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Desublimating Death in Liquid Modernity: Familiarity and Absurdity of the Sublime in Dickinson's "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" and Albee's *The Sandbox*

Fatimah A. Alwadaani
Department of English Language, College of Arts, King Faisal University, Al Ahsa, Saudi Arabia

***Abstract*—This paper examines the desublimation of death in Emily Dickinson's poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" and Edward Albee's play *The Sandbox*. It focused on how each text reconfigures death beyond its traditional association with transcendence and awe. The study used a qualitative, text-based approach to show how Dickinson domesticates death by representing it in a familiar ambient and temporal suspension, while Albee presents death as a trivial, visible, and emotionally detached event. Drawing on the concept of liquid modernity, the study explains how these representations reflect different stages of dissolving stable meaning and concepts in modernity. While previous studies have discussed death and the sublime within individual texts, limited attention has been given to comparative desublimation across genres. This study highlights the different poetic and theatrical representations of death within these two texts, which showcase the shifting of stable meaning and cultural consciousness in modern society.**

***Index Terms*—Albee, death, desublimation, Dickinson, liquid modernity**

I. Introduction

In philosophy and literature, death has often been conceptualized as a sublime, metaphysical, intense, and transcendent experience (Burke, 1998; Young, 2005). Immanuel Kant distinguishes the sublime by linking it to tension and exhaustion, and connects sublimity to moral seriousness, authority, and elevated thought (Kant, 2011). Death is positioned as overwhelming and elevating yet difficult to comprehend. For example, Burke (1998) described terror as "the ruling principle of the sublime" (p. 58). According to him, "the great and sublime in nature" cause a state of astonishment where "all [the soul's] motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other" (p. 58). Therefore, death has long been associated with an irresistible sense of grandeur and given an existential significance, as it connects the familiar and the incomprehensible.

Death is not merely understood as a biological event or metaphysical concern, but as a socially constructed and culturally regulated phenomenon (Sumiala & Jacobsen, 2024). Therefore, the sociology of death, as a framework, focuses on how societies organize and interpret death through rituals and discourses. These social and cultural practices are subject to change throughout time. Hence, this perspective explains the transformation of death within early and late modernity. Modernist and postmodernist texts have reframed the view of death while destabilizing its elevated conception. This transformation reflects what Bauman (2000) describes as liquid modernity, where stable ideas, fixed meanings, and metaphysical certainties of the past have dissolved into fluid, fragmented, and temporary experiences in the context of modern life. This suggests that death, like other cultural concepts, has lost its fixed meaning and is no longer linked to stable symbols or the sublime. In liquid modernity, it becomes a normal and emotionally detached event in human experience. Rather than presenting death as a transcendental experience, writers render it as closely mundane, familiar, and absurd. This change in perspective reflects a profound transformation in the contemporary consciousness.

Despite extensive scholarship on portrayals of death and the sublime, such as studies grounded in Burkean and Kantian theories, limited attention has been paid to the desublimation of death. In addition, the representations of death across different genres and periods have been rarely explored, particularly in relation to liquid modernity. This study has aimed to fill that gap by analyzing the conceptual transformation of death through the process of desublimation, in which death is stripped of its traditional sublimity and represented as an ordinary or theatrical constructed experience. Instead of inspiring awe, sacredness, or existential terror, death is portrayed as controlled and empty of affective depth. This desublimation of death mirrors how modern subjects encounter the loss of traditional meaning and limits, as death is presented in emotionally flattened, simplified, and socially constructed forms.

To investigate this transformation, the study renders a comparative analysis of Emily Dickinson's poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" and Edward Albee's short play *The Sandbox*. Although the two texts differ in terms of genre and historical context, both reconfigure death deprived of its traditional sublimity. Death in Dickinson's poem is a calm and courteous companion, while Albee sets death as a strange gentleman within an absurd theatrical framework that lacks

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a serious emotional ambience. This study also explains how the desublimation of death aligns with liquid modernity, since death loses its stable transcendental authority to become a fluid and ambiguous experience through simplification and absurdity.

II. Literature Review

A. Death and the Sublime

The sublimity of death has been widely discussed and represented in literature and philosophy. Drawing on Kant's theory of the sublime, Young (2005) and Mooney (2009) associated death with experiences that exceed ordinary human understanding. For Yong, the fear underlying the sublime is closely connected to mortality because individuals confront something overwhelming and unavoidable. Similarly, Mooney argued that the awareness of death reveals the limitations of human existence and encourages a reconsideration of life's meaning and purpose. Both studies presented death as an experience that evokes fear, awe, and reflection. Other studies focused on the emotional and psychological dimensions of the relationship between death and the sublime. Moskot (2022) argued that grief can function as a sublime experience because it confronts individuals with the incomprehensibility of death and loss. In a similar way, Hur et al. (2020) demonstrated that the sublime emerges through the interaction of attraction and fear, producing intense emotional responses associated with overwhelming experiences. These studies suggested that encounters with death often involve a tension between fascination and terror. Recent scholarship also explored how the sublime operates in contemporary contexts. Hasnaoui (2024) argued that postmodern literature reconfigures sublime terror through experiences of uncertainty, fragmentation, and symbolic forms of loss. Rather than emphasizing transcendence alone, the postmodern sublime reflects anxieties surrounding unstable realities and the loss of coherent meaning.

Taken together, these studies approached death as a sublime experience characterized by fear, awe, transcendence, and existential reflection. However, they generally assumed that death retains its elevated and exceptional status. Less attention has been given to literary representations that reduce or undermine death's sublimity by presenting it as ordinary, familiar, or materially grounded. This study addresses that gap by examining how Dickinson's "Because I Could Not stop for Death" and Albee's *The Sandbox* challenge the traditional association between death and the sublime through strategies of desublimation.

B. Death in Dickinson

Studies of death in her poetry have largely focused on its transcendental and transformative dimensions. Several scholars argued that Dickinson presents death as a passage rather than a final ending. Daghamin (2017) asserted that although Dickinson's perception of death is unstable and shifting, death remains a central mystery and a pathway to ultimate reality. Through personification, Dickinson transforms death from abstract concept into a tangible presence. Similarly, Kumar (2020) argued that Dickinson reconceptualizes death as a transformative and life-giving force that mediates between material and spiritual realities and leads toward immortality. Radhakrishna (2024) likewise interpreted death as a transition into another state of existence, while Raza and Zahra (2024) argued that Dickinson challenges conventional understandings of death by rejecting its finality and presenting immortality as an ongoing experience.

Alongside these transcendental readings, other scholars emphasized the uncertainty and ambiguity that characterize Dickinson's treatment of mortality. Jasim (2022) suggested that Dickinson's perception of death was shaped by personal losses and historical circumstances, leading her to represent death through transformation, ambiguity, and uncertainty. Similarly, Ullah et al. (2025) argued that Dickinson constructs death through paradox, irony, and unconventional imagery. Their study concluded that Dickinson challenges religious and social attitudes toward death by presenting it as both beautiful and uncertain. However, Etter (2020) offered a different perspective by examining death from a psychological standpoint. According to Etter, death appears as the Other in Dickinson's poetry. despite its painful implications, it becomes a source of self-awareness and personal strength.

These studies showed that Dickinson's representation of death is commonly interpreted in terms of transcendence, transformation, ambiguity, and psychological reflection. While they offer valuable insights into the philosophical significance of death in her poetry, they continue to treat death primarily as a metaphysical or existential threshold. Less attention has been paid to the ways Dickinson's poetic language and imagery make death appear familiar, accessible, and integrated into everyday experience. The present study examines how "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" simultaneously engages with and weakens the traditional aesthetics of the sublime, presenting death as both ordinary and philosophically complex.

C. Death in Absurdist Drama

Death and mortality in the theatre of the absurd are frequently depicted as fragmented, pointless, and empty of metaphysical transcendence. Klimczak (2019) argued that death is frequently represented as a form of biological determinism that exposes the absence of inherent meaning in human existence. Likewise, Schvey (1987) showed that modern dramatic representations of death tend to focus less on transcendence and more on the responses of the living. He argued that death often exposes a state of "death-in-life", in which individuals are unable to establish meaningful human connections. Similarly, Yadav and Azeem (2022) suggested that Albee presents death as a transformative force that

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highlights the psychological and moral responses of survivors while also functioning as a release from an absurd existence. Other studies approach death in Albee's drama from a social perspective. Jaf et al. (2016) argued that Albee strips death of its metaphysical significance and presents it instead as a consequence of social injustice and distorted human relationships. Similarly, Soomro et al. (2023) examined commodification and alienation in *The Sandbox*, arguing that Grandma's treatment as a burden reflects the deterioration of meaningful social bonds. Al-Jasim and Obayes (2023) likewise interpreted Grandma's suffering and acceptance of death as evidence of emotional detachment and family disintegration in modern American society.

Although these studies discussed death in relation to absurdity, alienation, psychological response, and social fragmentation, they paid limited attention to how death's traditional sublimity is challenged within the dramatic form itself. These studies focused on the meaning of death or its social implications, while overlooking the aesthetic strategies through which death is presented ordinary and stripped of transcendence. This study contributes by examining *The Sandbox* as a dramatic representation of desublimated death, where comedy, domesticity, and material concerns reduce the sense of awe traditionally associated with mortality.

III. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, text-based approach to examine the conceptual representation of death in selected poetic and dramatic texts. Through a close reading, the study analyzed Emily Dickinson's "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" and Edward Albee's *The Sandbox* as representative texts that reconceptualize death. The selected texts were chosen for their distinct generic forms -poetry and drama- while both present death as a conceptual construct. The lyric poem and the absurdist play offer different generic affordances through which desublimation operates. In Dickinson's poem, death is presented through subjective consciousness and compressed poetic language. In contrast, the theatrical space, visual symbolism, fragmented dialogue, and performative interaction in Albee's absurdist drama produce another mode of desublimation.

The analysis is conducted through textual interpretation that focused on figurative language, symbols, tone, and representations of death as a figure and how each text constructs the experience of death. This interpretive reading is followed by a comparative framework to identify the convergences and divergences between the two works with regard to the desublimation of death and the shift from transcendence to irony and emotional neutrality. Drawing on a sociological and cultural theoretical framework, the study examined these texts through the sociology of death and concepts of Bauman's liquid modernity. Within this framework, death is approached as a cultural construct shaped by changing perceptions of stability, meaning, and transcendence in modernity. The study situated death within broader cultural transformations, demonstrating how existential meaning and concepts are reshaped through perceptual changes.

The study was limited to the representations of death in the two cited works. These texts cannot fully capture the different representations of death across time periods, cultures, and genres. Moreover, the study applied a qualitative methodology through specific theoretical lenses, which may involve subjectivity and risk overlooking some relevant critical perspectives.

IV. Discussion

A. Emily Dickinson

Death is a recurrent theme in Emily Dickinson's poetry, reflecting her thoughtful interest in the experience of death and its ramifications for human life. Dickinson's representation of death emerged from a nineteenth-century culture preoccupied with mortality, but her poetry "offered and continue to offer, a crucial rebuttal to nineteenth-century and Puritan discourses eager to bring false certainty to the unknowable" (Schnable, 2020, p. 5). Speaker in her poetry actively challenges and destabilizes religious and cultural discourses of her time, creating a space in which death can be imagined beyond inherited certainties. In her poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death," she presents death in an unconventional way that contradicts the traditional conception of its sublimity (Dickinson, 2016). The poem presents the experience of death as devoid of any cultural ceremonies and religious rituals, with no deathbed rites, religious expectations, or mourning practices. Instead of depicting death as a terrifying or majestic figure within an experience of transcendental rupture, she personifies it as calm, courteous, and socially well known. This is apparent in the poem's opening lines: "Because I could not stop for Death – / He kindly stopped for me." Domesticating death removes the sense of terror and anxiety from its presence. Death appears as a "kindly" companion, who patiently pauses for the speaker, in a journey suggested to be tranquil and serene from the first two lines. The speaker appears to feel safe and comfortable despite being alone with death: "The Carriage held but just Ourselves." In this journey, the absence of urgency ("He knew no haste") and the speaker's quiet response of leaving behind "labor" and "leisure" contribute to an ambience free of drama or emotional intensity. Since grandeur and terror are traditionally associated with death, presenting death as civilized and familiar is a clear indication of its desublimation, which the poem's narrative structure reinforces. The journey by carriage passes through a series of everyday scenes (children at school, "Fields of Gazing Grain," "the Setting Sun") that symbolize different stages of life. Hence, death is presented as a part of a continuously lived experience and not a moment of rupture. From a socio-stylistic analysis, Dickinson's use of grammatical simplicity and rhythmic regularity functions to normalize

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death. her poetic structure reduces linguistic disruption and thus reduces existential rupture (Mubarak & Joodi, 2023, p. 112). The hymn-like common meter contributes to this effect by embedding death within familiar auditory patterns, allowing the poem to maintain emotional restraint rather than sublime intensity. Hence, the interplay between narrative voice, stylistic regularity, and metaphorical framing positions death as a mediated, linguistically contained experience.

From the lens of the sociology of death, Dickinson's poetry participates in the nineteenth-century culture of mortality while also exposes the emotional and spiritual instabilities that lurk beneath it. Bauman (2000) suggests that social and existential patterns are no longer fixed and authoritative; instead, they have become unstable, contradictory and unable to regulate social life (p. 7). Dickinson's cultural world was marked by early industrialization, rising urbanization, and a gradual loosening of Puritan theological certainties. These transformations initiated an early stage of social and spiritual fragmentation creating a degree of instability and fluidity in personal identity and religious belief. Accordingly, Dickinson's poetry reflects a world in which earlier certainties are already beginning to dissolve. Her representation of death, in which death loses its sublime status and terrifying absoluteness, registers the conceptual transformation of reality from solid and stable to liquid and inconstant.

However, this desublimation is not total, since the speaker separates between death and its aftermath. Beneath the poem's calm atmosphere lurks a metaphysical unease. The mention of "immortality" during the ride emphasizes the idea that this journey is beyond the ordinary (Dickinson, 2016). As the events of the journey unfold, the early serene environment starts to be disturbed by subtle changes; the shift in perspective ("Or rather – He passed Us –"), the sudden feeling of cold and vulnerability, and the unreadiness of the speaker who joins the ride with "gown" made of "Tulle," obviously suggest the fragility and exposure of the speaker's body at the end of the journey. These moments bring back traditional expectations about death. While death is a gentle and civilized companion, the human narrator's lack of preparedness complicates the aftermath. The poem's final stanzas reveal one aspect of the sublime that is connected to the eternal. The representation of the grave as a house that looks like "A Swelling of the Ground" confirms the physical finality of death, yet the last lines reflect the speaker's perception of time, where hundreds of years can seem to last less than a day while pointing "toward Eternity." This poem "suggests that Eternity is embedded within time, challenging traditional notions of death and afterlife […] the departure is portrayed as a pleasant journey, and Death is depicted as perpetual existence throughout eternity" (Singh, 2025, p. 482). In this shift, Dickinson reintroduces the sublime, not through terror and awe but the collapse of human measures of time within metaphysical expansion.

Instead of fully desublimating death, Dickinson portrays death between familiarity and transcendence. While domesticating death through softness and civility, she maintains its existential depth through eternity and unmeasurable temporality. Hence, she positions death in a liminal space between the ordinary and the infinite. In this poem, Dickinson thus anticipates the conceptual transformation of death in modernist and postmodernist literature.

B. Edward Albee

In *The Sandbox*, Edward Albee presents death stripped of its traditional sublimity and situates it within a theatrical absurdity of emotional detachment and social superficiality. Instead of portraying death as a moment of transcendence and dignity, Albee renders death as a normal event that is devoid of reverence or existential depth. The desublimation of the experience of death emphasizes a transformation in modern consciousness. This shift is embodied from the outset through the staging. The "bare stage" with beach setting, where the grandmother is placed in a sandbox, trivializes the experience of death and its symbolic sacredness. The spatial regression mirrors the conceptual regression of death. by placing Grandma in a child's play space, Mommy and Daddy reduce her to an infantilized object, stripping her of adult agency. Thus, the sandbox becomes a metaphor for how late-modern society contains death: in controlled spaces where the elderly are kept out of sight rather than respected. Based on the chosen place for this event, death can be staged, managed, and eventually ignored. Moreover, the extreme brevity of the play is a thematic strategy that mirrors the desublimation of death, reducing what was once a profound existential experience into a brief, flattened event. The structural compression reflects the logic of liquid modernity: time is accelerated, experiences are shortened, and anything that cannot be quickly consumed or managed is stripped of its depth.

The way the parents treat the grandmother contributes to this desublimation:

> […] Mommy *and* Daddy *re-enter, carrying* Grandma. *She is borne in by their hands under her armpits; she is quite rigid; her legs are drawn up; her feet do not touch the ground; the expression on her ancient face is that of puzzlement and fear*". (Albee, 1959, p. 2)

The parents indifferently transport the grandmother to the sandbox like a cast-off object instead of accompanying her through what would normally be presented as a more meaningful experience. Grandma's treatment exemplifies the liquid-modern replacement of durable familial obligations with a logic of disposability. Once she ceases to be useful, she is symbolically and physically discarded, reflecting what is identified as the replacement of durability by transience and disposability in modern relationships (Palese, 2013, p. 4). Their language is fragmented and empty of any emotion. The dialogue between them is repetitive and hollow, which implies a collapse of human empathy and authentic response to mortality:

> Daddy. Do you think . . . do you think she's . . . comfortable?
> Mommy (*impatiently*). How would I know?
> Daddy (*pause*). What do we do now?

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> Mommy (*as if remembering*): We . . . wait. We . . . sit here . . . and we wait . . . that's what we do. (Albee, 1959, p. 3)

Hence, death in this play is no longer an existential rupture accompanied by awe and profound meaning. This behavior aligns with Bauman's (2000) notion of liquid modernity, in which stable social and cultural structures, like ethics, emotions, and relations, dissolve into fluid and shapeless forms. In other words, death loses its solidity as a meaningful experience and becomes part of everyday life. The characters' lack of engagement with Grandma's dying process reflects the modern cultural tendency to make uncomfortable and disturbing experiences into something superficial and trivial.

The representation of the Angel of Death in the play as a young man is another aspect of desublimating death. Traditionally, the presence of such a character brings forth feelings of terror and awe, yet in Albee's play, the Young Man is described as physically attractive, gentle, and considerate. His role is performed with theatrical simplicity. Burke (1998) insisted that the sublime and the beautiful are very different, conflicting ideas:

> The ideas of the sublime and the beautiful stand on foundations so different, that it is hard, I had almost said impossible, to think of reconciling them in the same subject, without considerably lessening the effect of the one or the other upon the passions. (pp. 113–114)

This tension is evident in *The Sandbox*, where death is aestheticized through the figure of the Young Man, yet stripped of its terror, weaking its sublime effect. Moreover, the admiration and acceptance that Mommy shows to the Young Man from the first meeting, and Grandma's feeling of comfort in his company prove that both women are experiencing the emotional effects of the beautiful. The Young Man's embodiment of the Burkean "beautiful" is a liquid-modern strategy to aestheticizes death as something pleasant and reassuring, transforming mortality into a consumable image. Thus, aesthetic pleasure functions a mediating structure to soften the confrontation with death, replacing sublimity with familiarity and even desire. As Sun (2023) suggests that aesthetic forms operate within capitalist cultural logic as mechanisms that extend into lived experience and shape perception beyond material objects (p. 210). Accordingly, the aestheticization of death in the play organizes how mortality is perceived and emotionally processed by both characters and audience.

Through visual beauty, physical attractiveness, and theatrical simplicity, death is portrayed with aesthetics while stripped of its metaphysical depth. Moreover, the characters' awareness of their performative condition on stage reinforces this desublimation of death. Grandma directly addresses the audience and exposes the artificiality of the situation. The audience, as a consequence, cannot engage with death as an emotional and sacred experience, breaking with the traditional notion of the sublime. Eventually, Grandma accepts death, not as a transcendent moment, but as a quiet and polite conclusion of her life. Throughout the main dramatic elements, the absurd staging, the emotionally detached characters, the indifferent dialogue, and the ironic use of symbolic figures, the representation of death is a clear demonstration of its desublimation in modern culture.

C. Dickinson and Albee

Both Emily Dickinson and Edward Albee desublimate death in their texts by presenting it without its profound presence, sacredness, transcendence, terror, and metaphysical meaning. However, each work also portrays death in a distinctive way that mirrors different configurations of modern consciousness.

In Dickinson's poem, death is quietly desublimated within a familiar environment. It is neither terrifying nor transcendent in a Burkean or Kantian sense. Instead, it is presented as a gently patient companion guiding the speaker through a temporally suspended journey. The figure of death, portrayed as civilized and patient, replaces the grandeur of a force of nature previously associated with the sublime. Although the mention of immortality preserves some traces of transcendence, the experience does not generate awe or terror. Instead, death is rendered as a controlled and calm experience that unfolds in measured progression. Moreover, Dickinsons' use of poetic compression and figures allows its transformation to take place within the consciousness of the speaker. Thus, the representation of death in Dickinson's poem demonstrates a peaceful acceptance within a lyrical framework where death is absorbed into poetic subjectivity.

In contrast, *The Sandbox* renders a more radical form of desublimation that appears through exposure, theatricality, and absurdity. The visible and performative representation of death, in the figure of the Young Man, strips death of its symbolic depth. In addition, the play's metatheatrical strategies, such as the staged death scene, the indifferent dialogue, and the performative presence of the young man, and fragmentation add to the artificiality of the scene and expose death as a constructed event rather than inherently meaningful. The process of Grandma dying is staged in an indifferent and artificial manner, especially given the detached behavior of the other characters. Ultimately, death becomes an external and cursory event that is devoid of emotional or existential gravity.

Based on Bauman's (2000) notion of liquid modernity, both texts can be seen as destabilizing fixed meaning in modernity. Dickinson's treatment reveals a transitional moment: although traditional structures are losing their authority through the process of desublimation, death still carries some significance despite the partial loss of its sublimity. Albee's play reveals a further dissolving of these structures, leaving death lacking depth and coherence within the social and symbolic order. Both works present death as something that can be normalized, managed, or familiarly observed.

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V. Conclusion

This study has examined the desublimation of death in "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" by Emily Dickinson and *The Sandbox* by Edward Albee, showing how each work uses different strategies to depart from the traditional sublime presentation of death. The analysis showed that Dickinson domesticates death through lyrical containment and temporal suspension, whereas Albee renders a more radical desublimation by staging death as a visible, performative, and emotionally detached event.

The findings suggest that literary form plays a significant role in reconfiguring the experience of death. Dickinson creates a soft and internal experience within poetic consciousness, where death is softened and rendered manageable, while Albee externalizes and exposes death as an empty construct devoid of existential gravity. The comparison between these works indicated that this desublimation could range from partial symbolic meaning to total dissolution; that is, while Dickinson's poem reflects a transitional stage in which traces of transcendence remain, Albee's play is situated in a more advanced stage in which such traces are largely dissolved.

Viewed through Bauman's (2000) conception of liquid modernity and the sociology of death, these representations mirror a broader shift in modern consciousness, where death is no longer a source of transcendence but an event increasingly normalized and detached from stable meaning. This study thus contributes to the broader literature by offering a cross-genre analysis of how poetic and theatrical forms can redefine death in different ways within changing cultures. It also paves the way for further research into similar fields in other literary contexts, especially contemporary literature where similar processes of desublimation may reveal additional dimensions of modern and postmodern sensibilities.

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Fatimah A. Alwadaani is currently an assistant professor of English Literature in the Department of English Language, King Faisal University, Al Ahsa, Saudi Arabia. She received her PhD in English Literature from Imam Mohammad ibn Saud Islamic University in June 2022. Her academic interest areas are poetry, cultural studies, literary theory, philosophy, and comparative literature. E-mail: falwadaani@kfu.edu.sa

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