

Dealing with Death in Elizabeth Jennings' Poetry

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Abstract

Elizabeth Jennings (1926- 2001) is a woman poet of the Movement of the 1950s. She has written more than seventeen books of poetry and several books on criticism. She has not received much critical attention compared to the other Movement poets. Themes like loneliness, birth, death, religion, breakdown, despair, sadness, love, art are dealt with her in her poetry. Death is dealt by many poets in their poetry. Jennings has written poems on death almost in all her collections. This paper analyses some of her poems on death and tries to ponder into her varied approaches to death.

Death is a theme dealt by many poets in their poetic works. Jennings poems on death reveal her closer view of death because many of her poems arise out of a personal experience of death. It deals about the death of her parents, friend and also her niece who was born dead and very few deals with a general view of it.

Elizabeth Jennings was once asked in an interview by Gerlinde Gramang about her main themes in her poems to which she replied:

"I write a lot about love and death. In one of my poems I say "I am ashamed I've never seen somebody dying". This has changed now, because my mother died some years ago. And also a friend of mine died. I also wrote a lot about my childhood. I grew up in North-Oxford, we had a field at the back of our house and we used to climb through a fence. There were many willow trees, we used to do a lot of cycling, and we played bows and arrows. I also love old toys; they remind me of my childhood" (Interview)

The following selection of poems about death illustrates the poet's approach to this theme. In the first selected poem "For a child born dead" she describes a child's refusal to be born alive. In "After a Time" Jennings remembers a friend's death two years after. In this poem the discovery of a new kind of grief is depicted. The third poem "Bitter fruit" talks about a different type of death. It is the death of feeling and the lack of trust which are the major themes in this poem. The last poem in this selection "For my Mother, More than an Elegy", Jennings remembers the time spent with her mother, praises her wisdom and

expresses her grief about her death. Different ways of approaching death are attempted in the poems.

Rejection of Life in “For a Child Born Dead” (1955)

This poem is about the refusal of a child to be born alive and to become a part of our world. Before this child has even started life in our world it has preferred to die and so we are not given the chance to spoil its innocent life. Therefore this poem is also about purity. We do not know this person’s character and this is the reason why we cannot “distort” it in our memories. We are shocked by this refusal, and the only thing remains is grief.

Jennings wrote this poem after her sister lost a child. It is a very spontaneous poem and was written very close to the event, which is very unusual for Jennings. She was not aware of its full meaning for a long time. She knew that it was about this dead child, but only much later she found that it was also a poem about purity.

The poem starts with a question: “What ceremony can we fit/you into now?” The writer of the poem seeks to explore and find answers to this question. Because the child died before it was born, the normal conventions of grieving for a loved one cannot be applied. Grief would normally be oppressed in the remembrance of the life of the person who has died. This child had no life, so there is nothing to be remembered. Since the normal conventions of mourning are not appropriate, the poet seeks another “ceremony” through which to express her sorrow.

In the first and the third stanza the poet explores this problem. Remembrance is described as a comparison between the cold defeat of death and the “warm and noisy room” of life. This contrast is seen as important in the allowing the mourners to grieve: “We could remember you in lively mood / And then look at the other side/ the moon drawn out of you”. But this “opposite” does not exist in the case of the dead child. The poet summarizes the paradox of the situation in the last line of the second stanza: “You could not come and yet you could go” (Jennings 47).

In the final stanza the poet seeks consolation in the theme of purity. She finds solace in the fact that memory of this unborn child can never be tainted: “Not in our memories can we mould /you”(Jennings 47).

This poem also reveals the rich simplicity of Jennings’ best work. She achieves a complete pattern of stanza and rhyme, a perfectly controlled tone (abbacc, deedff, ghhgii). The poem’s control of grief makes the quiet tone more moving. The poem is mainly spare with two touches of metaphor in line three and in the verb “stride” with its adverb “ambitiously” in the second stanza as though to lay bare her grief. As she says: “But we have never seen you stride/ ambitiously the world we know. You cannot come and yet go” (Jennings 47). Here the pressure of emotions bear the weight of her telling, and metrical pattern, sound quality, perfect pitch, invariably act as barometer if the reader cares to check for perfect balance.

Jennings makes a very touching play with imagined opposites and the sad paradox of “You could not come and yet you go.” The poet speaks for itself, yet Miss Jennings’ comments on the poem contain their own revelation. In her book *Let’s Have Some Poetry!* She states: “If I write too quickly about something that concerns me deeply, either I cannot finish the poem or else I write a very bad one” (*Let’s Have Some Poetry* 24). She goes on to explain that she had written about her sister’s still born child and close to the time of the event although “I was deeply afraid that the finished poem might be sentimental.” Yet it became a favorite for many readers for her work, and she continues with an explanation of how the poem seemed wholly “given” to her. “It was highly personal, certainly, but the personal emotion was generalized and purified by a content of thought in the poem itself. For sometimes, in poetry, an idea is brought to life by means of an image or an emotion, while at other times, a strong emotion is controlled, and therefore made more powerful, by means of a sequence of thought and argument”(*Let’s Have Some Poetry* 43)

Mourning the death in “A Death” (1958)

In the Poem “A Death”, from *A Sense of the World* Jennings is talking about a particular person. It is in the very first stanza we come to know that she is talking about the death of a man who was in her house for three days prior to his death. It is during these three days that she felt very close to that person. It means she was not much close to him earlier. She says: “‘His face shone’ she said,/ ‘ Three days I had him in my house,/ Three days before they took him from his bed,/ And never have I felt so close’(Jennings 69). It seems that may be the poetess was distant to that person earlier due to some grievances but when she find him in the death bed she feels more closer than before.

In the second stanza the poetess describes her relation with the man when he was alive. The relation between them was not very transparent which means that he did not reveal everything to her. The words “opaque” and “hide” show how drawn away both were from each other. Jennings says: “Always alive he was/ A little drawn away from me/Looks are opaque when living and his face/Seemed hiding something carefully” (Jennings 69).

In the third stanza Jennings again brings out at situation three days before his death. When she talked to that person he was not the same person as earlier. He bore no secrets and his face bore a new shine. She had never seen him so open before.

In the concluding stanza Jennings shifts from her relationship to the man to another lady who steps in. This is about Jennings description of the person when he passed away. She observes the lady peacefully offering flowers on his grave. She further says that she offered the flowers just to please the viewers. She says: “How tenderly she put flowers on his grave/ But not as if he might return again/ Or shine or seem so close:/ Rather to please us were the flowers she gave” (Jennings 69).

Jennings through the last three lines of the poem tries to tell us about a relationship between the man and the lady. From the earlier stanzas it seems that the man has borne a secret which he did not reveal to anyone during his life. It is only three days before his death that he has

revealed it to the poet and in the last stanza it seems that the beloved or the lady did not feel much on the death of the man. It was just for the sake of the society that she had come to the grave and gave flowers without any mourn grievance or memory of the lost person.

It seems that Jennings want to convey that it is during the realization of death or may be after death many hidden truths are revealed which a person might not be able to tell during his lifetime.

Jennings in her *Autobiography* has revealed her strenuous relationship with her father and the poem *One Flesh* also talks discusses about the loose relationship of her parents in their old age. So may be in this poem the reference is to the dying father who had always been a fearful figure to Jennings and did not talk much. The lady referred to in the last stanza may be her mother.

Mourning the Death of her father in Jennings's "For My Dead Father" (1970)

Jennings has frequent references in the *Autobiography* to her father. Her references to her relationship with him which are repeated in a vague and evasive manner that she feared and admired him. She writes: "My relationship with my father was a strange one," In my extreme childhood, he was a remote and much revered figure. As I grew older and saw more of him, he became rather a frightening person ("Autobiography" 10). In the poems and elegies she wrote after his death, she confronts the ambivalence of her feelings about him. In the final lines of one of the poem "For My Dead Father," she creates an image which evokes a sense of their troubled relationship. "There was love now I see of a strange kind,/ We could move about in each other's mind"(Jennings 261).

Jennings' father passed away and now she cannot even apologize for what went wrong between them. Nor can she shed false tears but still she believes that there was a kind of eccentric relationship between them where each of them thought about the other.

Remembrance of a Friend's Death in *After a Time* (1975)

Jennings dedicated this poem to a friend who died two years before. She talks about her changed attitude towards death. Whereas she used to suppress all memory of death and did not dare to think about it, she suddenly seems to relate to it in a different way. She discovers a new kind of grief which enables her keep alive the remembrance of people she liked during life time.

In the first two stanzas Jennings states that she has never really been able to relate to death in the way others do. She describes herself as being excluded from the group of mourning people. She only seems to observe them from a distance and does not feel a part of them. She watches them when they "stare or cry". She does not know how to behave or what to do or say.

It is two years ago that her friend died; she did not use two years for mourning. It seems to have disappeared. She feels herself growing in strength. It is her past she is suddenly aware of .She thinks of happy times and also of faith. She does not know why these thoughts

have suddenly occurred to her. “In early hours I stand/Reflecting how I came/ To this”(Jennings 317).

The last stanza of the poem only consists of questions. She does not know what has made her change her attitude towards death or grief. She can only suspect that it was love that “drew me to glad grief from remorse”. What she has achieved is a new attitude of care for the dead. She is now able to face or even to accept death. This gives her strength. The poem is written in a very regular form and consists of four stanzas with five lines each. The rhyme scheme used is ababa.

Lack of trust in “Bitter Fruit” (1985)

In this poem Jennings talks about a different kind of death. It is the death of feeling she has to go through because she has lost trust in another person. Her whole future seems about to break into pieces because she does not know whether she will be able to again rely on this person. The fear and hopelessness she feels now reminds her of darkness and death.

The title of the poem is chosen very skillfully because it symbolizes bitter feelings. At the beginning of the poem the poet wonders how many types of bitter feelings exist. It is impossible for her to understand the extent to which her feelings for a person have changed. There is only darkness left inside her because this person lied to her. At the end of the second stanza she wonders what their future will be, because there seems to be little trust left between them.

In the third stanza the poet asks whether this trust can be regained, and whether the happiness they had achieved could return. But such a breach of trust can never be forgiven: “We can forgive anything but that”. She compares her feelings with grief and death. She writes that “There is noon-day sun that mocks at grief/ before we turn to dust” (Jennings 530).

In the last stanza of the poem a climax is reached. The poet describes this kind of death as: “the worst I have ever known”. It is the distance she feels between herself and the other person who makes her suffer. There is only fear and darkness left inside her.

This poem is written in a passionate way. The reader to a great extent is able to comprehend the pain described as a kind of death. The pain she feels is far more present than in the previous poems, which were about real death.

Like the previous poem, *Bitter Fruit* is written in a regular form. It consists of four stanzas with five lines each; the rhyme scheme is ababa.

Fond Remembrance of her Mother in “Fifteen Years after a Death”(1989)

This poem is from her collection *Tributes* in which she is paying a tribute to her dead mother. It is only after fifteen years after her mother’s death she recollects the past, the time she spend with her mother.

She begins with a question which she poses to herself, She asks : “Why was I hard, cruel, sullen?/Why did I turn away and want you to say you were sorry / When it was all my fault?(Jennings 585). Jennings is remembering the past with a heavy heart. The annoyance

she had towards her mother at times when she was displeased is clearly reflected in these lines. It was her stubborn behavior that prevented her from apologizing even when it was her mistake. She herself replies to her questions saying that: "Because I knew / You would always return, never sulk, always laugh,/ Touch my hand, crack a joke, stare at me,/ Never scold or upbraid me. You should have done (Jennings 585). Her mother was kind enough to tackle her as a girl and she would always come back lovingly to her daughter. But Today Jennings feels that her mother should have scolded her for her mistakes. Now the time has passed and her mother is no more with her to reproach her and improve her. It is very touching that when the mother was alive Jennings behaved rudely with her and today she is repenting for her fault when she is no more. However the repentance is too late.

Now Jennings shifts to her present when she is alone and awake till late night with the lights on. She is again reminded of her mother's lorries as she says: "Night lorries lumbering below the windows/ And I am alive and wakeful and living among strangers.(Jennings 585).The lorries recited by her mother in childhood are the point of closeness and familiarity as it reminds her of her mother or else she is living among strange people. Fifteen years of misery, anger and guilt have passed by and for her the good times are back as she has grown up to be a poet. The good time at present cannot replace the good time she had spent with her mother when young.

It is almost in the last ten lines of her poems she regrets how she failed to know that her mother was going to die soon. She says: "You taught me death and I never knew you were dying" (Jennings 585). When Jennings is reminded of her death she says she cannot bear to hear the even the name of the place where her mother passed away as she says : "On that island in the English Channel whose name/ I cannot hear spoken or even bear to see/ A picture postcard of"(Jennings 585) The place of death reminds frightens Jennings and she feels she has to be blamed. Jennings is now mature enough to understand the implications of what her mother said. She is now so understanding and experienced as if she could teach the ways of living life to her mother's as she says: "In our childlike precarious love/ You taught me that death is sitting and watching the sea/ Without a smile. That is how I last saw you./ If you were here now you could learn living from me"(Jennings 585).

Remembrance of the Poet's mother in *For My Mother* and "More than an Elegy" (1992)

This poem is included in Jennings' poetry volume *Times and Seasons* and is part of a series of poems she wrote for her mother. The other poems included in this sequence are entitled

"My Mother Dying Aged 87", Grief", "Her Birthday", "A Memory", "Sudden Remembrance", "Her Wisdom", "Let Me Learn", "Her Gifts and My Debt". In these poems Jennings tries to remember the time she spent with her mother, praises her wisdom and expresses her grief about her death.

In the poem *More than an Elegy* the poet wonders where her mother has gone after her death and what her present existence is like. She also likes to discover and describe the relationship she now has with her. Although she is dead she is still alive in the poet's mind.

The first stanza of the poem consists of four questions. The poet asks herself what has become of her mother after she died. In order to be able to express her mother's changed form of existence Jennings makes use of imagery. She wonders whether her mother is now: "A thought on the wind" or "A balance of spirit and air". At the same time the poet concedes that it is impossible to know the answers to these questions, and therefore it must be impossible to express to them in words. She comes to the conclusion that her mother's spirit must be "Where at best faith carries the heart". She addresses her mother and says. "You are both air/ and earth and you are part/ Of a disciplined fire" (Jennings 626). Her mother is not present in body, but she is present everywhere; in air, earth and fire.

The poet tries to get in contact with her mother when she prays. She states that when thinking of her mother she still relates to her "physical memories", because it seems impossible to imagine her in her changed existence. She is also amazed that she now seems to be able to express the love for her mother in a more loving way than she could when she was still alive.

In the last two lines of the poem Jennings again makes use of imagery to describe her mother's state of being. This time she compares her mother to the singing of a blackbird, which fills the air. She finishes the poem with the following words. "O you are/ The way a blackbird sings/ and shapes the air" (Jennings 626). The poem is written in a regular form and consists of eight stanzas with four lines each. The rhyme-scheme is regular as well and has the pattern abab.

Conclusion:

The seven poems discussed in the paper portray Jennings' realistic and close approach to death. Most of the poems arise out of the death of her near and dear ones. She learns many truths which she could not learn when these persons were alive. It is only

In "For a Child Born Dead" the harsh reality of life is portrayed. Before life is blessed to the child it has faced death. The closeness to the event makes the poem sensitive and touching. The second poem "A Death", though the title is not specific but towards the end it feels that Jennings is talking about the particular death of her father. Though a man may hide his real self when he is alive it is only towards the end that there is realization and he reveals many hidden secrets to others. Death which is the final stage in this life reminds us to come closer to truth. The third poem "For my Dead Father" is again about the relationship with her dead father which has not been smooth. Though there was a strange kind of love in their relationship Jennings could not reveal this during his life time. Now she cannot apologize but only repent as her father is no more. It is better to have healthy relationship with parents in life for later on one has to shed tears as there can be no apology after death. "After a Time" firstly talks about the usual conventions of mourning the death which Jennings generally ignored. It is

only after two years after her friend's death she feels the sorrow. In a way it is a clue to the fact that it is until we don't see or feel the death of someone closer to us we don't really know what death is. We become more personal and concerned when we come across such deaths. Further "Bitter Fruit" is not directly related to death but it basically deals with the bitter truth about the loss of trust. The loss of trust makes Jennings feel like death. Once one loses trust it cannot be regained. "Fifteen Years After" is a recollection and repentance about the death of Jennings' mother. It reflects how Jennings is disturbed by her past relation with her mother and feels guilty about her behavior with her mother too. Now there is no option left except repentance, recollection and shedding tears. Her nostalgia makes her more sensitive. At present she is mature, experienced and can understand the lessons of life and even can teach her mother but she is no more to listen. The truth which one should learn early in life is realized only after the loss of the person. Finally in the poem "More than an Elegy" is about the fond remembrance of her mother. She feels the presence of her mother in the elements of nature. The only point of contact with her mother is prayer. She is not able to forget the love of her mother. She is an energy giver to Jennings and her memory and her love is like the presence and singing of a blackbird in the air.

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