Surrealistic Images and Motifs: Differentiating the Theme of Death in Plath and Dickinson

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ABSTRACT

Making a case against the reductionism of comparisons between two American poets who lived and wrote in two vitally different ages, this paper attempts to explore a major and definitive strain of disparity that distinguishes the poetry of the two. Through a brief analysis of some of the most famous poems of Plath and Dickinson that deal with the theme of death, it will be demonstrated how typically surrealistic images, motifs, structures play a central role in the former and are largely absent in the latter. The applicability of surrealism to the poems dealing with this theme will be studied with reference to characteristic features of the movement, historical contexts and influences on the two authors, their choice of diction, stylistic features, etc. which inform the underlying spirit with which they regard death.
The constant preoccupation of Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath with the theme of death has received attention from a great number of scholarly researchers and, with the bulk of criticism already available, it is perhaps repetitious and presumptuous to subject the issue to a reappraisal. However, a central problem with a lot of criticism is that a minute analysis of a few poems can never lead us to a generalization and a bird’s eye view of a great many generates a generalization that cannot be trusted. This is particularly true of criticism that seeks to align or alienate an author from a movement, a group or a dominant trend in the genre. It is very easy, for instance, to prove that both Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath were existentialists, imagists, surrealists, expressionists and, given the number of different definitions of realism, realists. However, such generalizations signify very little precisely because it is so easy to see all of these strains in both of these and innumerable other authors.

A possible solution to the problem may be to regard different themes in a poet separately and then, rather than generalizing about the poet as a whole, to judge his / her affiliations in relation to that one theme. With this end in mind, this paper aims at differentiating between the theme of death as handled by Plath and Dickinson in some of their most famous poems by highlighting surrealistic images and motifs in the former and their absence in the latter. Logically, a trace of reductionism cannot be wholly eradicated from such a study but, in a paper of this length, the best one can do is to restrict one’s attention to the most well known, and therefore the most representative, works of the poets and cautiously formulate a theory about a certain aspect of a certain theme.

The similarities between the two poets are so generally known that they have come to be firmly fixed in traditions of their respective criticisms, beginning with their occasional proneness to toy with death in a self-indulgent manner and, if the biographical context be added, the evidence of their almost neurotic fascination during the last years of their lives with the poetic potential of the impending death. Yet these similarities could be established only by neglecting a lot of fundamental differences that emerge not only in the themes
conspicuously present in the one and absent in the other, or the dichotomy of Dickinson’s existentially equivocal optimism and Plath’s bleak pessimism, but even in their treatment of death—the recurrent theme that, for many readers, determines the similarity between them. Harold Bloom, in referring to those who group these two poets together as “the more fanciful of Plath’s admirers” (1), recognizes the need to undermine this complacent comparison for the sake of a more sound and just analysis.

Partly, this aim involves placing the two poets in their historical context by dwelling on the influences of their respective ages on them. Dickinson absorbed, it shall be seen, in spite of her radicalism, the conventions of an age that shouldered the legacy of Romantic and Transcendentalist traditions handed down to it by the earlier half of the nineteenth century while Plath was a typical representative poet of post-war America, writing precisely at the juncture when “literary surrealism finally reached the United States after the Second World War and became an important feature in the work of Robert Lowell and many younger poets” (Harmon and Holman 504). Plath was for a time literally a disciple of Lowell as she attended his poetry seminars at Boston University during the winter of 1958—59 and it is interesting to note that this definitive American stalwart of surrealism found her a remarkably compliant learner, making a special note of “her humility and willingness to accept what was admired . . .” (qtd. in Simpson 117).

In David Crystal’s Nineties Knowledge, the movement of surrealism has been briefly and comprehensively defined as follows:

The first surrealist manifesto of Andre Breton (1924) proposed the replacement of 19th century Realism by the three related means of humour, dream, and counter-logic (the absurd). This initiative was taken up by many artists and writers, and the term is now used to describe the heightened or distorted perception and registration of reality, by whatever means. The basic idea was to free the artist from the demands of logic, and to penetrate beyond everyday consciousness to the ‘super-reality’ that lies behind. Freud’s theory of the subconscious was appealed to, and many pictures by Dali,
Magritte, and others seek to recreate the fantasy world of dreams. Objects are taken out of their normal context, their scale drastically changed, or they are represented as made of an inappropriate material, such as Dali’s melting watches. (161)

In this paper, this note shall be treated as an operational definition and a cohesive tool against the applicability of whose phraseology would be set instances of poems in which the two poets have dealt with the theme of death.

The basic reference point of surrealistic postulations is the failure of common sense and, based on a concentrated withdrawal from regarding binary oppositions as unambiguously contentious, an attempt to drag contradictions into a whole—a whole that is not neat or symmetrical but often disharmonious. A surrealist painter, for instance, might accomplish an indefinite fusion of motifs of agitation and tranquility by painting symbols of chaotic energy in muted colours. This gives birth to one of the most important features of surrealism i.e., the imperative enlightenment of transcending the perspective of black and white as opposing entities in order to discover the “super-reality.” In accordance with this idea, in Plath’s poetry life and death, instead of being separated as utterly heterogeneous or contradictory states, often co-exist: a living person might be dead and vice versa. In such situations, the narrative’s mingled invocations of wonder, curiosity and unbelief strip consciousness of a rational basis for precepts and the immediacy of experience typically poses itself in the face of a sustained interpretation of events. When Plath suggests possibilities of life-in-death, the reader is expected to respond by sharing—as it happens in dreams—feelings rather than thoughts, vulnerability and horror rather than their rational impossibility. Consider, for example, the last lines of “The Bee Meeting”:

I am the magician’s girl who does not flinch.
The villagers are untying their disguises, they are shaking hands.
Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they accomplished, why am I cold. (53—55)

The speaker’s first proclamation is that of bearing a charmed life, of being indifferent or contemptuous rather than defensive against a host of unknown dangers that threaten her and the sudden alarm felt by the self-realization of being “cold,” reinforced by the presence of the coffin-like box, does not cancel or obliterate the truth of the earlier statement but creates the impression of life-in-death. More than a combination of two abstractions, it is the speaker’s experience of undergoing the sensations of both simultaneously. Approached psychoanalytically, the state of life-in-death is often regarded as the “altered state of consciousness” which psychologists define as “a state of consciousness that is dramatically different from ordinary awareness or responsiveness” (Lefton 117). The surrealist’s interest in deviating from what is normal makes the “altered state” acquire the privileged status imputed in a realist text to the normal state. The purpose of such a shift in perspective, a distortion of what is ordinarily real, is the quest for some new reality that is more complex and subtle than possibilities offered by rationality. And so it is noteworthy that by joining together the opposites of life and death, Plath has by no means attempted to harmonize them. The idea is simply to demolish the givens of life being life or death being death and thereby force entry into the brand of truth discovered typically in dreams. This creates an affinity between Plath and Rene Magritte, one of the foremost surrealist painters about whom The 20th Century Art Book records: “Magritte appears to contradict reality by nonsensically naming something that does not need to be named, at the same time as denying that it is what it obviously is” (292). In a dream, fire does not burn and water does not drown but their experience is more than an abstraction as the mind suffers from the agony entailed by them all the same. So Plath is able to undergo the agony of death without being able to relieve herself of the burden of life. Another significant point is also related to this: the state of life-in-death immediately invokes the terrifying quality of the legends of the undead, poets often personify it in the likeness of a vampire as in the following stanza by Coleridge:

Her lips were red, her looks were free,
Her locks were yellow as gold:
Her skin was as white as leprosy,
The Night-mare Life-in-Death was she,
Who thickens man’s blood with cold. (“Ancient Mariner” 190—194)

How such an image belongs to typically surrealistic poetry about death will be commented upon later.

Such a disharmonious assimilation of life and death is also visible in the poem “Ariel”. The action begins with the speaker substituting her inertia with movement and journeying from darkness towards the light of the rising sun. Since in Biblical terms darkness represents pre-existence chaos and light is equated with the birth of life, the rising sun towards which the speaker uncontrollably rushes carries a promise of vitality or rejuvenation (This symbolism of the morning signifying the birth of life is explored also in detail by Plath herself in her poem “Morning Song”). So the speaker’s journey denotes a transition from an inert state of non-existence to the vivacity of life that would enable her to realize her being in a fruitful manner. Yet at the same time her swift movement has been compared to that of an arrow which is helplessly flying towards its goal.

    And I
    Am the arrow,
    The dew that flies
    Suicidal, at one with drive
    Into the red

    Eye, the cauldron of morning. (26—31)

An arrow is an instrument that inflicts death but, once shot, it cannot help its movement and the fiery redness of the sun towards which it is directed would immediately consume it. So it is simultaneously a journey towards life and hope and a suicide dive that would bring instant death.

For Emily Dickinson it is not so. Her concepts of the mortal life, death, resurrection and the life hereafter are clearly distinguished
from one another and the mind, at a given time, feels the sensations of only one state. This is in keeping with the tradition of nineteenth century realism. For her, the rituals associated with death are not equivocal: people do not collect honey—the sweet fruit of long and untiring efforts of honeybees—when somebody dies. Rather, the decorum of tragedy and moral seriousness is observed in the way it is in the classic realist novels of, say, George Eliot or Thomas Hardy:

- The bustle in a house
- The morning after death
- Is solemnest of industries
- Enacted upon earth,--- (“The Bustle in a House” 1—4)

So, even if the thought process is far more complex and philosophical because of an epigrammatic precision, Dickinson’s methods of responding to death have a Tennysonian affinity with the elegiac vein of the Graveyard School of Poetry. Lying in the grave, far from the warmth of human relationships, is a melancholy experience bearing many similarities with similar records of the Romantic poets:

- Safe in their alabaster chambers,
- Untouched by morning and untouched by noon,
- Sleep the meek members of the resurrection,
- Rafter of satin, and roof of stone. (“Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers” 1—4)

An influence, conscious or unconscious, of Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” or of many similar poems can hardly be overlooked in the imagery of these lines. Consider the following stanza and the links would be self-evident:

- Beneath those rugged elms, that yew tree’s shade,
- Where heaves the turf in many a moldering heap,
- Each in his narrow cell forever laid,
- The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep. (Gray 13—16)

Gray’s emphasis on pastoral simplicity apart, common between these two stanzas is the sense of repose and safety, alienation from the hectic cycle of day and night that defines life.
Thirdly, there is a life beyond the grave which guarantees immortality and puts eternity within the grasp of man:

\[
\text{Since then 'tis centuries; but each} \\
\text{Feels shorter than the day} \\
\text{I first surmised the horses' heads} \\
\text{Were towards eternity. ("The Chariot" 17—20)}
\]

The purpose of presenting these three excerpts from Dickinson in this order is to prove the claim made earlier that for her, unlike Plath, the concepts of life, death and the life hereafter are clearly distinguished and form the successive stages of a linear process encoded in the plain journey in a horse drawn chariot, and lacking in the conceptual obscurity emerging from the surrealists’ preoccupation with the super-reality. Also, there is none of the weird dis harmony that occupies a unique place in Plath’s juxtaposition of these concepts.

Apart from the relatively simpler poems quoted here are the more complex ones in which critics, finding illustrations of the co-existence of life / death duality, do make room for a surrealistic interpretation. An argument to forestall this viewpoint seems necessary if the differences between the two poets are to be fully appreciated. In a poem like, “I Felt a Funeral in my Brain,” the one that, apparently, comes nearer being surrealistic than any other, what the poet does is not to establish the fact that the speaker is feeling the state of death at the same time as the state of life is active to record it and to comment on it. Rather, the mind has created a complete picture in which the central figure has died and other people carry out the funeral rites. For Wordsworth, we see into the life of things when “the motion of our human blood / Almost suspended, we are laid asleep / In body, and become a living soul ("Tintern Abbey" 45—47). A similar process is at work here since the normal consciousness has been temporarily suspended while an altogether different level of the mind is at work to see into the life of things which, in this case, is a funeral. This prevents the intermingling of the conscious and the sub-conscious forces. The past tense of verbs, beginning with the “felt” of the first line, are abundantly present throughout the poem and serve an important function: the state in which the narrator experienced death has passed away and the earlier mode of
consciousness has been revived at the later moment when s/he chooses to record it (contrast Plath’s present tense verbs in “I am the . . .” “Why am I cold,” etc. in the quotation from “The Bee Meeting”). This significant fact is observed by Emelie Fitzgibbon when she warns Dickinson’s readers that they “must remember that the poem is an artifact. It is a carefully constructed analysis of a mental experience and, while it creates the illusion of a mind falling into an abyss, it was obviously created after and not during the experience itself” (13).

Based on this, a further point can be made about Plath’s surrealism in connection with the theme of death. In the art of her nineteenth century predecessor, the two levels of consciousness are separated because she has narrated an experience which has gone before but in her case the present tense icons suggest a narratology according to which the poem attempts to become an experience rather than the narration of an experience.

Death, for Dickinson, is an inevitable reality that has to be dealt with whether one likes it or not. The fact that no escape is possible from it—“None can avoid this purple, / None evade this crown” (“One Dignity Delays for All” 3—4)—generates the consciousness that it should be confronted graciously and treated as a friend. In Plath’s case, it is not always an inevitable reality; it can be chosen voluntarily by one who is brave enough to face it. There is a masochistic joy in putting an end to one’s life and thereby mutilating oneself. Dickinson regarded death as a move of displacement and she wrote about suicide only two or three times (Robinson 138). Plath, on the other hand, was obsessed with the idea of suicide. Those given to historical criticism dwell on the details of the two poets’ biographies to interpret and explain the varied preoccupation with natural death and suicide in their respective works but far more significant is the psychological insight it offers about their attitudes towards death. The major difference which led to the formulation of these different attitudes is that Dickinson found joy in simple and plain things carrying the potential of signifying life and once said, “I find ecstasy in living—the mere sense of living is joy enough” (qtd. in Anderson 165). Plath, on the other hand, apparently attached no
plain sense of joy with the experience of living; where it emerges, it is hysterical and cancels out ordinariness with a force that is itself unnerving. A critic, for instance, has described her “poetry as espousing ‘Nietzschean joy’” (Brennan 38). More specifically, in relation to the theme of death, one may consider, as an example, the opening lines of the poem “Edge,” in which the associations of joy are drastically subverted as the “smile of accomplishment” figures on the lips of a dead body:

The woman is perfected.
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity . . . (1—4)

As the price demanded by perfection is death, the sense of fulfillment that it brings is undermined through the stylistic break in the compound “dead body,” suggesting a being aggressively broken down, followed by a hint of the smile or the dead body or the perfection being equated with an illusion. So joy, accomplishment and fulfillment seem to take inescapably twisted forms in Plath, reinterpreted in Ivan Albright’s terms (see below), while the contrast with Dickinson cannot be more pronounced as the latter believes in maintaining the course of nature in its usual, well ordered fashion to the extent that even the thought that the world would continue to function in its normal ways after her death is genuinely gratifying:

’Tis sweet to know that stocks will stand
When we with daisies lie,
That commerce will continue,
And trades as briskly fly. (“If I Should Die” 11—14)

In a theological framework, suicide mostly implies a cruel breach in natural order, a realization of one’s power over oneself through a transgression against the ordained limits of nature. A surrealist is often guided by a desire to overstep the boundaries of nature in order to create new perspectives of his own. To stretch things beyond their natural limits creates a sense of disorder at the same time as magnifying them to a superhuman size. Psychoanalytically, the concept of suicide is a distortion of the natural concept of death and,
as such, might be regarded as a surrealistic (re)presentation of it. This, at any rate, is the way Plath often approaches it. The condition of the man in “Suicide off Egg Rock” at the time of committing suicide is described in these words: “He smoldered, as if stone-deaf, blindfold, / His body beached with the sea’s garbage, / A machine to breathe and beat forever” (14—16). The smouldering shows that the body is in the process of disintegration, its senses have ceased to work and it is becoming a part of the sea’s garbage. Ronald Hayman notes that the man “looks forward to the moment when he’ll be washed up on the beach with the other garbage . . . To commit suicide is to insist on having your body treated like garbage” (121). If the image of this metamorphosis of the dead man is represented visually by an artist, it would affect the spectator as a disturbing invitation of entry into a world that is novel, repulsive, diffused, lacking any foundations and awe-inspiring—in fact collecting together all the characteristic features of a surrealist painting.

It should also be noted that the strain of nihilistic revulsion that underlies the perfected woman in “Edge” or the trashy dead body in “Suicide off Egg Rock” keeps it from being tragic in the grand classical manner. Once this principle of disturbing and uncanny subversion is recognized, one may locate a faint but distinct element of humour in this treatment of dead bodies that can readily be identified with the boisterous conceptual upheavals of the Absurdists. This two-pronged dimension of humour-cum-absurdity, it was noted in the opening definition of surrealism, is a distinctive trait of the movement.

Another important feature of Surrealism is the distortion of figures to give them a terrifying look. In a dream, for example, the subject might associate insecurity with the image of a friend who chases him in a silent, ghostly manner or horror with the image of innocent things cast as phantoms. An artist trying to capture this quality of terror in the friend or an otherwise harmless interior on his canvas will distort their features; the face of a woman may take the aspect of a witch or a common living room may look like the interior of a mouldering grave. This sort of terror inspired by the grotesque distortion of images is the hallmark of Ivan Albright, an important
surrealist painter, and is noted by Paul Oppenheimer in these words: “A great many of his paintings present the decay of his human models, exposing rotted or tormented flesh, glazed or bloodshot eyeballs, and cadaverously hollow or wrinkled lips in microscopic detail” (183).

This kind of terror, characteristic of several important surrealist painters, could easily be discerned in Plath’s projection of death. To put it more simply, while talking of death the dream can accurately be defined as a nightmare. As an example, consider the poem entitled “The Hanging Man”:

By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me.
I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet.

The nights snapped out of sight like a lizard’s eyelid:
A world of bald white days in a shadeless socket.

A vulturous boredom pinned me in this tree.
If he were I, he would do what I did. (1—6)

Whether the god referred to in this poem is the poet’s husband or, in more general terms, a symbol of patriarchal authority or, indeed, the unforgiving and stern God of the Old Testament, the one impression that instantaneously thrusts itself upon the reader is that it is an appalling, deadly being and the victim sizzles in his grasp both because of pain and the horror of the situation. The poem opens with dramatic abruptness, unhindered by any background or preliminary information and the reader confronts the violence of the act with a spontaneity and intimacy typical of dreams. Graham Greene, in his famous short story “The Basement Room,” illustrates, through the vulnerable sensibility of a young boy, how repressed fears adopt terrifying visual shapes while finding a violent outlet in dreams: “. . . the inevitable terrors of sleep came round him: a man with a tricolour hat beat at the door of His Majesty’s service, a bleeding head lay on the kitchen table in a basket, and the Siberian wolves crept closer. He was bound hand and foot and couldn’t move; they leapt around him breathing heavily . . .” (152). All these terrors carry inexorable suggestions of the subject’s vulnerability and the intensity of his
sensations is almost exactly paralleled in the description of the Hanging Man’s victim. The choice of the word “sizzle” is very meaningful—the hissing sound characteristic of frying fat, the stifled scream is not only a response to the horror of the situation but itself contributes to heighten it. It is simultaneously the cause and effect of the horror. In the second stanza, the image of a lizard’s eyelid is oddly used to describe the state of sleeplessness that equates night time to “bald white days.” The lizard’s eye is cruel and malicious, like the Hanging Man who acts remorselessly. Finally, the “vulturous boredom” instills another creeping intimation of trepidation as the image of a vulture ready to pounce on a dead body dangling from a tree is implicitly evoked. So, the executioner, the victim, the lizard and the vulture are all surrealistic symbols used to describe an agonizing death. This poem is not a solitary example of its kind. Rather, the motif of terror recurs in many others by Plath dealing with this theme; “Death & Co.,” for example, has been described by Hana Sambrook as “a poem of terror, written in the last autumn of Plath’s life” (19).

An insight into the key concepts of vampirism is important for a full appreciation of the motif of horror inseparably linked with death in Plath, since they occupy a central place in such masterpieces as “Lady Lazarus” and “Daddy.” The following is a comprehensive, if simplistic, introduction to what a vampire generally means in legend:

A Vampire was a dead person whose body had been taken over by an evil spirit. By day, the body lay in a hidden place as if dead, resting upon earth. With the setting of the sun, the Vampire arose. Keeping its human form, or perhaps taking the form of a bat, it went in search of the blood it needed. It attacked sleeping people, sucking their blood without awakening them, but causing them to have dreadful nightmares and to grow weak and listless. Unfortunately, people bitten by a Vampire often became Vampires themselves. (McGowen 57)

A Freudian reading of this description, with its emphasis on dreams being a natural outlet for unfulfilled wishes and repressed desires,
would easily establish a link between the arousal of the vampire from its daytime stupor and the unconscious’ transfer from a passive to an active state. A surrealist author, taking it a step further, would obviously see in the vampire’s assault on a sleeping person a treasured opportunity of bringing together motifs of (i) dreams (activated with the setting of the sun, or the onslaught of the night), (ii) horror (in the stealthy movements of the Vampire), (iii) distortion or mutilation (in the vampire’s physiological necessity of turning the gruesomeness of bloodthirstiness into a nutritious feast), (iv) the duality of suppression and liberation (in the victim’s death and rebirth as the undead), (v) semi-consciousness and half-formed narratives (in making people listless without awakening them). In a word, vampirism opens a broad prospect of images and themes that would capture the surrealist’s super-reality of death. Plath, in “Elm,” gives tongue to a tree perturbed by being the dwelling place of a vampire-bat, the blood-sucking symbol of death:

I am inhabited by a cry.  
Nightly it flaps out  
Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.

I am terrified by this dark thing  
That sleeps in me;  
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.  
(28—33)

Here the idea that the malignant death resides within the being and is not, as shall be seen in Dickinson’s case, an entity that exists without, evokes surrealist subjectivity in the sense that the reality of dreams, being specific only to the subject’s mind, does not figure in the consciousness of people existing in the externalist domain of perception. Having established the idea of death being within, terror is internally objectified since it is not only an attribute not only of the speaker tree in whom the malignant creature resides but is also contained in the hint of deadly mutilation effected by the love looked for not with any tenderness or affection but with “hooked” talons. This culminates into the paradox of love that combines affection with molestation.
But a bat is non-human and the poignancy of this kind of terrifying death is increased manifold by the substitution of the creatural symbol with the familial ties invoked by the poet’s own father and husband in “Daddy”:

If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two—
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know. (71—74)

Here the surrealistic vampire motif becomes very subtle for various reasons: the violent death is inflicted by the speaker’s dear ones and whereas the vampires sucked blood, it was the victim who killed them, another paradox reflecting back on the fact that the victims of a vampire themselves became vampires, combining in them predator and prey. There is a scathing and undisguised cruelty in the expression, “drank my blood,” hardly to be found anywhere in Dickinson, followed by a fit of Dionysian jubilation on the death of the vampire father that, more than a gesture of feminine emancipation, is an orgy of sadistic release—“There’s a stake in your fat black heart / And the villagers never liked you. / They are dancing and stamping on you” (76—78). The sheer wantonness of the dancing and stamping is cleverly infused with the authority of ritualism sanctioned by legends since, as it was traditionally believed, the only way to ensure that a vampire would not return to life ever again was to thoroughly mutilate its body. Hence a metaphysician in Dracula, armed with formidable knowledge of the unknown, unashamedly reveals his grotesque design against a female vampire, “I shall cut off her head and fill her mouth with garlic, and I shall drive a stake through her body” (Stoker 207). When such mutilation comes to signify deliverance for innocent humanity in legends, dreams are serving their purpose of engaging the subject in sadistic pursuits by linking them with redemption when in reality they would more readily be associated with deplorable transgressions. It hardly needs be said that the surrealists treasure dreams, at least partly, for this ability of bringing together reality and fantasy and, going a step further, discovering primeval instincts at the expense of civilization and thereby changing the connotations of sin into those of redemption.
Once again, in “Lady Lazarus,” the same strain of surrealistic terror plays a central role throughout the text and culminates in the unreserved pride of the speaker’s final claim, “Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air” (82—84), while, in yet another poem, the image of a vampire occurs most unexpectedly in the description of flowers as having “a mouth just bloodied” (“Poppies in July” 7).

With Emily Dickinson, the case is quite the opposite. Far from playing on images of terror or mutilation in describing her numerous encounters with death, she personifies it as a gentle friend, affectionately and peacefully relieving a human being from his wretchedness and bringing him the gift of eternity. She has an idea that ghosts which haunt the mind are more frightening than the external ones that haunt chambers (“Ghosts” 5—8) but, if such is the case, death is never the internal ghost that needs to be feared. It is for her a detached reality and

Ourself, behind ourself concealed,
Should startle most;
Assassin, hid in our apartment,
Be horror’s least. (“Ghosts” 13—16)

So the externalist assassin Death, in “The Chariot,” one of her most famous poems, becomes a coachman whom the speaker promptly notes for his “civility” (8). Allen Tate comments on this aspect of the poem thus:

He is a gentleman taking a lady out for a drive. But note the restraint that keeps the poet from carrying this so far that it is ludicrous and incredible; and note the subtly infused erotic motive, which the idea of death has presented to every romantic poet, love being a symbol interchangeable with death. The terror of death is objectified through this figure of the genteel driver, who is made ironically to serve the end of Immortality. (165)
So whereas Plath objectifies terror through a vampire bat, the same purpose is served in Dickinson through the genteel driver and the strain of absurdity noted earlier in Plath is here carefully avoided as the poet is conscious of not overplaying nihilistic redefinitions. In even more clear terms, the poet claims that she does not see any reason to fear death since it is to her no more than a household servant:

Afraid? Of whom am I afraid?
Not death; for who is he?
The porter of my father’s lodge
As much abasheth me. (Afraid? Of Whom am I Afraid?”
1—4)

The element of terror once eliminated, and an unambiguously loving relationship once established, death is looked upon as a long and uninterrupted sleep that has an almost sensuous joy and offers an indulgent scope for romantic indolence:

A long, long sleep, a famous sleep
That makes no show for dawn
By stretch of limb or stir of lid,—
An independent one. (“Sleeping” 1—4)

The prospects of corporal elation through cancellation of the senses underlying this description can be contextualized historically if compared with the many celebrations of sleep by the Romantic and the Victorian poets, a befitting example being Keats’ “To Sleep”:

O soft embalmer of the still midnight,
Shutting, with careful fingers and benign,
Our gloom-pleas’d eyes, embower’d from the light,
Enshaded in forgetfulness divine: (1—4)

For Dickinson, death works more or less as an embalmer rescuing her from the hectic and fretful, cyclical turmoil of life. In another poem, a latent sensuality is seen as the supreme characteristic of death, as it tenderly shuts the eyes of the sleeper:

Thine is the stillest night,
Thine the securest fold;
Too near thou art for seeking thee,
Too tender to be told. ("Let Down the Bars, O Death!" 5—8)

It is clear that the stillest night, far from being the surrealist vacuum devoid of light, activating the vampire-bat in darkness, is a haven eagerly sought by the poet. This is how Paul J. Ferlazzo describes the temperamental diversity of Dickinson’s death poems that focus on the physical aspects of dying: “These poems range from the reverential to the sentimental, from the eulogistic to the macabre” (43). But the poems that he selects as examples to illustrate the macabre quality—“I Like a Look of Agony” and “I’ve Seen a Dying Eye”—can hardly be said to approach the stark gruesomeness of, say, the rottenness of the freshly dug up dead body in Plath’s “Lady Lazarus.” This proves the major rift between the romanticized version of a benign death and a fearsome death guided by surrealistic principles.

Another significant feature of surrealism is the drastic changes introduced in the physical proportion of things in relation to each other. Ordinary things, when invested by seemingly demonic powers, become monstrous, a quality best captured by unwieldy enlargement as in Salvador Dali’s celebrated painting The Persistence of Memory, where the canvas shows watches made of an unlikely semi-solid material to have overgrown until they loom large over a nondescript landscape. This quality of monstrous features is worked out with reference to the theme of death in Plath’s celebrated poem “The Colossus.” The remains of the huge colossus, scattered all over a huge landscape, become a mighty and awe-inspiring symbol of death while the speaker is an archaeologist trying in vain, through piecing together those remains, to revitalize the dead god, representing, in other words, a futile struggle to ward off death. An idea about the colossus’ size is shockingly revealed through a reference to the time the speaker has already spent in his / her labour: “Thirty years now I have labored / To dredge the silt from your throat” (8—9). The significance of this size is reinforced in the last two stanzas by the close juxtaposition of the colossus with symbols of elemental power and energy—“lightening,” “wind,” “stars,” “sun” (22—27)— and the total effect is that of creating cosmic dimensions in which the solitary human being is implicitly mocked at for his smallness. The largeness
of the decayed statue, an obvious manifestation of death, serves to highlight the smallness of the human being who, with his vital urge for labour and design, represents life. The balance between the conceptual dichotomy of life and death is therefore lost in the physical incompatibility of the entities that symbolically represent them in the poem. One may contrast this dissimilarity of the two with the personification of death in Dickinson’s “The Chariot,” where death and the living person claimed by it are not only physically compatible human beings but also seem to benefit from a perfect psychological synchronization and its resultant coordination.

Another way of looking at the same issue is that a surrealist’s world deals essentially with representations that defy logic like the mechanics of optical illusions and carry with them underlying suggestions of order and symmetry falling apart. This dream-like play of illusions also plays a palpable role in Plath’s projection of death, particularly in cases where the reader of spectator is shocked or surprised through an utterly unexpected reversal of the impact of an image. This makes one reconsider the relationship between language and reality as the end of the process is to make a mockery of common-sense perception of “reality” and, as mentioned before, it attempts to bring into focus what the surrealists call the “super-reality.” An image of death in Plath’s “Poppies in July” explains the point:

Little poppies, little hell flames,
Do you do no harm?

You flicker. I cannot touch you.
I put my hands among the flames. Nothing burns. (1—4)

An image of freshness, innocence and vitality, reinforced by the endearing adjective “Little,” is instantly invoked by the mentioning of the poppies at the very beginning of the poem but the reader’s expectations from this image are disastrously undermined by the phrase that follows it in the same line. To borrow a phrase from Crystal’s definition of surrealism, death is here shown to have been “made of an inappropriate material.” Imagination suffers from another jolt as the unceasing annihilation invoked by the flames of
hell is once again made uncertain by the casual and relaxed tone of the inquiry that follows, “Do you do no harm?” And as the poppies flicker in response to this question, so do associations of words as the relationship between signifiers and their signifieds becomes precarious. True to the limitations of corporal insubstantiality imposed by dreams, the speaker momentarily realizes that s/he cannot touch the lethal flowers but in the next line proceeds to place his/her hand among them and notes—with or without surprise, we cannot tell—that they do not burn. The whole experience is then a mediatery between conscious and sub-conscious acts and death seen in one as a threat is realized in another as an illusion but the lingual confusion arises out of the fact that the words designating the things and happenings in the experience do not undergo a change to accommodate the rapid transition from one to the other level of the mind. Death, therefore, makes its presence be known where it apparently does not exist and, because the two have blended together, neither is reality the complete truth nor the dream only an illusion. By being multi-dimensional in this sense, the super-reality transcends ordinary perception. To understand how poppies can symbolize death, one has to suspend a homogeneous perception in favour of one that simultaneously addresses different modes of consciousness.

At the same time, this partial assimilation of multiple perspectives is more than a sweeping plunge into fantasy because the room for an intense brand of reality gained thereby is argued for by many famous psychologists who have theorized about surrealistic dynamics of imagination. Consider, for instance, this comment by Steven Pinker, “The imagination, of course, is not chained to one place at one time, and paintings without true perspective may, strangely enough, be evocative renditions of our mental imagery. Cubist and surrealist painters, who were avid consumers of psychology, used multiple perspectives in a painting deliberately, perhaps to awaken photograph-jaded viewers to the evanescence of the mind’s eye” (294). In Emily Dickinson, on the other hand, there is often an attempt to maintain the realistic standards for truth and logic.

This difference can also be analyzed in purely structural terms as conventional poetry, with its apparent emphasis on coherence,
elaborates a given idea by arranging words in a logical sequence, making them into tools of semantic explicitness, notwithstanding the multiple possibilities of interpretation. Dreams characteristically defy the regular causal patterns and so while Dickinson’s poems about death are structured in a way that ideas are generally foreshadowed by the ones preceding them, Plath deliberately sets herself the task of recording a thought process made thematically obscure through the juxtaposition of incongruous images which amounts to creating a total effect of a partially disjointed structure. As an example of this difference, one may contrast the images of “Poppies in July” with those in two of Dickinson’s poems: in “The Forgotten Grave” the poet ponders over the state of an old, neglected grave and in her poem entitled “The Rose” she gives a coherent picture of a flower in spite of her recourse to stylistic abridgements typical of imagism:

A sepal, petal, and a thorn
Upon a common summer’s morn,
A flash of dew, a bee or two,
A breeze
A caper in the trees, —
And I’m a rose! (1—6)

In these two poems of Dickinson, the thematic suggestions provided by the poems’ titles are fairly predictable, as images of life and death do not intermingle in a weird, irrational manner.

From the stylistic viewpoint, this surrealistic technique of Plath has an advantage of its own: even though the elements making up the content of the poem are held together precisely by their dissimilarities and capacity to entangle themselves into shocking juxtapositions, there is a significant harmony achieved at the same time between form and content. Death signifies the body’s decay, the cessation of the senses and a termination of order that determines worldly existence. Therefore, images and thoughts bundled together in a wild manner proclaim and celebrate the onslaught of death as the body of the poem comes to symbolically represent the body of the dying subject (and, incidentally, subject-matter), capturing a motif of chaos conquering order and the darkness of the unconscious overtaking the relatively systematic light of consciousness.
On the basis of all these arguments, it is concluded that Plath’s concept of death, in accordance with the principles of surrealism, deals with a dream-based reality in which conscious and subconscious forces intermingle unreservedly whereas, with the possible exception of some poems, nothing of this kind distinguishes the poetry of Dickinson.

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