A dull, dead, lifeless thing —  
And left me there to think —  
Of all the things I might have been. (Dickinson 206-207)*

Emily Dickinson's "They shut me up in prose –" (Fr445) stands as a powerful, condensed interrogation of patriarchal constraints upon the female intellectual spirit. The poem functions not merely as a lament over external suppression, but as a complex psychological study detailing the intense distress caused by forced conformity and the strategic deception required for the autonomous self to survive. The speaker, framed as an innocent but intensely powerful figure, constructs an argument wherein the external performance of compliance is the calculated deception necessary to conceal a fiercely liberated interior consciousness. This internal liberation serves as the sole, defiant balm against the ontological distress of enclosure. "Prose" represents the rigid, structured conventions—both literary and societal—that were deemed appropriate for women, in contrast to the expansive, imaginative freedom of Dickinson's chosen medium, poetry. This constraint is not only intellectual but also physical and psychological, likened to the punitive act of placing a "little Girl" in a "Closet," an image that emphasizes the speaker's profound sense of "disempowerment and infantilization".

The external pressure demanding this distress is crystallized in the deceptive social contract of silence: "Because they liked me 'still'—" (Dickinson 4).<sup>1</sup> The quotation marks around "still" signal that the word is a prescribed identity, not a natural state. The "they" demand a performance of immobility and quietude. This expectation of being "still" is the primary deception the speaker must maintain to satisfy the patriarchal gaze. The speaker is required to project an image of resignation to conformity, masking the internal turbulence of her suppressed ambition.

In "They shut me up in prose –," Dickinson fuses the themes of deception and distress to create a powerful statement on female intellectual autonomy. The distress is the psychological wound inflicted by the patriarchal demand for conformity and the physical restraint implied by the "Closet." The deception, however, is a two-fold maneuver: the speaker's reluctant outward appearance of being "still" (Dickinson 4) and, more importantly, the strategic maintenance of a furiously active and defiant inner life. By demonstrating that the spirit's creative will is fundamentally independent of external restraint, the poem achieves a moment of profound rhetorical victory. The final "laugh" (Dickinson 12) is not an expression of joy, but a declaration of psychological and artistic triumph over the forces that sought to enclose and define her.

To further substantiate the concern and support the initiated thesis, this paper takes scholarly aegis from scholars across the globe namely Alaa Hussein Sharhan, Cristanne Miller, Shilpa S. Khandare, and Karen Oakes. "Textual-Conceptual Functions of Negation in Emily Dickinson's Selected Mystic Poems: A Study in Literary Discourse" by Alaa Hussein Sharhan. This paper explores the role of negation in Dickinson's mystic poems, examining how it contributes to her exploration of themes such as death, immortality, and the human experience.

"Emily Dickinson's 'It Was Not Death, for I Stood Up': Distress and the Poetics of Survival" by Cristanne Miller. This paper explores Dickinson's poem "It Was Not Death, for I Stood Up" as a representation of the poet's experiences with distress, examining how the poem's language and form convey the complexities of pain and survival. "Manifestations of

"Death in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson" by Shilpa S. Khandare. This paper examines the theme of death in Dickinson's poetry, analyzing how it manifests in various forms and guises, and exploring the poet's unique perspective on mortality.

"Dickinson's Distress Poems: A Study of the 'Flood' and 'Ebb' of Emotion" by Karen Oakes. This paper explores Dickinson's poems of distress, examining how they represent a unique blend of intense emotion and carefully crafted artistry, and analyzing the ways in which they convey the complexities of human feeling. These papers offer insightful analyses of Dickinson's poetry, exploring themes of distress, death, and the human experience.

Feminist theory provides a framework for understanding the traits of Deception and Distress in Dickinson's poems, particularly in the context of patriarchal society. Dickinson's poetry often expresses feelings of confinement and restriction, reflecting the societal expectations placed upon women during her time. In this seminal work, Gilbert and Gubar argue that women writers like Dickinson used literature as a means of subverting patriarchal norms and expressing their own experiences and emotions. Dickinson's poetry can be seen as a manifestation of this subversion, with Deception and Distress serving as strategies for coping with the societal expectations.

On the other hand, Psychoanalytic theory offers insights into the psychological underpinnings of Dickinson's poetry, particularly in relation to Deception and Distress. Dickinson's poems often explore themes of loss, grief, and mortality, reflecting her own experiences with depression and personal loss. Freud's psychoanalytic theory can be applied to Dickinson's poetry to understand the ways in which her unconscious mind processes and expresses emotions related to Deception and Distress. Dickinson's use of imagery and symbolism can be seen as a manifestation of her unconscious mind, revealing repressed emotions and desires. These theories provide a framework for understanding the traits of Deception and Distress in Dickinson's poetry, highlighting the complex interplay between societal expectations, personal experience, and psychological processes.

To conclude, with references from other researchers on the opted poet's works it is evident that the selected poems of Emily Dickinson portrays discontent of the role she holds in society. Further, her interpretation of Death, advocacy of Distress and elucidation of Deception through gender roles makes her tone of womanhood gallant and reflective. The Theoretical Frameworks furthers the clarity of voicing through the lens of Feminism and Psychoanalysis. However, this paper leaves an evident gap for other researchers to seek traits of Spirituality and courtship, Nature and Humanity from these poems of Dickinson.

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