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The Process of Mourning: Whitman and Dickinson’s Diverging Configurations of Grief

Meghan Vesper '05

Peter M. Sacks considers the elegy as the process in which a poet works through his grief, what Freud referred to as "the work of mourning." One of America’s greatest poets, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, respond very differently in their poetry to death and loss. In "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Whitman evokes five distinct stages of mourning: despair, a struggle between memory and healing, death, revelation, and finally, rebirth through song. In stark contrast, Dickinson responds to death with silence and paralyzed shock. She does not weep like Whitman in "The Second April," and although she certainly mourns the loss of her beloved, she will be unable to overcome grief when the beloved dies (7). On the other hand, does not have a beloved who inspires revelation. Her desire is to write poetry, and I will later examine how this does not provide her with the ability to transcend grief.

Before turning to Whitman’s "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," it is necessary to briefly consider the conventions of the pastoral elegy and the English elegy. Whitman’s view of the pastoral elegy provides a landscape to articulate and overcome loss that is more substantial than the "real" world (xvii). This landscape also allows poets to evoke the similarity between human loss and death in nature (xvii). According to Lambert, poets’ derivation of consolation from nature’s annual regeneration mirrors humans’ capability to recover from loss. Although the elegist’s loss may be permanent, nature’s renewal provides the elegist with the comfort that he will recover from his grief. Likewise, Peter M. Sacks concludes that the English elegy’s form and movement draws upon ancient vegetation rites of passage from death to rebirth (20). He also notes other conventions of the English elegy: questioning, the procession of mourners, images of the resurrection, the separation of mourning voices, and the acknowledgement of loss. These conventions provide a basic foundation for exploring how Whitman’s and Dickinson’s mourning processes conform and diverge from the English elegiac tradition.

According to Sacks, the American elegist refuses to conform with the English elegiac tradition and breaks through the English elegiac conventions in several critical ways. First, I propose that Whitman breaks-through his grief in order to fulfill the greater purpose of uniting America. Dickinson, on the other hand, never transcends the death of her old self. Her poems are preoccupied with the confrontation and exam of death, but she never loses its finality with a higher truth. Instead, she considers death and inconceivable pain part of the natural human condition.

I propose that Dickinson’s absence of desire, or a beloved, is one of the primary reasons she never weeps and overcomes her grief. This draws upon Henry Stewart’s argument that our desire for an absent beloved is often more passionate than the desire we feel in our own absence (2). He claims that even the most attached people are unable to overcome grief when the beloved dies (7). On the other hand, the loss of the beloved can be one step towards reaching absolute truth. This is true of Whitman in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d." Losing what he desires, a unified America, deepens his grief of Lincoln’s death. But it also stimulates Whitman’s determination to rebuild American democracy, culminating in revelation and healing. Dickinson, on the other hand, does not have a beloved who inspires revelation. Her desire is to write poetry, and I will later examine how this does not provide her with the ability to transcend grief.

As Sacks notes, mourning becomes a seasonal event for Whitman. The following spring's flowers, grass, and yellow-spear’d wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark embrace and the yellow-spear’d wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark... (24). This first section is the prelude to Whitman’s process of mourning. In section two, Whitman succumbs to despair and his sorrow becomes passionate. Whitman not only weeps, his primordial cry evokes language’s insufficiency in capturing his crisis. This is the darkest part of Whitman’s elegy and the first stage of his mourning process. The Western star is falling, the right is black, and Whitman cries that his soul is trapped by a cloud that renders him powerless. Stephen John Mack proposes that Whitman physically loses his vision because he feels estranged from the national identity with Lincoln’s death (125). His overwhelming sense of self-loss prevents him from singing, his usual source of healing (Aspí, 5). For Whitman, Lincoln represented America’s national identity and his death signifies permanent American disaster.

Whitman’s yearning for a unified America shapes the expression of his grief. Anne Carson argues that loss is a necessary condition for the English elegist as well. The English elegist’s grief is "disembodied", and Whitman’s grief is "the very essence of Lincoln..." (188). Lincoln represented America’s national identity, and his death signifies permanent American disaster.

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To join the dirges of the mourners in the streets. Furthermore, the days and nights are darkened by clouds, and the only light he describes comes through the windows of "dim lit churches". According to Lambert, this physical darkness, characteristic of post-Renaissance elegies, allows the mourner to explore the complexities and ambiguities of grief. In the pastoral elegy, on the other hand, the mourners grieve during the daytime when light offers insight and simplification (187). In Whitman’s elegy, the city’s ‘'bleakness’’ reflects that his mourning process is difficult, even confusing.

Although Whitman fails to overcome his grief in the country or city, he does not turn to the thrush again for another three years. In fact, he describes thisenguin’s unwillingness to let go of his memories of Lincoln.

Whitman’s hesitance is reflected in sections seven and eight, when he tries to alleviate the pain of loss by covering coffins with artificial flowers. They serve only as a temporary distraction. He gains a greater sense of urgency to join the thrush after he recalls his vision of the western star passing from the night. He tells the...
Whitman overcomes Lincoln's death, "that which comes out of Lincoln's death is surmounted by a stronger desire for America's unification. In relation to Carson's triangle, Whitman transcends his grief. His overwhelming sense of loss from the process of mourning: revelation.

This physical contact diminishes the fear of death, and also one feels "And the body gratefully nestling close to thee" (201-202). And the thrush invites physical intimacy with death when he sings: "Here, surrounded by physical signs of life and rebirth (201). Yet the lilac with mastering odor holds me".

Whitman is unable to pass from grief to the beginning stages of healing until he dies, the third stage in his process of mourning. Whitman's death is an essential stage because it physically removes him from the lilacs and the western star. In the swamp, he is able to psychologically detach himself from Lincoln's death. Aspiz describes the swamp's place in Whitman's poetry, and the affect it has on his sense of self: "Passing, I leave thee lilac with heart-shaped leaves, / I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming, returning with the spring". In this last stanza, Whitman sings, "But this sort, grieved myself, / And so, I thought the moment I linger, for the lustrous star has detain'd me, the star my departing comrade holds and detains me". This is the last stage in Whitman's process of mourning: rebirth. He physically lets go of deaths' hands, the darkness of the night and day, and the memories of Lincoln — represented by the scent of the lilac — no longer encompass him: "Passing, I leave thee lilac with heart-shaped leaves, / I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming, returning with the spring".

In number 344, "I die'd for Beauty —"

Dickinson describes her coffin's procession across the thriving fields of autumn — a physical journey that is similar to Lincoln's in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd". In "Passing, I leave thee lilac with heart-shaped leaves, / I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming, returning with the spring". She describes how death does not signify an end to sensory awareness for Dickinson. This is a true end of her death poems. For example, in number 448 ("I die'd for Beauty —") Dickinson's persona lies in her tomb and talks with a corpse in a nearby room. Even in death, part of Dickinson's consciousness remains. Dickinson argues that in "pursu'd the physical experience of death to its uttermost limit, beyond human consciousness..." (57). Dickinson refuses to accept death as the end of existence; she does not feel she is "bowed down, and weeping hopeless tears, / And the child and the musing comrade suffer'd." Whitman expresses the wish to get out of her coffin: "And then, I wanted to get out, / But something held my will". These lines do not evoke the same type of tension between memory and healing that Whitman experiences in "The Lilac Elegy," but she refuses to accept Christianity's concept of the eternal. She journeys "toward Eternity," but never actually reaches it. Dickinson's critical difference from Whitman lies in her desire to remain and die. She is not "alone in the eternal-temporal world. When she dies, she is never reborn. Her process of mourning involves four primary stages: death, heightened sensory awareness, shock, and silence. In number 344, "I die'd for Beauty —"

Dickinson places her stocking out of reach to denote a boundary between her dead persona and her family. This brings Dickinson to Berkeley's axiom of knowing, "toe est perceipt", which states that the dead only continue to exist when mourners are present (Shaw, 82). The fear of being forgotten by her family brings Dickinson's persona to the edge of despair: "But this sort, grieved myself, / And so, I thought the moment I linger, for the lustrous star has detain'd me, the star my departing comrade holds and detains me". This is in stark contrast with how Whitman expresses his grief. His beloved. Unlike Whitman, she does not despair. Her tone is calm and subdued as she relates her journey. I will return to her absence of passionate grieving shortly. First, it is important to note how death does not signify an end to sensory awareness for Dickinson. This is a true end of her death poems. In number 448, "I die'd for Beauty —"

"And once more, / I pass the glades, and the green vines, and the eddying swallows / By my own door, and the distant whisper / Of starlings". Dickinson refers to death as a "cessation of life". Dickinson's persona is not "fully at rest" like the dead soldiers in Lincoln's elegy. She worries that her family does not mourn her death and writes: "And would it blur the Christmas glee / My stocking hang too high / For any Santa Claus to reach / The altitude of me —"

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unified persona (19). Their capitalization also implies distinction from each other. The nerves no longer send any sensory awareness; they are still, like rocks. The heart, representative of desire, is equally paralyzed and cannot even remember how long ago the pain began. Whitman never experiences such intangible passing of time in “The Lilac Elegy.” Rather, he is in almost constant motion, passing from renewal to despair, and gaining a new perception of his self and America. In contrast, Dickinson’s persona loses a sense of unity between her body and soul in death. By the second stanza, she has no conscious control of her body’s physical movement: “The Feet, mechanical, go round – / A Wooden way.”

Dickinson writes in a prose piece, “Anguish has but so many throes – then Unconsciousness seals it” (qtd. in Anderson, 23). This reflects how Dickinson fossilizes when she reaches the point of despair. In line ten, she writes: “This is the hour of Lead –”, evoking a sense of permanence and oppressiveness. As Anderson notes, Dickinson’s feeling after pain is actually the absence of awareness: “no feeling at all, only numb rigidity existing out of time and space” (26).

Dickinson continues to evoke this dulled sense by comparing death to freezing. She emphasizes the slow passage of time by separating the heightened sense of cold, numbness, and death with dashes: “As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow – / First – Chill – then Stupor – then letting go –.” As in number 344, Dickinson implies that death is not the end. The final dash leaves Dickinson’s persona suspended between death and eternity.

Unlike Whitman’s, Dickinson’s poetry suggests that true healing is not possible. In number 550, (“I measure every Grief I meet”) Dickinson implies that people can only pretend to be healed: “At length, renew their smile — / An imitation of a Light / that has so little Oil –”. She never overcomes pain. Instead, Dickinson’s grief becomes so overwhelming that she physically stops moving and is silent. According to Marsilio Ficino, “hidden and continual grief” is at the center of a person’s life because he becomes attached to the temporal (qtd. in Staten, 2). But unlike Whitman, Dickinson never identifies the loss of a temporal beloved as the source of her pain. She does not have an erotic beloved as Whitman does; her greatest worldly attachment is her poetry. In fact, her desire to write does not fit within Anne Carson’s triangle of “lovers, beloved, and that which comes between.” According to Carson, falling in love inspires the lover to perceive the world and the self in a new way (153).

For Whitman, Lincoln’s death inspires a new vision of American democracy and vocation: he will unify America through song and the common experience of death. Without a beloved, Dickinson’s persona never transforms or aspires to an idealized world. In “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” Whitman’s erotic desire for American American democratic unity allows him to complete his process of mourning in American democratic unity allows him to complete his process of mourning in