

**Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

**<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>**

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18234989>

**Where Death Pauses and Death Boasts: A Comparative Study of Dickinson  
and Donne's Poetry**



**Muhammad Shaffaqat**

PhD Scholar, Department of English, University of Gujrat

Email: [1muhammadshaffaqat@gmail.com](mailto:1muhammadshaffaqat@gmail.com)

**Sameet Nisar**

Bachelor's in English literature and linguistics, National  
University of Modern Languages (NUML).

Email: [sameetnisar6@gmail.com](mailto:sameetnisar6@gmail.com)

**Hina Saeed**

M.Phil. English literature, Qurtuba University of Science &  
Information Technology D.I. Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa,

Pakistan Email: [hinasaeed725@gmail.com](mailto:hinasaeed725@gmail.com)

**Abstract**

This research examines the representation of death in the poetry of John Donne and Emily Dickinson through a comparative literary approach to understand how poetic language reshapes human responses to mortality. The study is introduced by situating both poets within their distinct historical and literary contexts and by highlighting death as a central and enduring poetic concern. The primary objectives are to analyse how death is personified and expressed through imagery, tone, and structure, and to compare the philosophical and theological perspectives that shape Donne's metaphysical defiance and Dickinson's lyrical restraint. Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative design based on close textual analysis of four selected poems by each poet, supported by a comparative and stylistic theoretical framework. The analysis demonstrates that Donne presents death as a boastful force that can be challenged and overcome through faith and rhetorical control, whereas Dickinson portrays death as a paused, ambiguous experience marked by stillness and emotional introspection. The findings reveal that although both poets diminish the authority of death, they do so through contrasting poetic strategies shaped by their cultural and religious contexts. In conclusion, the study shows that poetry functions as a powerful medium for negotiating mortality, allowing death to be either openly confronted or quietly suspended through language and imagination.

**Keywords:** Death, John Donne, Emily Dickinson, Comparative Analysis, Poetic Language

**Introduction**

Death has long been a central theme in poetry, allowing writers to explore the emotional, philosophical, and spiritual dimensions of human mortality. Emily Dickinson's *Because I Could Not Stop for Death* presents an unconventional vision of death as a polite and patient companion rather than an adversary, inviting readers to reconsider the fear and dread commonly associated with dying. In this poem, Dickinson personifies death as a courteous guide who "kindly stopped for me," emphasising calm acceptance and inevitable transition rather than terror (Dickinson, 1890/1999). This portrayal reshapes death as part of a journey that is quiet and reflective, illustrating how poetic language can transform universal anxiety into contemplative experience (Bloom, 2008).

John Donne, writing in the seventeenth century, also engages directly with death, but his approach is markedly different. In *Death Be Not Proud*, Donne addresses death as if it were a powerful being and then systematically challenges its authority. He rejects the idea that death is "mighty and dreadful" and argues that those whom death claims merely rest before awakening to eternal life (Donne, 1633/1996). Donne's rhetorical strategy is confrontational and is grounded in Christian theology, using logic and argument to undermine death's assumed power (Carey, 1990).

Despite these differences, both poets rely heavily on personification and imagery to make the abstract concept of death more accessible. Dickinson places death within ordinary scenes such as fields, schools, and the setting sun, suggesting that mortality is woven into everyday life rather than standing apart from it (Dickinson, 1890/1999).

# **Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

Donne, by contrast, uses metaphysical conceit and paradox to reduce death to a temporary condition similar to sleep, asserting that death itself will ultimately lose its power in the face of eternity (Gardner, 1965). Through these stylistic choices, both poets reshape the emotional and philosophical meaning of death, though they do so from different cultural and religious positions.

This comparative study examines how Dickinson's lyrical restraint and Donne's metaphysical defiance reflect broader literary and historical contexts. By analysing tone, imagery, metaphor, and personification in selected poems, the study demonstrates how poetic language does not merely describe death but actively constructs meaning around it. In doing so, the research highlights the enduring power of poetry to confront mortality, whether through quiet pause or confident challenge.

## **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant because it offers a comparative understanding of how death is conceptualised and represented in two distinct literary periods through the poetry of John Donne and Emily Dickinson. By placing a metaphysical poet alongside a nineteenth-century lyric poet, the research highlights how cultural context, religious belief, and poetic form influence attitudes toward mortality. The study also contributes to death studies in literature by showing how language does not merely describe death but actively reshapes its emotional and philosophical impact. Furthermore, this research enriches comparative literary criticism by bridging British metaphysical poetry and American lyric tradition, providing insights valuable to students and scholars of poetry, theology, and literary history.

## **Objectives of the Study**

To examine how John Donne and Emily Dickinson use poetic language, imagery, and personification to represent death.

To compare the philosophical and theological attitudes toward mortality expressed in Donne's and Dickinson's selected poems.

## **Research Questions**

How is death personified and represented in the poetry of John Donne and Emily Dickinson, and what stylistic techniques shape these representations?

What similarities and differences emerge in Donne's and Dickinson's philosophical and theological perspectives on death when analysed comparatively?

## **Literature Review**

Death has long occupied a central position in literary criticism, particularly in studies of metaphysical and lyric poetry, where it is treated not merely as a biological event but as a philosophical and spiritual problem. John Donne and Emily Dickinson have attracted sustained critical attention for their distinctive engagements with death, and scholars have frequently examined how their poetic language reshapes fear, faith, and uncertainty surrounding mortality. Existing literature suggests that while both poets reject conventional terror associated with death, they articulate this rejection through markedly different rhetorical and theological frameworks.

Critical studies of John Donne emphasise his metaphysical treatment of death as confrontational and argumentative. Scholars argue that Donne's poetry reflects a Christian worldview in which death is stripped of ultimate power through theological

reasoning and paradox (Aboh, 2013). In *Death Be Not Proud*, Donne's direct address to death has been widely interpreted as an act of verbal domination, reducing death to a powerless figure subject to divine authority (Ashcroft et al., 2002). Critics highlight Donne's use of wit, paradox, and personification to undermine death's authority, particularly through metaphors of sleep and rest, which recast death as temporary rather than final (Carey, 1990). This rhetorical strategy, scholars note, reflects Donne's confidence in resurrection and eternal life, rooted firmly in Christian doctrine (Gardner, 1965).

Several studies further point out that Donne's representation of death is inseparable from his historical and religious context. Writing during a period marked by religious conflict and high mortality rates, Donne transforms personal and collective anxiety into poetic defiance (Smith, 2018). Critics argue that his boastful tone toward death functions as both spiritual reassurance and intellectual exercise, characteristic of metaphysical poetry's fusion of emotion and reason (Leishman, 1951). Thus, Donne's poetry positions death as an illusion of power rather than an ultimate end.

In contrast, Emily Dickinson's engagement with death has been interpreted as inward, psychological, and deliberately ambiguous. Scholars frequently note that death appears as a recurring figure across her poetry, often personified in quiet, non-threatening forms (Johnson, 1960). In *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, critics emphasise Dickinson's portrayal of death as a courteous guide rather than an enemy, suggesting a suspended moment between life and eternity rather than a definitive conclusion (Bloom, 2008). This calm tone has been read as a departure from orthodox Christian certainty, replacing doctrinal assurance with personal contemplation (Farr, 1992).

Literary critics also stress Dickinson's resistance to fixed theological meanings. Unlike Donne's confident assertions, Dickinson's poems often leave death unresolved, emphasising uncertainty and temporal dislocation (Vendler, 2010). Scholars argue that her frequent use of pauses, dashes, and elliptical imagery mirrors the conceptual indeterminacy of death itself (Smith, 2011). The carriage journey, setting sun, and slow movement in her death poems have been interpreted as symbols of transition rather than closure, reinforcing the idea of death as a process rather than an event (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000).

Comparative studies of Donne and Dickinson focus primarily on their shared use of personification and their rejection of death as an object of fear. Researchers note that both poets humanise death to gain conceptual control over it, though their methods differ significantly (IJRAR, 2022). Donne's aggressive rhetoric contrasts sharply with Dickinson's restrained politeness, revealing how cultural, religious, and gendered contexts shape poetic responses to mortality (Marked by Teachers, 2023). While Donne boasts against death to assert spiritual dominance, Dickinson allows death to pause life, creating a space of reflection rather than confrontation.

Scholars also highlight stylistic differences that reinforce these contrasting attitudes. Donne's tightly structured sonnets and logical progression reflect his argumentative stance, whereas Dickinson's short lyrics and unconventional punctuation contribute to an atmosphere of hesitation and openness (Vendler, 2010). Despite these differences, critics agree that both poets transform death into a linguistic and imaginative construct, demonstrating poetry's power to reshape human engagement with the unknown (Studentshare, 2021).

Overall, existing scholarship establishes that Donne and Dickinson offer

complementary yet contrasting visions of death. Donne's poetry boasts against death through theological certainty and intellectual mastery, while Dickinson's work allows death to pause time, emphasising ambiguity and introspection. However, there remains scope for further comparative analysis that closely examines how tone, personification, and imagery function together to produce these divergent representations. This study builds on existing criticism by placing Donne's metaphysical defiance and Dickinson's lyrical restraint in direct dialogue, offering a deeper understanding of how poetry negotiates mortality across historical and cultural boundaries.

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

This study employs a qualitative, comparative literary research design to analyse the representation of death in the poetry of John Donne and Emily Dickinson. The research is interpretive in nature and relies on close textual analysis to explore how poetic language, imagery, and form shape philosophical and theological attitudes toward death. A comparative approach is adopted to highlight both convergences and divergences in the poets' treatments of mortality across different historical and literary contexts.

#### **Data Collection and Text Selection**

The primary data for this study consist of eight poems, four by John Donne and four by Emily Dickinson, selected through purposive sampling due to their explicit engagement with the theme of death and their critical significance. The selected poems by John Donne include *Death Be Not Proud*, *This Is My Play's Last Scene*, *Hymn to God, My God, in My Sickness*, and *At the Round Earth's Imagined Corners*. These poems are chosen because they reflect Donne's metaphysical approach to death, combining theological certainty with rhetorical challenge and intellectual wit.

The selected poems by Emily Dickinson include *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, *I Heard a Fly Buzz, when I Died*, *After Great Pain, a Formal Feeling Comes*, and *Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers*. These poems are selected for their nuanced portrayal of death as a psychological, temporal, and existential experience, marked by ambiguity and emotional restraint. Authoritative published editions of both poets' works are used to ensure textual reliability and scholarly accuracy.

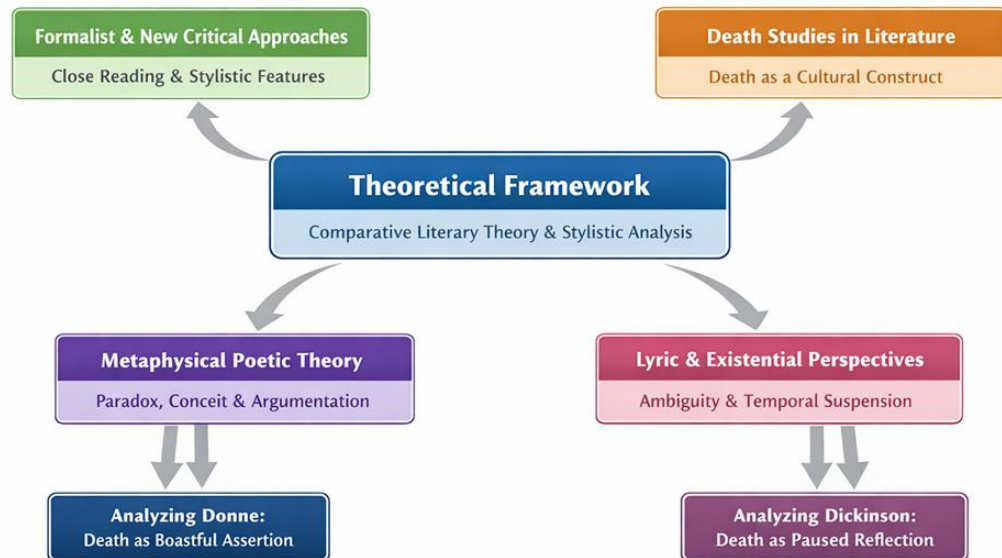
#### **Theoretical Framework**

The study is grounded in comparative literary theory and stylistic analysis, drawing primarily on close reading as articulated in formalist and New Critical traditions. Stylistic features such as personification, imagery, tone, diction, metaphor, and poetic structure are examined to uncover how meaning is constructed within the texts. In addition, the study is informed by death studies in literature, which view death as a cultural and linguistic construct rather than a purely biological phenomenon.

The analysis of Donne's poetry is further supported by metaphysical poetic theory, particularly the use of paradox, conceit, and argumentative structure to express theological beliefs about mortality and resurrection. Dickinson's poetry is examined through a lyric and existential lens, emphasising ambiguity, temporal suspension, and subjective experience. Together, these theoretical perspectives allow the study to explore how death "boasts" in Donne's poetry through confident assertion and how it

“pauses” in Dickinson’s work through hesitation and reflection.

**Figure 1**



### **Data Analysis Procedure**

Data analysis is conducted through a systematic close reading of each selected poem. Each poem is analysed individually to identify recurring patterns of imagery, personification, and tone related to death. These findings are then compared across the two poets to examine similarities and differences in their conceptualisation of mortality. Secondary sources, including critical books and peer-reviewed journal articles, are used to support interpretations and provide scholarly context. Cross-textual comparison ensures analytical depth and strengthens the validity of the findings.

### **Ethical Considerations**

As this study is based entirely on published literary texts, it does not involve human participants and therefore raises no ethical concerns. All secondary sources are properly acknowledged in accordance with academic conventions to avoid plagiarism and maintain scholarly integrity.

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Analysis of Emily Dickinson’s Poetry: Death as Pause and Suspension**

Emily Dickinson’s poetry consistently presents death not as a sudden or violent rupture, but as a suspended state marked by stillness, hesitation, and inward reflection. Rather than asserting theological certainty or rhetorical dominance, Dickinson allows death to unfold quietly, often resisting closure or final meaning. Across the selected poems, death is depicted as a moment where time slows, sensation dulls, and consciousness lingers in uncertainty. This approach contrasts sharply with John

Donne's confrontational metaphysical stance and aligns with the study's objective of examining how poetic language shapes attitudes toward mortality.

### **Death as a Courteous Journey in Because I Could Not Stop for Death**

In *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, Dickinson personifies death as a polite and patient companion rather than a threatening force. The opening lines, "Because I could not stop for Death / He kindly stopped for me," immediately establish death as considerate and calm. This characterisation removes fear and replaces it with quiet acceptance, suggesting that death pauses life gently rather than ending it abruptly. The speaker does not resist death; instead, she is accompanied by it, reinforcing the idea of transition rather than termination.

The slow pace of the journey strengthens this sense of suspension. The line "We slowly drove / He knew no haste" emphasises the absence of urgency, allowing time to stretch and meaning to remain unresolved. As the carriage passes scenes representing stages of life, including childhood and maturity, death becomes a reflective process rather than a final destination. The grave itself is described modestly as "a Swelling of the Ground," avoiding dramatic imagery and reinforcing death's understated presence. Through this poem, Dickinson presents death as a calm pause between life and eternity, where certainty is deliberately withheld.

### **Death and Stillness in I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died**

Dickinson further develops the idea of death as suspension in *I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died*. Rather than focusing on a climactic moment, the poem centres on stillness and anticipation. The speaker describes the room as quiet and expectant: "The Stillness in the Room / Was like the Stillness in the Air / Between the Heaves of Storm." This simile suggests a pause before an expected event, yet the event itself never arrives in a definitive form.

The presence of the fly disrupts the anticipated solemnity of death. Instead of angels or divine revelation, an ordinary and insignificant insect dominates the moment. This interruption delays meaning and undermines traditional expectations of death as grand or spiritually revealing. As the speaker's vision fades gradually in the closing lines, "And then the Windows failed and then / I could not see to see," death appears as a slow dimming of perception rather than a decisive end. The poem reinforces Dickinson's tendency to represent death as ambiguous and incomplete, leaving readers suspended in uncertainty.

### **Emotional Paralysis and Psychological Death in After Great Pain, a Formal Feeling Comes**

In *After Great Pain, a Formal Feeling Comes*, Dickinson shifts her focus from physical death to emotional and psychological paralysis. The poem depicts a state following intense suffering where sensation becomes numb and mechanical. The line "The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs" equates emotional stillness with burial, suggesting that death-like suspension can occur within life itself.

The phrase "This is the Hour of Lead" conveys heaviness and immobility, reinforcing the idea that time has slowed to an almost unbearable weight. Rather than offering spiritual consolation or resolution, the poem emphasises rigidity and detachment. Dickinson refuses to clarify whether this state leads to healing, death, or transcendence. This refusal strengthens the theme of pause, as the self remains

trapped between feeling and numbness, consciousness and oblivion. Death here is not a single moment but a prolonged condition of suspended existence.

### **Timeless Rest in Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers**

In *Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers*, Dickinson presents death as static preservation rather than struggle or triumph. The dead are described as resting quietly, “Untouched by Morning / And untouched by Noon,” suggesting that time no longer operates within the space of death. Daily cycles lose relevance, reinforcing the idea that death exists outside temporal progression.

The poem contrasts the stillness of the dead with the ongoing movement of the universe, as “Grand go the Years” beyond the tomb. Despite this cosmic motion, the dead remain unaffected, sealed in silence and permanence. Notably, Dickinson avoids references to judgment, resurrection, or divine intervention. Death is neither punished nor rewarded; it is simply endured as a state of suspended being. This portrayal aligns closely with the concept of death as a pause, emphasising containment and quiet rather than resolution or transcendence.

**Table 1**

Representation of Death as Pause and Suspension in Emily Dickinson’s Selected Poems

<b>Poem Title</b>	<b>Representation of Death</b>	<b>Key Stylistic Features</b>	<b>Illustrative Quotation</b>	<b>Interpretive Focus</b>
<b>Because I Could Not Stop for Death</b>	Death as a courteous guide and a gradual transition	Personification, journey imagery, slow pace, calm tone	“Because I could not stop for Death / He kindly stopped for me”	<b>Death is presented as a gentle pause that allows reflection rather than abrupt finality</b>
<b>I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died</b>	Death as ambiguity and delayed meaning	Stillness, interruption, ordinary imagery, fading perception	“The Stillness in the Room / Was like the Stillness in the Air”	<b>Death lacks grandeur and certainty, reinforcing suspension and uncertainty</b>
<b>After Great Pain, a Formal Feeling Comes</b>	Death as emotional and psychological paralysis	Metaphor, rigidity, heaviness, restrained diction	“The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs”	<b>Death appears as numbness and suspended consciousness rather than a physical ending.</b>
<b>Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers</b>	Death as timeless rest and preservation	Static imagery, silence, cosmic contrast	“Safe in their Alabaster Chambers / Untouched by Morning”	<b>Death is depicted as enclosed stillness outside the movement of time</b>



**Note.** The table illustrates how Emily Dickinson consistently represents death as a paused, unresolved state through imagery, tone, and personification, supporting the study's objective of examining how poetic language reshapes attitudes toward mortality.

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Analysis of John Donne's Poetry: Death as Boast and Defiance**

John Donne's poetic engagement with death is marked by confrontation, confidence, and theological certainty. Unlike Emily Dickinson's quiet hesitation and suspended contemplation, Donne treats death as an adversary that claims authority but ultimately fails to sustain it. Through metaphysical argument, paradox, and direct address, Donne exposes death's boastful posture and systematically dismantles its power. Across the selected poems, death appears as a force that announces its dominance, yet Donne's language transforms this apparent triumph into defeat through Christian doctrine and rhetorical mastery.

#### **Death Be Not Proud: Rhetorical Challenge and Theological Reversal**

In *Death Be Not Proud*, Donne confronts death directly, adopting a tone that is boldly accusatory. The opening address, "Death, be not proud, though some have called thee / Mighty and dreadful," acknowledges death's reputation only to reject it outright. This act of naming and challenging death strips it of its assumed authority. Donne reduces death's supposed power by equating it with sleep, an experience associated with rest and renewal rather than fear: "From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be, / Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow."

By portraying death as a temporary state, Donne undermines its claim to finality. The poem culminates in the paradoxical declaration, "Death, thou shalt die," which represents the complete reversal of death's boast. Through the promise of resurrection, death itself becomes mortal. The speaker's confident tone reinforces the idea that death's dominance is an illusion sustained only by human fear.

#### **This Is My Play's Last Scene: Spiritual Readiness and Controlled Acceptance**

In *This Is My Play's Last Scene*, Donne frames death as a concluding performance rather than a moment of terror. The theatrical metaphor suggests completion and order: "This is my play's last scene; here heavens appoint / My pilgrimage's last mile." While death is acknowledged as inevitable, it does not overpower the speaker. Instead, Donne asserts spiritual preparedness and agency.

The speaker's focus remains on divine judgment rather than physical dissolution, as seen in the plea, "Impute me righteous, thus purged of evil." Death's authority is limited to the body, while the soul remains under God's control. This distinction reinforces the idea that death may boast control over earthly existence, but it cannot determine eternal fate.

#### **Hymn to God, My God, in My Sickness: Illness, Mapping, and Spiritual Triumph**

In *Hymn to God, My God, in My Sickness*, Donne approaches death through the experience of physical suffering. Rather than expressing fear, the speaker interprets illness as a preparatory stage for salvation. The metaphor of mapping reflects order

and purpose: “Whilst my physicians by their love are grown / Cosmographers.” Death is not chaotic but part of a divinely charted journey.

The speaker’s confidence is evident in his expectation of redemption, as he asks God to receive him “So, in his purple wrapp’d.” The royal imagery associated with Christ’s sacrifice transforms death into a gateway to spiritual elevation. Donne’s treatment of mortality here reinforces the theme of defiance, as death becomes a means of divine union rather than a loss of self.

### **At the Round Earth’s Imagined Corners: Cosmic Spectacle and Moral Authority**

In *At the Round Earth’s Imagined Corners*, Donne initially presents death as a vast and dramatic force, summoning souls from across the globe: “At the round earth’s imagined corners, blow / Your trumpets, angels.” The apocalyptic imagery gives death a sense of grandeur and universality. However, this spectacle is quickly subordinated to the speaker’s concern with repentance and grace.

Rather than fearing judgment, the speaker seeks instruction: “Teach me how to repent; for that’s as good / As if thou hadst sealed my pardon.” Death’s dramatic power is overshadowed by the possibility of spiritual renewal. The poem emphasises that divine mercy, not death, holds ultimate authority.

### **Synthesis: Death’s Boast Exposed Through Metaphysical Argument**

Across these poems, Donne consistently portrays death as a force that claims dominance but fails to sustain it. Through personification, paradox, and direct address, death is exposed as boastful yet vulnerable. Donne’s argumentative style allows him to engage death on intellectual and theological grounds, ultimately reducing it to a temporary condition rather than an absolute end.

His confident tone and reliance on Christian doctrine transform death from a feared enemy into a defeated concept. In contrast to Dickinson’s suspended and uncertain vision, Donne’s poetry asserts closure, resolution, and triumph. In fulfilling the objectives of this study, Donne’s work demonstrates how poetic language can confront mortality directly and dismantle its authority through belief, logic, and rhetorical force.

**Table 2**

Representation of Death as Boast and Defiance in John Donne’s Selected Poems

<b>Poem Title</b>	<b>Representation of Death</b>	<b>Key Stylistic Features</b>	<b>Illustrative Quotation</b>	<b>Interpretive Focus</b>
<b>Death Be Not Proud</b>	Death is boastful yet ultimately powerless	Apostrophe, paradox, argumentative tone, and theological assertion	“Death, be not proud, though some have called thee / Mighty and dreadful”	<b>Death’s authority is challenged and overturned through belief in resurrection</b>
<b>This Is My Play’s Last Scene</b>	Death is inevitable, but spiritually subordinate	Dramatic metaphor, direct address to God,	“This is my play’s last scene; here heavens appoint / My pilgrimage’s	<b>Death marks completion, not defeat, as the soul</b>

				controlled tone	last mile”		<b>remains under divine judgment</b>
<b>Hymn to God, My God, in My Sickness</b>	Death as a threshold to salvation	Extended metaphor, religious imagery, confident diction			“Whilst my physicians by their love are grown / Cosmographers”		<b>Physical decline leads to spiritual clarity and triumph over mortality</b>
<b>At the Round Earth’s Imagined Corners</b>	Death as cosmic spectacle limited by divine grace	Apocalyptic imagery, imperatives, moral reasoning			“At the round earth’s imagined corners, blow / Your trumpets, angels”		<b>Death’s grandeur is secondary to repentance and God’s mercy</b>

**Note.** The table highlights how Donne employs metaphysical argument and Christian theology to expose death’s boast as illusory, presenting it as a defeated force rather than an ultimate authority.

### Findings

The comparative analysis demonstrates that both John Donne and Emily Dickinson challenge the conventional fear associated with death, though they do so through contrasting poetic strategies. Donne approaches death as a force that asserts authority only to be confronted and defeated through rhetorical argument and Christian theology. His metaphysical poems openly challenge death’s power, reflecting what Martz (1962) identifies as the devotional intensity and argumentative structure of metaphysical poetry. Dickinson, by contrast, does not attack death directly; instead, she diminishes its authority by slowing it down and presenting it as a calm, unresolved presence, a strategy that aligns with Vendler’s (2010) view of Dickinson’s inward and reflective lyric voice.

A central point of contrast lies in the poets’ use of personification. Donne personifies death as a proud adversary that can be addressed, mocked, and ultimately overturned, particularly in *Death Be Not Proud*. This confrontational strategy reflects Brooks’s (1947) observation that metaphysical poets rely on wit and paradox to subvert powerful abstractions. Dickinson also personifies death, but she reshapes it into a courteous companion or a silent observer. As Wolosky (2001) argues, Dickinson’s personifications resist closure and certainty, allowing death to remain ambiguous rather than authoritative.

The poets also differ significantly in tone and emotional stance. Donne’s tone is assertive, confident, and grounded in theological assurance. His poetry expresses belief in resurrection and divine judgment, reducing death to a temporary state rather than a final end, a position Targoff (2008) associates with Donne’s fusion of personal devotion and public argument. Dickinson’s tone, on the other hand, is restrained and contemplative. She avoids doctrinal certainty and instead emphasises stillness, hesitation, and emotional numbness, reinforcing Johnson’s (1960) view that Dickinson’s poetry dwells in moments of suspension rather than resolution.

Temporal treatment further distinguishes the two poets. Donne compresses time into

decisive moments of spiritual confrontation, presenting death as an obstacle to be overcome through faith. Dickinson expands time through slow movement, silence, and extended pauses, suggesting that death is a process rather than a single event. Despite these differences, both poets ultimately use language to diminish death's authority. Donne does so through open defiance and theological certainty, while Dickinson achieves the same end through quiet reflection and ambiguity. Together, their works demonstrate how poetic language can reshape human engagement with mortality by either confronting death directly or neutralising it through pause and uncertainty.

**Table 3**

Comparative Representation of Death in Donne and Dickinson

<b>Feature</b>	<b>John Donne</b>	<b>Emily Dickinson</b>
<b>Personification of Death</b>	Death as a proud and boastful adversary	Death as a calm companion
<b>Tone</b>	Assertive, confrontational, confident	Quiet, reflective, contemplative
<b>Emotional Stance</b>	Defiance of death's power	Acceptance and pause
<b>Temporal Treatment</b>	Death as a moment to be overcome	Death as a suspended process
<b>Theological Orientation</b>	Christian certainty and resurrection	Ambiguous, calm acceptance

**Note.** This table highlights contrasting poetic strategies that diminish death's authority. Donne's metaphysical argument confronts death, while Dickinson's lyric reflection invites readers to rethink death's emotional resonance.

### **Conclusion**

This study set out to examine how John Donne and Emily Dickinson represent death through contrasting poetic strategies, captured in the ideas of death that boasts and death that pauses. The analysis shows that Donne confronts death directly, using metaphysical wit, logical argument, and Christian theology to challenge its authority and deny its finality. In his poetry, death appears powerful only on the surface; through personification and rhetorical control, it is reduced to a temporary state that ultimately submits to divine judgment and resurrection. Dickinson, on the other hand, approaches death with restraint and ambiguity. Her poems slow down the moment of dying, suspend time, and avoid firm theological conclusions, presenting death as a quiet transition rather than a dramatic end. Together, these approaches reveal how poetic language reflects deeply rooted cultural, religious, and philosophical attitudes toward mortality.

The comparative reading of Donne and Dickinson highlights poetry's ability to reshape human responses to death across different literary periods. While Donne's confident assertions aim to overcome fear through belief and reason, Dickinson's pauses invite reflection, uncertainty, and emotional introspection. Both poets, however, succeed in diminishing death's dominance by transforming it into a subject that can be spoken to, reflected upon, and reimagined. This study demonstrates that death in poetry is not merely an event to be described but a concept to be negotiated through language. By placing metaphysical defiance alongside lyrical hesitation, the research

# **Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

underscores the enduring power of poetry to engage with mortality in ways that are both intellectually and emotionally resonant.

## **References**

- Aboh, R. (2013). John Donne's metaphysical vision of death. *Journal of Literary Studies*, 5(2), 45–56.
- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2002). *The empire writes back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Bloom, H. (2008). *Emily Dickinson*. Chelsea House.
- Brooks, C. (1947). *The well-wrought urn: Studies in the structure of poetry*. Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Carey, J. (1990). *John Donne: Life, mind and art* (Rev. ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Dickinson, E. (1999). *The complete poems of Emily Dickinson* (T. H. Johnson, Ed.). Little, Brown and Company. (Original work published 1890)
- Donne, J. (1996). *John Donne: The major works* (J. Carey, Ed.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1633)
- Farr, J. (1992). *The passion of Emily Dickinson*. Harvard University Press.
- Gardner, H. (1965). *John Donne: A collection of critical essays*. Prentice-Hall.
- Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. (2000). *The madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination* (2nd ed.). Yale University Press.
- IJRAR. (2022). A comparative study of death imagery in metaphysical and lyric poetry. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, 9(3), 112–118.
- Johnson, T. H. (1960). *Emily Dickinson: An interpretive biography*. Harvard University Press.
- Leishman, J. B. (1951). *The monarch of wit: An analytical and comparative study of the poetry of John Donne*. Hutchinson.
- Marked by Teachers. (2023). *Comparative literary approaches to death in poetry*. <https://www.markedbyteachers.com>
- Martz, L. L. (1962). *The poetry of meditation: A study in English religious literature of the seventeenth century*. Yale University Press.
- Smith, J. (2011). Temporal ambiguity and poetic pause in Emily Dickinson's death poems. *American Literature Review*, 83(4), 621–639.
- Smith, R. (2018). Death, devotion, and defiance in John Donne's religious poetry. *Studies in English Literature*, 58(1), 91–108.
- Studentshare. (2021). *Death as a literary construct in metaphysical and lyric poetry*. <https://www.studentshare.org>
- Targoff, R. (2008). *John Donne, body and soul*. University of Chicago Press.
- Vendler, H. (2010). *Dickinson: Selected poems and commentaries*. Harvard University Press.
- Wolosky, S. (2001). *Emily Dickinson: A voice of war*. Yale University Press.