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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Beauty of Death: "Archetypes" in Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelly and Emily Dickinson

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| ABSTRACT
Percy Bysshe Shelley is a central figure in British Romanticism whose works explore philosophical issues such as life, death, fate, and freedom through depictions of nature. These themes are closely intertwined with inner conflict, spiritual transcendence, and the pursuit of beauty. On the other hand, Emily Dickinson is one of the most influential poets in 19th-century American literature. Her poetry delves into profound themes of life, death, and faith, showcasing her continuous questioning of the true nature of existence. Although Shelley and Dickinson differ in writing style and emotional expression, both share a deep focus on the meaning of death and the relationship between life and death. Through symbolic imagery such as death, rebirth, elements of nature, and figures of the hero or anti-hero, both poets convey universal human emotions and collective experiences. While there is no shortage of research on the poetry of Shelley and Dickinson, few scholars have compared their works through the lens of Jungian Archetypal Theory. This paper tries to fill this gap by exploring the "beauty of death" embedded in the two poets' works by analyzing the archetypal features in their poems from three perspectives—Self, Hero, and Shadow. Meanwhile, the paper also seeks to inspire readers to rethink the relationship between life and death.

| KEYWORDS
Archetype Theory; Percy Bysshe Shelly; Emily Dickinson; Beauty of Death

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1. Introduction

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) stands as one of the most visionary figures of English Romanticism, distinguished by his radical idealism and lyrical intensity in works such as Prometheus Unbound and Ode to the West Wind. Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), widely regarded as one of America's greatest poets, carved out a singular literary voice through her unconventional use of slant rhyme and compressed syntax, producing nearly 1,800 poems that meditate on death, immortality, and the inner life. Both poets engage profoundly with the tension between mortality and transcendence—a thematic convergence that invites comparative analysis through the lens of Jungian Archetypal Theory.

Originating from Freud's psychoanalytic framework and substantially developed by Carl Jung, Archetypal Theory introduced the concept of the "collective unconscious"—a universal layer of the human psyche whose primary contents are "archetypes" such as the Persona, the Shadow, the Anima, and the Hero (Zhao Yiheng, Fu Qilin & Zhang Yi). Since the early 20th century, this framework has exerted a profound influence on literary criticism and cultural studies. Building on this tradition, the present paper examines the archetypal features in Shelley and Dickinson's poetry through the dimensions of the Self, the Hero, and the Shadow, with a view to illuminating the "beauty of death" embedded in their works.

Scholarship on Shelley has evolved through three broad phases: early political and historical criticism situating his Romanticism against the backdrop of the French Revolution; a mid-20th-century turn toward aesthetics and natural philosophy, represented by Abrams's mirror-and-lamp analysis of *A Defence of Poetry*; and a subsequent diversification drawing on ecological criticism (Morton, 2007), postmodern readings (Roberts, 2013), and cross-cultural reception studies (Sandy, 2016). In China, engagement with Shelley dates to Su Manshu's 1909 translation, deepening through systematic scholarly attention after 1949, with recent work focusing on imagery analysis and comparative studies.

Research on Dickinson gained momentum with Johnson's landmark 1955 study identifying death as a central theme encompassing both destruction and transcendence. Subsequent scholars extended this inquiry: Farr (1979) interpreted death as affirmation of eternal regeneration, while Vendler (1984) characterized Dickinson's treatment of death and beauty as an "imperfect aesthetics." Since the founding of EDIS in 1988, scholars have approached these themes from an increasingly global perspective (Liu Xiaohui, 2007). In China, Dickinson studies began with Jiang Feng's 1984 translation and have since diversified to encompass cultural identity (Li Ling & Zhang Yuejun, 2020 , spiritual dimensions (Li Yingxue, 2024) and so on.

Despite this rich body of scholarship, comparative studies of Shelley and Dickinson remain scarce, and the application of Jungian Archetypal Theory to their work is rarer still. To address this gap, this paper examines the archetypal dimensions of Self, Hero, and Shadow in their poetry, aiming to stimulate deeper reflection on the complex relationship between life and death.

2. The Self: The Transcendent Beauty of Death

In Jungian psychology, the Self refers to the core of an individual's psychological structure, representing the union of the conscious and the unconscious. Jung believed that the goal of individual psychological development is self-realization—achieving inner wholeness and harmony (Jung, 1961b). Throughout this process, death plays a critical role as a symbol: it is not only the end of the physical body but also the spiritual rebirth and sublimation of the soul. In the poetry of Shelley and Dickinson, such spiritual sublimation through death is frequently depicted, reflecting the transcendent beauty of death.

Shelley's Adonais, written as a tribute to John Keats, profoundly explores death, love, and spiritual sublimation, reflecting his thoughts on tragedy and self-realization in alignment with Jung's Self archetype. Through Adonais's death, Shelley illustrates both the fragility of life and the process of integrating the Self archetype: although Adonais's physical body dies, his spirit attains immortality, while Shelley himself undergoes spiritual sublimation in the process.

At the beginning of the poem, death is portrayed as cold and ruthless:

Death is gluttonous meal his silence, laugh at our weeping He went to the abyss of death.

Expressions such as "twilight of the dead room", "A pale shadow of death", and "devil" further reinforce this despair. Yet the line "but his bright soul / The world is still hanging" suggests that death marks the moment when the body returns to the eternal spiritual realm. In Stanza 21, Shelley exclaims:

Where do we come from? Why? To be on the stage
What an actor or audience? Both great and,
They will put all the life borrowed to death

The poet realizes that death compels individuals to relinquish attachment to material life and turn toward the spiritual world. This reflection deepens in Stanza 28:

To dust to dust! But pure spirit
Will be attributed to the glory that it comes from;
As one of the eternal grain, it will go beyond the last
And uncertainty, always shine, and never change,
And you cold corpse heap in the shame of the fireside.

Here, death becomes an opportunity for the rebirth and sublimation of the soul—a crucial step in Jung's "individuation". Stanza 41 reinforces this: "No, he's alive, awake, dead", suggesting that material existence is illusory while death is the key to entering the spiritual realm.

By mourning his friend, the poet ultimately achieves his own spiritual sublimation. At the poem's opening, he struggles to accept the loss:

"Don't leave me, don't make me sad, mad,
Like the lightning left the night!" Her cry
Wake up the death, death is a smile, let her embrace.

By the poem's end, however, he proclaims:

I am in the dark, fear, wander far;
And then, the soul of Adani, brilliant
Passes through the forehead of the insider, as bright as the stars,
It beckons from the immortality of spirit home to me.

Beauty does not vanish with death but is transformed into immortality. This reflects the "integration" of the Self archetype—through confronting death, the individual achieves liberation and sublimation of the soul, transforming death from a terrifying presence into one of peace and transcendent beauty.

Similarly, Dickinson's poetry embodies the Self archetype through accepting and reflecting on death. In *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, death is personified as a gentle companion:

Because I could not stop for Death— He kindly stopped for me—

The word "kindly" reframes death not as fearful but as inevitable yet gentle—in Jungian terms, the courage to accept death is a defining characteristic of the Self archetype. Moreover, death initiates a spiritual journey rather than marking a simple end:

The Carriage held but just Ourselves—And Immortality.

The "Carriage" symbolizes the journey toward death, while "Immortality" suggests that death and eternity coexist—death is a transformation rather than annihilation. This is further developed as the poet sheds mundane concerns:

We slowly drove—He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility—

By relinquishing both "labor" and "leisure"—representations of the outer, unintegrated self—the poet turns toward profound inner contemplation. The transitional scenes that follow reinforce this movement:

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—

These images suggest the constant flow of life toward death, through which the poet gradually recognizes that life and death are not opposites but unified (Wang Yuzhi, 2016). According to Jung, the ultimate goal of "individuation" is to integrate the unconscious and achieve self-transcendence (Xue Yuxiu, 2010; Jung, 1981)—death marks not the disappearance of the body but a transformation and transcendence of life itself.

I Felt a Funeral in My Brain explores spiritual breakdown, reconstruction, and sublimation. Dickinson opens with highly symbolic language:

I felt a Funeral in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading—treading—till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through—

This breakdown is not complete destruction but a preparation for spiritual integration and rebirth. The motion of "Mourners to and fro" signifies the ongoing struggle between emotion and reason—the beginning of "integration" for a fragmented consciousness. The poem reaches its climax with:

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down—
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing—then—

The breaking of reason plunges the poet into the abyss of self-exploration, yet through "drop down" and "hit a world", she ultimately achieves inner integration and spiritual sublimation. "Finished knowing—then—" marks the poet's complete awakening to the process of spiritual collapse and a deeper self-awareness. No longer a victim of the "funeral", she clearly perceives the death and reconstruction of her spiritual world—an embodiment of the Self archetype in which inner turmoil leads to integration, sublimation, and the transcendent beauty of death.

3. The Hero: The Emancipatory Beauty of Death

The Archetype of the Hero is a key concept in Jung's Archetypal Theory, referring to individuals' internal strength and personality patterns as they face adversity and suffering, ultimately achieving psychological growth and self-liberation (Jung, 1992). Both Shelley and Dickinson portray the Hero archetype in their works, using the challenge of death and liberation of the self to manifest its traits.

Shelley's poetry employs highly symbolic characters, such as Prometheus and the West Wind to illustrate the Hero archetype, revealing the process of spiritual liberation through conflict and suffering. In *Prometheus Unbound*, Prometheus is a quintessential Hero figure who rebels against Zeus's tyranny and endures immense suffering for the advancement of human civilization, yet ultimately achieves self-awakening and spiritual liberation..

Thou art not omnipotent, for I will not bow Before thy might.

These lines illustrate Prometheus's spirit of defiance—even facing certain defeat, he fearlessly challenges Zeus's authority and refuses to submit. His contempt for tyranny is further expressed:

"Scorn and despair,—these are my empire:—
More glorious far than that which thou surveyest
From thine unenvied throne, O Mighty God!"

Despite his suffering, Prometheus regards it as more glorious than Zeus's tyranny—a defining characteristic of the Hero archetype. Though physically chained, his spirit is liberated:

"For though I suffer, I have seen the dawn
Of a new world, where men shall rise and break
Their chains, and build their temples in the sky."

According to Jung, the hero typically undergoes a "hero's journey" (Joseph, 1955)—facing challenges, enduring suffering, and ultimately achieving self-growth and liberation (Ping Liqing, 2020). Prometheus's journey exemplifies the emancipatory beauty of

death: though he suffers physically, his spirit is set free.

In Ode to the West Wind, the West Wind symbolizes change and renewal as both destroyer and preserver. The opening stanza captures its destructive force:

O Wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

The West Wind sweeps away dead leaves—symbolizing the death of the old order—while simultaneously carrying seeds of new life, embodying the intertwined relationship of death and rebirth. As Shelley firmly believed in the continued existence of the spirit after death, he embraced death as a transition to a more meaningful existence rather than a feared end. The poet invokes the West Wind's power to achieve his own spiritual liberation:

I would ne'er have striven
As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.
Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!
A heavy weight of hours has chain'd and bow'd
One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

He further expresses his desire to dismantle outdated thoughts:

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,
Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!

The "death" of old thoughts is a necessary precursor to the birth of new ideas. The poem reaches its climax with "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"—Winter symbolizing death and decay, Spring representing resurrection and liberation. Through the West Wind, the poem illustrates the interconnectedness of death and rebirth, showcasing the emancipatory beauty of death.

Dickinson's poetry, by contrast, portrays the growth of the "inner hero" through spiritual liberation and the separation of the soul from the body. In *I Cannot Live With You*, she explores spiritual liberation through depicting an unfulfilled love:

I cannot live with You—
It would be Life—
And Life is over there—
Behind the Shelf

Through confronting the pain of separation, the poet demonstrates both the courage to face death and a process of inner growth (He Zhongqing & Zhao Jing, 2019). Though the poem features no traditional hero, the poet exhibits the "inner struggle and growth" characteristic of the Hero archetype—by overcoming her own limitations, she achieves spiritual liberation, embodying the emancipatory beauty of death.

The Soul Has Bandaged Moments explores the soul's struggle against trauma and oppression. The opening lines establish its pain and fear:

The Soul has Bandaged moments—
When too appalled to stir—
She feels some ghastly Fright come up
And stop to look at her—

In Jungian theory, fear is the individual's initial response to suffering, but the true hero gradually finds strength to resist. The word "Bandaged" symbolizes suppressed pain—temporary in nature, as the soul gathers strength through suffering. This strength erupts in the poem's middle section:

The Soul has moments of Escape—
When bursting all the doors—
She dances like a Bomb, abroad,
And swings upon the Hours.

"Burst all the doors" and "dances like a Bomb" symbolize the explosive awakening of the soul's rebellious spirit. The soul's ongoing confrontation with threatening forces forms an essential part of the Hero archetype—through repeated self-repair and the quest for freedom, the soul exemplifies the "struggle" characteristic of the Hero, revealing the emancipatory beauty of death.

4. The Shadow: The Enlightening Beauty of Death

The Shadow, as defined by Jung, represents the repressed or denied aspects of the individual psyche—traits or desires deemed unacceptable by society or even the self (Jung, 1981). Encompassing not only negative emotions and impulses but also untapped potential and creativity, the Shadow archetype is frequently revealed in literary works through inner conflict,

suppressed emotions, and struggles with self-awareness. This is prominently displayed in the poetry of Shelley and Dickinson, particularly in their portrayals of death and the conflict between ideals and reality.

Shelley's poetry juxtaposes idealism and revolutionary spirit with profound reflections on death, destruction, and human impotence. Written in 1820 during a low point in his life, To a Skylark uses the skylark as a metaphor for Shelley's idealistic vision (Xu Xiao, 2018), painfully highlighting the gap between his ideals and reality:

We look before and after,
And pine for what is not;
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

These lines express the contradictory nature of human emotion—happiness and sadness inextricably intertwined. "Pine for what is not" directly addresses unfulfilled desires in the Shadow archetype, while the coexistence of "sincerest laughter" and "some pain" illustrates the duality within the human soul. The anxiety surrounding the death of ideals is a clear manifestation of the Shadow archetype.

This sense of unattainable perfection deepens as Shelley elevates the skylark to an almost unreachable existence:

Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow,
The world should listen then, as I am listening now!

The poet can listen and plead, but never truly attain the skylark's state—an expression of the Shadow archetype's negative aspect, reflecting the smallness and limitations of the human spirit before unattainable ideals. The skylark's transcendent song further embodies a longing for immortality:

Waking or asleep,
Thou of death must deem
Things more true and deep
Than we mortals dream,
Or how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?

"Thou of death must deem things more true and deep" highlights the fear and confusion about death and a desire for transcendence within the Shadow archetype. Despite the inevitable collapse of his ideals, the poet continues to aspire toward them—a positive attitude in the face of conflict that carries the enlightening beauty of death.

In *The Triumph of Life*, Shelley explores humanity's powerlessness before life's torrent:ed him. In the poem, the poet explores humanity's sense of powerlessness in the face of life's torrent:

Yet so
Was borne amid the crowd as through the sky
One of the million leaves of summer's bier.—
Old age & youth, manhood & infancy,
Mixed in one mighty torrent did appear,
Some flying from the thing they feared & some
Seeking the object of another's fear,
And others as with steps towards the tomb
Pored on the trodden worms that crawled beneath,
And others mournfully within the gloom
Of their own shadow walked, and called it death...

Shelley reflects on the inevitable limitations of the human condition—saint and tyrant alike unable to escape life's grasp. The poem ends with the cry "Then, what is life? I cried", conveying both his quest for life's essence and his perception of death's inevitability. Through the irreconcilable contradictions of the Shadow archetype, Shelley illustrates the enlightening beauty of death.

In Dickinson's poetry, the Shadow archetype is equally prominent. In *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, death is personified as a calm companion, creating a paradoxical portrayal of death as both benign and inevitable—reflecting the inescapability of death as a key trait of the Shadow archetype, while the poet's tranquil attitude symbolizes its enlightening beauty.

The sense was breaking through
Then space began to toll
As if the heavens were a bell.
Just then, a plank in reason broke

Through "the sense was breaking through" and "a plank in reason broke", Dickinson portrays a mental collapse showcasing another facet of the Shadow archetype. Yet "I fell down and down and hit a world at every plunge" suggests that spiritual

transcendence is closely linked to the collapse of the mind—death marking both the end of suffering and the beginning of soul elevation, emphasizing its dual and enlightening nature.

In *I Cannot Live With You*, the Shadow archetype manifests in the poet's helplessness before the inevitable death of love—both physical and spiritual. Moving from loss to calm acceptance, the poet reveals courage and eventual triumph over despair, reflecting the enlightening beauty of death.

A Coffin Is a Small Domain is among Dickinson's most philosophically profound poems, exploring the boundaries between death and the soul through the symbols of the coffin and grave:

A Coffin—is a small Domain,
Yet able to contain
A Citizen of Paradise
In it diminished Plane.

The phrase "diminished Plane" reflects the Shadow archetype, symbolizing both the restrictive nature of the physical world and the potential for spiritual transformation beyond it. Though the coffin confines the individual, it holds a "Citizen of Paradise"—suggesting death as a transition to something higher rather than an absolute end. The grave deepens this paradox:

The poet also reflects on the grave:
A Grave is a restricted Breadth—
Yet ampler than the Sun—
And all the Seas He populates
Moreover, Lands He looks upon.

Though "restricted", the grave is paradoxically "ampler than the Sun"—embodying the core of the Shadow archetype as something that cannot be easily understood or directly faced. Death marks the end of physical space while opening a gateway to spiritual transformation, revealing the enlightening beauty of death.

In confronting death through coffin, grave, and spiritual journey, Dickinson's poetry invites readers to face the Shadow within, uncovering both the terrifying and transcendent aspects of death and revealing the deeper truths of human experience.

5. Conclusion

Through the lens of Jungian Archetypal Theory, it is evident that in the poetry of Shelley and Dickinson, death represents not merely the end of life but a pathway to beauty and eternity. The "beauty of death" reflects the complex emotions within the human psyche while revealing the profound connection between life, death, and spiritual transcendence. Through death as theme and imagery, both poets explore how humans can gain insight into life by accepting and confronting death, ultimately achieving spiritual transcendence and emancipation.

Literary classics endure because they withstand the test of time. The "beauty of death" in Shelley's and Dickinson's poetry continues to provoke rethinking of the relationship between life and death—by accepting the limitations of life, we may cherish its value more deeply, confront death with a positive attitude, and achieve spiritual transcendence.

Nevertheless, this study has only examined the shared archetypal traits present in a selection of their works. Due to space constraints, other archetypal features in their broader oeuvre remain unexplored. Future research could further investigate the diverse manifestations of archetypes in their poetry and how these archetypes reflect their profound insights into human existence.

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