

Critical Reflection on Lamenting the Loss through Interdiscursive Writings of Louisa May Alcott and Emily Dickinson

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ABSTRACT: *This critical study investigates American women writers, Emily Dickinson and Luisa May Alcott's works in the wake of Lucy E Frank and Phillippe Aries' literary scholarship of Cult of Mourning. Further, it aims at exploring the celebration of death as cultural practice in America. This celebration was categorized as "an orgy of the weeping and mourning" and grew common as a "Cult of Mourning". It is significant to mention that the practical writings of Alcott and Dickinson expanded the horizons of religious and moral poetry. Present research while highlighting the artistic and discursive (while using multiple genres including poetry/elegies, biographies, and letter writing) writings of the selected women writers interrelate mourning as a cultural practice with that of literary expression. This research is significant because it discusses these women writers' bold stance and their striking role in demonstrating death, pessimism, and deprivation as a pathway to define success. It concludes that these American women writers have played a momentous role in men centered world to keep the tradition of elegy alive and reveal eventual triumph and anticipation by discovering a way to survive the loss.*

Key Words: Cult of Mourning, Pessimism, Elegy, American Literature, Civil War

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Introduction

This study investigates the cultural phenomena of lamenting the loss of the dead ones through the cultural scholarship of the Cult of Mourning. This cultural practice was introduced and expanded by Lucy E Frank and Phillippe Aries and serves as a theoretical lens for my study. My selected writers Louisa May Alcott and Emily Dickinson have a direct connection with wartime. Louisa May Alcott served as a nurse while Dickinson's friend Higginson, and Frazer Stearns's death moves her and becomes part of her poetry. In this way, the time before and after the war establishes a clear context for my study and meanwhile introduces the shaping of the style of my selected writers, and elegy writing within the tradition of lamenting the loss in America. Death rituals and consoling practices are different in every culture. These expressions of mourning are solemn for some and joyous for others depending upon the belief system. My research problematizes the notion of responses and attitudes of American people toward death that was utterly changed in the 19th century and the literary practice of multiple writers has played a momentous role in bringing this shift. Cult of Mourning as a cultural theoretical stance aptly applies to the multi-genre writings of these women writers because the concept was introduced after the civil war to lament the unprecedented deaths, with the whole concept of dying, burying, mourning, consoling, and in the end enduring the pain as explained by Phillippe Aries and Lucy E Frank. This study is important because it analyses the cultural practice within the literary traditions of those times and shows these writers as bearers of their cultures.

Though the works discussed in this research are less exhausted in the domain of research, they play a vital role in shaping the cultural practice of the cult of mourning in America, hence making this approach significant. In this Cult, people show themselves pessimistically charmed with death (Frank 34). Hence, the study expresses the despondency of these two writers, and more

significantly, their way to see hope out of hopelessness, a way to see success out of failure through their biographies, letters, and poetry, and hence establishes their contribution to the elegiac tradition.

Antebellum from the Latin phrase ‘ante Bellum means before the war, and in American tradition, it means, ‘before the Civil War’ (1861-1865). Literature of this time was practical, usually, nonfiction, and derivative of the trends of British Literature (Smith 38). Literary trends grew while expanding their horizons from religious and moral poetry as Phillis Wheatly’s poetry, to Hill Brown’s sentimental novels to autobiographies. A truly American Literature emerged in the 19th century with the depiction of American culture and its landscape as Washington Irving did in his collection of short stories in the 1820s. James Fenimore Cooper introduced Leather-stocking tales with the adventures of frontiers and his proficiencies in American deserts. On the other hand, Poe wrote Gothic and Horror fiction. Along with Poe, the works of Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and Nathaniel Hawthorne are considered the most lasting work of this period (Smith 12).

American Literature, in its independent form, was much substantial in this period, because, it has been borrowing its literary trends from Britain since its independence. It made the country culturally inferior in the 19th century. The first attempt of Sir Sydney Smith in a book *Who Reads an American Book* showed cultural superiority and snobbery. He said, “America is experimenting with democracy. They have no culture yet. When any American writes a novel, it is essential for him to copy Sir Walter Scott, and the same is the matter with poetry” (LeFavour 12). He tried to convey the idea that Americans are people bereaved of their own culture, and, especially of literary culture. These are not standards of civilization as English or Europe has set for them. Ralph Waldo

Emerson showed a nationalistic spirit, responded to this challenge put forward by Smith, and articulated a shape for American literature. In his book *Nature* (1836), he writes:

“American literature does not need to even look across the Atlantic at Sir Walter Scott. We have a completely different experience. We have a different political environment. We are much more self-determined” (12).

They wanted to create an identity and culture that was entirely their own. Emerson’s imagining of National Literature ignited his disciples in New York and New England, who tried to practice his ideas. There was another group of writers, who were influenced by him, like Nathaniel Hawthorn, Emily Dickinson, and his fellow, Walt Whitman whose poetry took a deep-seated turn during the Civil War. It is with long poetic lines, conversational in style, and artistic in the figure. Whitman said, “I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil” (LeFavour 23). Summing up, following Emerson’s direction, he wanted to be the poet of the United States.

Civil War changed the language of his poetry in a very compact way, which was needed as well to bring change to American readers. They wanted to bring a moral revolution in readers, so that, reading brings a transformation in them. So, writings of this time changed from British standards to American standards, which worked to transform the world, and described all Americans without any division (Schantz 23). Emerson writes that he loves ambition of Whitman to be an American, and as a national poet, he is going to write about Northern, Southern, escaped slaves, and Native American embracing their endeavors in that radical place called America. The magazine industry also flourished during Civil War to publish the works of novice writers (Smith 25).

Furthermore, Emerson's contribution to the revival of the Transcendental Movement during the period of Romanticism can be venerated as another great contribution (Robinson 13). Transcendentalism, an antebellum reform movement, or a religious, political, and literary movement was in favor of Post-Christian spirituality. It was with a belief that every human being tends to spiritual growth and accomplishment as my selected writers, Louisa May Alcott and Emily Dickinson also manifest their spiritual growth through their writings. Emerson developed a loose union of ambitious authors after questioning the religious doctrines of the 'supernatural existence of Jesus', and 'New Testament Miracles'. First of all, Parker and Emerson worked together and continued to explore religious dimensions. Parker in 1841 called that religious doctrine permanent rather than transient, and later on, he became an anti-slavery minister. Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller took literary characters with their works like *Nature*, *Walden*, and *Critical Study of Goethe* respectively. Further, they worked for social restructuring with Fuller's radical work *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), which she wrote for women's rights and Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* (1849) which he wrote as an activist to decrease the taxes. Further, transcendentalists helped to shape the doctrines which would formulate American culture in modern times (LeFavour 16) which future writers carry and celebrate as lamenting the loss is being celebrated by Dickinson and Alcott.

Postbellum or Post War literature was progressive literature. O'Neill established the honest and momentous trend of drama in America and elevated realism. Realism, for him, was the growth of human lives into a rich emblem of truth. The unpolished form of realism called 'Naturalism' became the basic mode of manifestation for postwar writers. The reality of racism and the difficulties of migrants were exposed during reconstruction times. Then modernism brought a sweeping shift from the past. Writers talked about Great Depression and then about American

Dreams as in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Great Depression from 1929-to 1933 was due to a serious crash in the stock market, while American Dreams were based on upward mobility for everyone with diversity (Poplawski 54).

Regionalism is seen in Robert Frost's writings, while the Stream of Consciousness technique was also used by writers like Faulkner, where the writer worked with what was going on in the character's mind without the grading of time into the present, past, and future. Langston Hughes along with other black writers introduced injustices in States. Their dejection, condition of despair, mourning, and sorrow were part of literature. Post War Shocks, Psychological Traumas, and Nostalgia against Loss were common subjects of writings. Urbanization along with immigration increased, and Darwin's 'theory of evolution was another surprise for Americans (56). Transcendentalist writers similar to Dickinson and Alcott made serious attempts to change the attitude of people toward death as an embracing phenomenon with profound spirituality (Oliver 5).

Dickenson and Alcott wrote in these facets, elegy, letters, etc., because, they realized that family, God, and, sympathy for others have great power. Further, they are not only deprived, and, so, hopeless but also set the mourning customs of the 19th century while showing hope in hopelessness (Pollak 13). Moreover, they add to the male-centered elegiac tradition while living in a male-dominated world. So, an elegy in this research work is going to be seen through 19th-century background and social customs. Despondency, deprivation, a sense of dejection, or hopelessness, according to these writers, is a pathway to define success, what they were missing in their lives.

Theoretical Framework

This research work explores the elegiac tradition in the lives and selected works (letters, elegies, and biography) of Dickinson and Alcott with the help of 19th-century background and traditions. For this, the scholarship of Lucy E Frank from his book *Representations of Death in Nineteenth-Century US Writing and Culture*, and Phillippe Aries's from his work *The Hour of Our Death* have been taken to support my work. These works have transformed the paraphernalia of death in a cultural context. Instead of taking death as a biological phenomenon, it became a ritual, rather than a commercial activity. People became consumers of the cultural relics to celebrate this occasion to immortalize the dead ones who otherwise were mortal. As Aries puts it, that puritanical dogma about hell in the afterlife was changed into an invitation from heaven. The scholarship about peace, beauty, and serenity after death was produced to eradicate the fear of death. Death was celebrated as a cultural event and this movement was labeled as "an orgy of the weeping and mourning" and got popular as a "cult of mourning" (23). The cult of mourning became a belief structure that adored post-death celebrations, and its followers celebrated it, "as the occasion for two of the deepest 'right feelings' in human experience: bereavement, or direct mourning for the dead, and sympathy, or mournful condolence for the bereaved" (Frank 13). Further, Phillippe Aries and Lucy E Frank's study on Cult of Mourning discusses the concept of "culture of loss" as exemplified by Dana Luciano as well on the death of President Lincoln. Moreover, Phillippe Aries's description of social rituals, appeal to the supernatural, and mourning costumes to perform grief is what he suggests to celebrate the death in the Civil War.

The 19th century was a period of mourning in America (Aries 67). After Civil War highly sacred mourning customs were introduced like covering the whole house with black thin fabric on an adult's death and with white fabric on a child's death. The clocks were turned off and mirrors were shielded. Windows were kept open so that departed souls could fly. Families shared lithographs with wailing willow as a sign of mourning, and a dove as a symbol of peace. The deceased was shown in the photographs. After the funeral ceremony, the clocks were reversed, the windows closed and the black fabric was removed. Pictures and hair wreaths were only left to display hence, creating an air of mourning.

Every field- literature, mass media, music, and architecture contributed in their way to honor death or endorse correct ways of mourning. Nation's tribute to Washington's death to its leader through people's panegyrics, chorus performances, and countless personal statements published in newspapers was only the start of a national captivation with collective grieving towards that deprivation; and communal efforts towards consolation (Aries 34). Along with this theoretical stance, it is a critical study to reflect the contribution of women writers in representing culture along with literary expression through their discursive approach, which meanwhile, also confirms them the devotee of the conventions of the time. This study through a close reading technique analyses 19th-century American elegiac tradition. As has been noted that the tradition expresses the pain, rising from the loss of family and loved ones due to some disease or the destruction of the Civil War. Elegies reflect the mourner's agony. While readers associate their pain with these elegies, hence, shifting and meanwhile sharing the private pain with the public pain. It is complaining and consolation at the same time. Hence, this research explores the lamentations, and hopelessness in the interdiscursive writings of Emily Dickinson, and Louisa May Alcott through the lens of 'Cult of Mourning'.

Analysis and Discussion

Emily Dickinson like Walt Whitman would reshape American verse. She was the least known during her life with only seven poems published. Her 1800 surviving poems meet death, and she was interested in spirituality, nature, and everyday life. She was brave to break rules with frequent use of pauses, dashes, fragments or enjambed lines, and slant rhyme. Living in a rich but reserved family she summed up her living as, “pretty much all somberness” and a ‘secluded eccentric’. According to her, deprivation, or being denied- whether it was literary desire, love, faith, etc. delivered a complex comprehension more than the one who has achieved all this. Title of her works like “*heaven, is what I cannot reach!*” *Success is counted sweetest, by those who ne'er succeed*”, and *Water, is taught by thirst*” inform how deprivation sums up the worth of what she was missing.

Letter 294, written, when her 8 years old nephew died of typhoid, was the most grief-stricken and hurting. The selected line, “The Crisis of the sorrow of so many years is all that tires me” (Dickinson 295) manifests her everlasting agony and the annoying situation in this world. Then, she was moved by the death of her other loved ones, such as Sophia, her cousin; Leonard Humphrey, her school principal; Carlo, her pet; Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson, her parents; her friends, Otis Phillips Lord, and Charles Wordsworth. She includes Elegies written on the death of these loved ones in her letter 1 (one), with those elegies published after her death putting her as a dynamic member of her setting. Furthermore, these grieves reverberate in the elegy given in the same letter.

She, regardless of living quiet and in solitude, was a keen observer of the cultural changes and the scholarship of her surrounding contemporaries. She noticed the impact of death- ‘rustle in

and out, upon her neighborhood, and their grief-stricken traditions and wrote *There's been a Death, in the Opposite House*, in which she notes their parade, throwing the soft mattress, where the departed soul slept, and opening of the window to fly the soul of the dead one. She also notes covering the house with black crepe, covering the mirror, and the clock at a standstill. Everything is resumed to normal after the funeral showing the completion of the ceremony. In this way, she followed the conventions of the time to go with literary practices and cultural happenings.

She demonstrates in a letter that she has read many elegies, so, she knows the conventions and uses them in her elegies. Death is a common theme, readers touch upon, as she records in her works like, *I heard a fly buzz by when I died*, and, *Because I could not stop for death*. A constant theme of death in her writings makes the elegy a suitable domain for her. Moreover, like Alcott, she knows domestic literature as well and incorporates those images in her elegies. Elizabeth Barrett notes her as a product of both the elegiac tradition and the 19th-century mourning rituals. Her other notable elegies are: *Her final summer was it, and yet we guessed it not, I meant to find her when I came; I did not reach thee*; and, *I Measure every grief I meet*. In all these elegies, Dickinson uses the conventions of peace and consolation, wailing, nature grieving along with the mourner, the March of mourners, and the image of the last day rituals of the departed soul.

Sewall in the biography of Dickinson demonstrates that the death of her father (1874) Edward moved Emily to a great extent. Edward was a powerful personality, and scholars like John Cody and Clark Griffith consider him the cause of Emily's seclusion (Sewall 44). She knew her father more than others; still, she noted in her letter that she did not know him (Selected Letters 62). He was a patriarch, and a tough man to comprehend and she called him, "the oldest and the oddest sort of a foreigner" (66). Contrary to this, she noted humor in his personality, and a sad

atmosphere enters into the elegy she wrote for him, as Sewell notes the tone, “never departed” (67).

In the case of the death of her nieces, she takes it as sleep, “asleep that ended with a smile” (301). Speaker, in this personal letter, laments in such a way as she has lost the path. There is no vision or guidance for her and she is asking for one thing “the birds she lost” (301). She compares her nieces with the Robin bird who was learning but could not take a flight. So, its hope was a false hope for happiness. Dickinson was with a mystic belief that there is eternity and perpetuity in Heaven; so, she never dismissed the idea of a reunion there. This complexity leaves her a beguiling figure, which needs to delve deeper into her poetry and letters.

Louisa May Alcott is best known for her works of fiction. The areas of thrillers and poetry especially her elegies lack readers’ attention. She, like Dickinson, wrote most of the elegies after the death of her close family members and friends. She demonstrates her family’s grief and, they are made public by publishing. Alcott also handles the elegiac tradition and 19th-century mourning rituals side by side. She approaches consolation, lament, complaint, the procession of mourners, praise of the dead, and the last day’s rituals in the same way as Emily does. She maintained the tradition in a male-dominated society- a society that influenced her to respond. Moreover, she also incorporates her elegies in letters she wrote to her family members as Dickinson did.

As a nurse, she has first-hand bleak and somber experiences of death during the War. Cheever, her biographer puts these experiences as “poetry of dead provided an intellectual and artistic lens through which Americans might conjure and comprehend the carnage of war” (37). He further views that not only do the poems require the speaker to think about death but also that they bring the readers to the reality of death and the deceased. Moreover, elegies soothe the pain

of earthly separation, for the affected and general readers, and elaborate her Christian belief of reunification with the departed” (Cheever 38).

In *Transfiguration*, Alcott presents deeply personal devastation, and the speaker bemoans the death of her beloved mother. Alcott, in a letter, transfigures the death of her mother as rest or sleep and consoles herself with the notion that after two months of persistent pain, her mother could finally rest. She meets further consolation and mourning tradition while writing that her body has moved to win a superior realm, though unknown, where she talks about Paradise, and everlasting peace in Paradise. It is the virtue of the deceased that are counted in this time of pain and agony. Further, she mentions the convention of keeping the lock of hair of the deceased one, for the solace of the rest of the loved ones. The Speaker believing in the ‘Cult of Mourning’ as well as in Christian belief is of the view that the dead goes to a better place, transforms, and gains a new body (225).

She had experienced the death of Elizabeth and May, her sisters; her mother; and a close friend, Henry David. In her journal she delineates Beth’s death as; Beth called all the family members and held their hands before she departed. She mourns while writing that she “saw a light mist rise from the body, and float up and vanish in the air; and how her mother’s eyes followed hers, which doctors called “the life departing visibly” (88).

And Lizzie’s death, she says, she cannot forget, whom she finds nearer, even than before. She consoles herself with the words; she is happy that Lizzie is at someplace where she is free from pain and suffering and her beautiful soul is happy ever. She has experienced poverty in her life, which is obvious when she says, that in her youth, she did not have money, now, she has money, but not youth. She adds further that death cannot haunt her, but it is friendly and wonderful

to her (89). Thus, in explaining her deceased she incorporates sentimentalism and hails death as beautiful with the hope of an early reunion with her loved ones. It is through elegies that she participates in the nineteenth-century mourning tradition or ‘Cult of Mourning’. Lament in her elegies is taken as an effort to overcome the agony. She, through this short process of elegy, covers what can be called psychological stages including pain, praise, lamentation, solace, and retrieval in the form of recovery as Aries scholarship also informs.

Alcott’s letter to Sophia Ford about Thoreau’s death contains many elegiac stages and she notes this grief in her poem, *Thoreau’s Flute*, which she wrote on his death. Her father was beside the bed when Thoreau was persistent and cheerful but never left the bed again (74). This pleasant style of explaining death serves as relief, an elegiac component. Further, she includes the procession of mourning in this elegy as,

“Lovely day clear, and calm and spring-like

Where they all walked [Thoreau’s] coffin with its fall of flowers” (74)

In the final lines of the letter she writes, “I never can mourn for such men because they never seem lost to her but nearer and dearer for the solemn change” (75). Hence, Alcott sums up the idea that literary legends live in history through their writings, and the same applies to Thoreau, who lives through his poetry and nature writing.

Little Nell (1865), which she wrote before her major works of fiction, is thought to be based on Dickens’ Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The wailing comes in the form of affectionate tears dropping on her grave. Alcott thinks that nature shares the pain of the bereaved person, for instance, “winter sunlight sheds golden shadows like soft blessings” on quiet little bed” (5-9). Nature through the word shed participates in crying, weeping, and tearing. Speaker’s elegiac

complaint emerges when she writes that Nell's 'feeble body' was unable to bear the heavy distress of solitude (9-11).

Beset with sorrow, pain, and fear,

Tempted by want and sin,

With none to guide or counsel her

But the brave child-heart within (19-20).

These lines show the main stance of the elegiac complaint of the writer that Nell was alone dwindling between right and wrong and had no one to direct her except her own heart. She praises her virtue of being faithful love and affirms Little Nell as a noble child. Moreover, the writer's wish for Little Nell's guidance echoes the 19th-century cultural stance that children should be advised. She laments that Nell would not have experienced death if she had given some instructions, so, her death was unjust. Hence, the study discloses the concept of mourning as a cultural phenomenon that takes literary expression through the elegies of these writers. The art of both these writers interrelates them.

Conclusion

It has been noted that elegy took special meaning in the 19th-century environment when the culture was subjugated by death due to the Civil War and outbreak of diseases, and the process was given the name 'Cult of Mourning'. The study has proven these writers, with a significant amount of scholarship, as renowned elegists, and important members of the mourning culture of

their times, hence bearers of their cultures. The study has also made clear that the Elegies cover the whole path from bereavement to consolation, and play a pivotal role of catharsis in the writings of both these writers, Dickinson and Alcott. Most of the time the diction of these writers bears religious connotation as has been noted in their poems with the word 'sleep', which echoes their religious belief in resurrection and the afterlife. Moreover, the mourning tradition of both writers is clear from their personal letters, as they were moved by the death of their loved ones and the death of their fellow writers. Hence, apart from their personal bewailing, these poetesses integrate the pain, deathbed scenes, praise, complaint, and consolation in their elegies, distinctively, to keep the tradition of mourning alive; and show ultimate success by discovering a way to cope with loss and dejection.

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