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Two Different Views on Grief and Agony as Mental Pains In Emily Dickinson's Poems

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A B S T R A C T

This research looks at two poems of Emily Dickinson which are "I Measure Every Grief I Meet" and "I like a look of Agony". The goal of this research is to show different views on grief and agony as mental pains in order to gain a better understanding of the two poems. The writer applies New Criticism approach and uses comparative method in order to get evidences that are needed. The text focuses on pointing out different views on grief or mental pain through attitudes of the speakers in each poem by analyzing the two poems stanza-by-stanza. This paper affirms that even though the two poems have same theme which are grief and agony or mental pain, the attitude of each speaker towards these issues is significantly different. In "I Measure Every Grief I Meet", the speaker shows that they are full of compassion in observing their surroundings, they show sympathy and concern on people's feeling. The speaker admits that find comfort in knowing others also feel grief as they do but they do not see it as something beneficial to them so that they can take advantage from those who are in grief or experiencing physical pain. In "I Like a Look of Agony", the speaker is being harsh and selfish because they do not care of the condition of those who are in agony. The speaker shows no sympathy but the fact that this is something that benefits them so that they can find comfort in witnessing the agony of others.

INTRODUCTION

In poetry the term "speaker" has a different meaning from one might know in daily life. The speaker is a creational person that is chosen by a poet to deliver the words and the voice or "persona" of a poem [1], [2]. Therefore the speaker is not the poet even though the poem itself may be a biographical one [3]. The "voice" of the speaker makes a poem more alive and becomes a tool for the poet to deliver their ideas to the readers. It is important for the readers to know the role of of a speaker and the fact that the speaker is not the poet [4]. A poet sometimes gives different perspective to the speaker. The poet could simply change the speaker

genders, the era the speaker lives in and the surroundings of the speaker [4]. Therefore the reader may not think that the speaker is the poet themselves and also the reader may not ignore the role of the speaker in a poem since the speaker is the mouthpiece of the poet themselves.

This article discusses different views of on grief and agony as mental pains through two speakers' attitudes in the two poems of Emily Dickinson The poems are "I Measure Every Grief I Meet" and "I Like a Look of Agony". The different views are shown through the significantly different attitudes of the two speakers towards the theme of the poems which are grief and mental pain. The different attitudes can be seen by analyzing the two poems stanza-by-stanza. Dickinson herself is an American poet and she created around 1,800 poems in her life time [5].

Most of her poems are published after her death. She is considered to be an influence writer of Romanticism period even though she is commonly known as a poet from the Realist era. The writer personally admires Dickinson for her understanding of things in life and her skill at conveying thoughts through words in her poems [6]. The writer figures that these two poems of hers are still unknown to most people. The writer feels the need to share the beauty of Dickinson words and provide a better understanding on these two poems.

METHOD

The writer uses library research in conducting the research. The writer needs some references in order to provide the datum that are needed and also the better way for the readers to understand this paper. In order to get evidences that are needed the writer analyzes the two poems by using New Criticism. This approach forbids the act of seeing things outside the work that is being discussed [7], which means the writer does not see or consider any other aspects beside the poems themselves. This method focuses on the poems since those are only things that matters.

The writer also tries to show two different views on grief and agony as mental pains of each speaker in the two poems by using comparative method. The comparison is done after analyzing the two poems stanza-by-stanza so that the proofs of the different views are based on a whole interpretation. This is meant to avoid any misunderstanding of the different views themselves. This way is considered the best way since the poems do not consist of same amount of stanza. It is considered not effective since there is huge difference in the amount of words that are used in the two of Dickinson's poems.

In attempt to provide more understanding for the readers, the writer starts the explanation by analyzing these two poems stanza-by-stanza. The writer believes that it is easier to compare the two poems after providing a whole analysis. The comparison later shows significantly different attitudes of each speakers on grief and agony as mental pains. The writer also provides interpretations of the poems as results of elaborating the writer's own understanding and arguments that are taken from reliable sources. the writer mostly gives her interpretation more so that it shows the writers understanding of the meaning of the two poems.

DISCUSSION

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As mentioned before that the writer only focuses on the poem and does not compare the two poems line by line in order to get the evidences that are needed for the proof. The writer decides to divide this discussion into three parts. First part consist of the interpretation of the first poem which is "I Measure Every Grief I Meet". The second part consists of interpretation of the

second poem which is “I Like a Look Of Agony”. The last part consists of the comparison of the two poems. The comparison is conducted to see the different views which the writer believes can only be achieved after interpreting the whole part of the poem.

The speaker’s view on grief as metal pain in “I Measure Every Grief I meet” (first poem)

I measure every Grief I meet
 With narrow, probing, eyes –
 I wonder if It weighs like Mine –
 Or has an Easier size. (Dickinson 1-4)

This first stanza can be divided into parts in attempt to make the understanding easier for the reader. The first part consists of the first and second line in which the speaker states their view of the outside world-not her own feeling. In this part, the speaker states that she try to “measure” the sadness or grief on people face when the speaker sees them. In the second part the speaker tells how she feels inside. She states that she feels grief too and whether grief of everyone else is more bearable than hers.

I wonder if They bore it long –
 Or did it just begin –
 I could not tell the Date of Mine –
 It feels so old a pain – (Dickinson 5-8)

This stanza can be also separated into two parts. The first part shows that the speaker continues to question the phenomenon, she asks about the time of grief that others have been feeling. In the second part, the speaker talks about herself and states that she is not sure of how long she has been feeling the grief but she knows it has been such a long time she feels that way.

I wonder if it hurts to live –
 And if They have to try –
 And whether – could They choose between –
 It would not be – to die –
 (Dickinson 9-12)

In this stanza the speaker tries to question more. They wonder if those who are in grief ever think to stop feeling so by choosing death than life. This speaker here also seems to question themselves whether the thought of choosing death or commit suicide ever crosses their mind.

I note that Some – gone patient long –
 At length, renew their smile –
 An imitation of a Light
 That has so little Oil –
 (Dickinson 13-16)

In this stanza the speaker describes that those who have been feeling grief for so long and try to be patient for a long time “renew their smile”. Unfortunately the smile cannot convince the speaker that later they describe the smile as an imitation of light from a lamp that has so little oil which implies the smile does not look happy or good enough as is it is a dim light.

I wonder if when Years have piled –
Some Thousands – on the Harm –
That hurt them early – such a lapse
Could give them any Balm –
(Dickinson 17-20)

In this fifth stanza, the speaker questions whether time really heals wounds. The speaker wonders whether those who have been in grief for such a long time can be happy at the end. The speaker here seems to question themselves about this in a skeptical way as they are in doubt and not sure about the concept of time heals wounds.

Or would they go on aching still
Through Centuries of Nerve –
Enlightened to a larger Pain –
In Contrast with the Love –
(Dickinson 21-24)

This stanza is a continuation of speaker questions the concept of time heals wound. The speaker wonders whether those who are in grief may just feel sad forever that can cause them to feel more pain. The speaker wonders whether those who are in grief now might find happiness one day instead of being sad forever.

The Grieved – are many – I am told –
There is the various Cause –
Death – is but one – and comes but once –
And only nails the eyes –
(Dickinson 25-29)

In this stanza the speaker argues that they think there are many reasons for people to feel grief and death is one of them. The surprising part is that the speaker thinks that death only nails the eyes which means there are other reasons worse than death. There are more reasons out there for people to feel grief. Reasons that are worse than death.

There's Grief of Want – and grief of Cold –
A sort they call "Despair" –
There's Banishment from native Eyes –
In sight of Native Air –
(Dickinson 30-34)

This stanza is quite tricky to interpret because the meaning of want and cold are various here. The possibilities are want means desire and cold means things that one might lack in their life. Want could be desires that humans often have in life, for example desire for having enough money to live with. Cold could be things that one does not have in their life for example like a house to live in or things that keep them warm. In the third and fourth part it seems that the speaker talks about some kind of jail or something like exile.

And though I may not guess the kind –
Correctly – yet to me
A piercing Comfort it affords
In passing Calvary –

(Dickinson 35-39)

In this stanza, the speaker admits that they cannot guess the other reasons and that they feel comfort of knowing other feels grief too but not in a harsh way as they refer to biblical term which is Cavalry. The speaker states that witnessing that they are not the only one to feel grief calms the speaker. It is like a feeling of being not the only one to feel so.

To note the fashions – of the Cross –
 And how they're mostly worn –
 Still fascinated to presume
 That Some – are like my own –
 (Dickinson 40-41)

In this last stanza, the speaker still states that they feel comfort of knowing others are in grief as well and that others' grief might be like hers the speaker here refers to grief as fashion. It could be clothes. It gives the impression that the fact people wear this "fashion" amuse the speaker. The speaker tries to question the way some people deal with grief in as the same as the way the speaker deal with their grief.

The speaker's view on agony as a mental pain in "I Like a Look Of Agony" (second poem)

I like a look of Agony,
 Because I know it's true--
 Men do not sham Convulsion,
 Nor simulate, a Throe—
 (Dickinson 1-4)

In this first stanza, the speaker admits that they enjoy seeing those who are in agony or mental pain. It simply because the speaker thinks the emotion is true and cannot be faked. It is not possible for someone to fake their mental pain and their sadness. This fact makes speaker thinks that they can easily spot the truth without having difficulties in guessing things.

The Eyes glaze once — and that is Death--
 Impossible to feign
 The Beads upon the Forehead
 By homely Anguish strung.
 (Dickinson 5-9)

In the second stanza the idea of Agony later becomes the absoluteness death (Leiter 106). The speaker here states that death is the most impossible thing to be faked and they describe how it looks through the word beads and the suffering that happened because death. The speaker thinks that no one will fake the emotions they show towards death.

The different views that are represented through the speakers' significantly different attitudes in the two poems

The speaker of the second poem gives the readers idea that grief and agony as mental pains are profitable as long as you do not feel it while the speaker of the first poem shows that it is okay to feel grief when others do too. The speaker in the first poem does admit that they find comfort knowing others feel grief just like they do but there is no evidence or any proof of the speaker

in the first poem stating they like seeing others suffer because it is beneficial to them. Knowing others are also in grief helps the first speaker calm themselves and bear with the mental pain they are feeling. even tough the speaker here like the feeling of knowing they are not being the only one, the speaker does not state their thought harshly. The speaker in the second poem clearly states that they enjoy seeing others suffer because it brings advantage to them. They think sadness and death cannot be faked therefore it is easy for them to see the truth of things happen around her. It helps them shape and see things around them and feel at ease knowing that they are seeing the truth. It also can be said that the speaker of the first poem tries to be selfless with their view every time they see those who are dealing with mental pain even though they cannot help but keep relating things to themselves. The speaker in the second poem apart from not showing any concern of how death upsets others, they also show the readers that they are selfish enough to take advantage of those who are already unfortunate. They do not even bother to at least show some little condolence to those who are in agony. The speaker just harshly states they like witnessing people in agony because it gives them an easy way to find the truth.

CONCLUSION

This research can help reader to have a better understanding in reading poem by looking at the importance of a speaker's role in a poem. The writer provides stanza-by-stanza analysis in hoping that there will be no confusion created among the readers. In conclusion, the different views can be shown through attitudes that each of the speakers in the two poems has on grief and agony as mental pains. The poem "I Measure Every Grief I meet" the speaker shows her concern on people's condition while the speaker in "I like a Look of Agony" starts telling the readers their feeling and later how they see things around them based on their very own perspective and makes everything about themselves. There is no judgement of the writer that states the appropriation of each speaker's attitude.

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