A Thematic Interpretation of Emily Dickinson’s Poetry

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Keywords: Emily Dickinson, Theme, Nature, Love, Life.

Abstract. Emily Dickinson, a renowned female poet of America in the nineteenth century, is considered as the pioneer of Modern Poetry and Imagist Movement of American and Britain poetry in the twentieth century. Her poetry, with profound implications and unique styles, has made immortal contributions to the prosperity and development of world literature. While living in a solitary and inactive life, known as “Amherst recluse” in American literature, she has created 1775 ingenious poems in her whole life, covering numerous themes, such as nature, love, life, God and friendship and so on. The thesis will focus on multiple subjects of her poetry, thus interpreting her distinctive outlooks on nature, love and life, through which, the wild and ferocious nature, the happy and sorrowful love as well as the hasty and deliberate life will be reflected. Finally, the point is made that her poetry is influenced by the social background, family situation and personal experiences at that time. Hence, the substantial role she has played in American poetry is further affirmed.

1. Brief Introduction of Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, on December 10, 1830. Her father was a prominent lawyer of the town and he remained for more than forty years a trustee of Amherst College. As a girl she was shy, sensitive, and sometimes rebellious. Her family was well-to-do, and she was able to live comfortably during her childhood. Then she attended primary school and finished her education at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, a kind of secondary school for young ladies. After graduation she lived quietly at her father’s home. She read the Bible, Shakespeare and Keats, among others, and was greatly influenced. In 1854 she went to Washington for a short time, while her father was serving a term in the United States Congress. At about this same time she went to Philadelphia for a visit, where she fell in love with a married clergyman, Charles Wadsworth. However, nothing came of the affair, and she returned to her native home in Amherst. There she lives on until her death.

Dickinson was never married. However, she cultivated intense intellectual companionships with several men in succession, whom she quaintly called her “tutors”. These include Benjamin F. Newton, a law student in her father’s office, who introduced her to stimulating books and urged her to take seriously her vocation as poet; the Rev. Charles Wadsworth whom she came to regard as her “dearest earthly friend” and in whom she found the masculine nature and affection that she never experienced in her father; and Thomas W. Higginson, a poetry critic foe. The Atlantic Monthly, whose kindly encouragement was a support to years of loneliness. [1]

Dickinson’s life was outwardly eventless, for she stayed quietly at home and for the last twenty-five years she lived almost totally in seclusion. After the death of her father in 1875, Dickinson began to dress in white, avoided strangers, and only kept communication with a number of intimates through letters and notes. Her existence had seemed sad to many people, but reading her life in her letters one found that she got much inspiration from her garden and from reading. She had a passion for her garden, and her poetry was cultivated, like her garden, for her own pleasure,
not for public display. Actually she was quite happy and peaceful living alone. She died at Amherst May 16, 1886.

Though only seven of her poems were published during her lifetime, Emily Dickinson left a huge chaotic mass of manuscripts of poems, some carefully revised, and others carelessly jotted down on odd scraps of paper. And these amounted to a total of about 1775 poems, which revealed the enormous poetic power she possessed. Since she didn’t have the pressure of publications, her style reflected the freedom intensity, and idiosyncrasy of her personality. At the time of her death she requested that all of her poetry and correspondence be destroyed, but her request was not followed out.. After her death, Higginson worked with Emily Dickinson’s niece to produce six volumes of her poems. They are Poems and Poems: Second Series, which brought Dickinson immediate popularity and critical recognition; Poems: Third Series; The Single Hound, which established Dickinson’s position as a major poet; Further Poems and Unpublished Poems. Since Dickinson had never put a date on her own poem, the editors added the numbers to her poems. In 1950 Harvard University bought all her copyright. A complete collection, The Poems of Emily Dickinson, came out in 1955. For the whole 19th century Dickinson was the only woman poet who enjoys high academic esteem today. [2]

2. Analysis of Multiple Theme of Emily Dickinson’s Poetry

2.1. Accepting Nature as Part of Her World

Over 500 poems of Emily Dickinson works are concerned with the nature. Nature, in her eye, is vivid while sometimes magic and elusive. Most of her natural poems focus on the relationship between human beings and nature, as to her, nature is either wild or ferocious. Those visions, such as sea, flowers, flyers, insects, as well as the sunrise and sunset, come to life in her creation. Her natural poems leave us not only fresh enjoyment but the permanent savor.

Nature—the gentlest mother/Impatient of no child/The feeblest or the wayward/Her admonition mild/In forest and the hill/By traveler is heard/Restraining rampant squirrel/Or too impetuous bird/How fair her conversation/A summer afternoon/Her household, her assembly/And when the sun goes down/Her voice among the aisles/Incites the timid prayer/Of the minutest cricket/The most unworthy flower./When all the children sleep/She turns as long away/As will suffice to light her lamps/Then, bending from the sky/With infinite affection/And infinite care/Her golden finger on her lip/Wills silence everywhere.

Here, Dickinson compares the nature to a mother, a wild and affectionate figure. The word “child” shows the point that everyone in this world is a member of the nature accepting care from the nature, regardless of any season. Then the body of the poem describes four periods: morning, afternoon, nightfall and nighttime, including the whole day when everything on earth loved by the nature mother. While, Dickinson realized her poem was not long enough to express the concern she had felt, thus pointing the affection of nature was limited, to say nothing of her love.

However, some of her natural poems are horror to us. “Apparently with no surprise” is a typical representation.

Apparently with no surprise/To any happy Flower/The Frost beheads it at its play /In accidental power /The blonde Assassin passes on /The Sun proceeds unmoved/To measure off another Day/For an Approving God.

In the poem, following it kills beauty flowers, white frost is still walking calmly . While the Sun, witness of all these happened, presents little sympathy, rising and setting like usual. So does the God.
In summary, nature in her poem is both friendly and indifferent, benevolent and cruel, regarded as the combination of contradiction and complexity[3]. Just as what the transcendentalism advocates, nature can bring her enormous happiness and joviality through its harmonious relationship with human beings. But she tries to exceed the limit of transcendentalism to reveal the opposite facet. In this sense, Dickinson push much more forward than those transcendentalists, this is why she is considered as the pioneer of the modern poetry.

2.2. Re-defining Love in Her Own Terms

Dickinson’ poems on love shift from delight and excitement to sadness and melancholy, from blur and tarnish to dreariness and misery. The up-and-down feeling reflects the contradiction and multi-color in her inner world vividly. It is said by some critics that there has never been someone having no enough contracting with the society who have such a strong feeling about agony and delight, nor one who like her cannot only understand love and death but exist thereafter. Those mysterious and complex experiences of love consist of her creation of poem, as well as the reason of peculiar of her poetry.

Wild nights! Wild nights!/Were I with thee /Wild nights should be /Our luxury!/ Futile the winds/o a heart in port/Done with the compass/Done with the chart/Rowing in Eden/Ah! the sea/Might I but moor/To-night in thee!

Love is the forever theme of poets, eulogizing the sweetness and greatness of it. In the poem “Wild Night—Wild Night”, the speaker reveals all her innermost feelings to her lover. Love is expressed in an unabashed manner. During the dark night, beautiful love is just like the bright future is attracting a warm heart on the wide sea with roaring waves.

While some other poems, such as “I Cannot Live With You”, show a contrast of her feeling of love, in this poem, the sorrowful love is depicted.

I cannot live with you/It would be life/And life is over there/Behind the shelf—The sexton keeps the key to/Putting up/Our life, his porcelain/Like a cup—Discarded of the housewife/Quaint or broken/A newer Sevres pleases.

Those people related with Dickinson render a great influence on her idea and creation. The most important person, Charles Wadsworth, a priest on the trip to Philadelphia, gives her a lot of encouragement. It is known that while visiting Philadelphia in 1855, during her only trip outside of Massachusetts, Emily most likely was taken to hear Wadsworth preach at Arch Street Presbyterian Church. It is also known that Wadsworth later visited her at least twice in Amherst, that two volumes of his sermons were given to her, that she probably read many of his other sermons in newspaper reprinting, and that she developed strong feelings towards him. Some believe that Emily’s great “terror” in 1862 and her incredible poetic productivity that year was a response to Wadsworth’s removal to Calvary Church in San Francisco. [4]

It is certain that Charles is an influenced figure in her life, some critics said that he is the right man in her love. Hence, Emily Dickinson regards him as “her most intimate friend”. Maybe influenced by this period of love, she adds numbers of agony in her poem. A good case in point is “I Cannot Live with You”. In this poem the speaker suffers the agony coming from love. To her love is very powerful and it may overwhelm everything. She feels upset when facing it. So she makes an earnest plea to Jesus, hoping to get help from God.

2.3. Pondering on Life

Dickinson had withdrew from rural activities even before the age of thirty, gradually free from going out. With the passage of time, she kept in touch with her friends by letters instead of meeting each other. It was often than not she avoids visitors until that she lived in solitude. It is said that
contacting with others leaves her in a position of tiredness as a mature female, with strong and sensitive feeling.

Solitary as she was, she constantly talked to her spirits, reflecting on the meaning of life, which plays a substantial role in her later creation, she elaborated on this topic from different perspective of views. The typical examples are “success is counted sweetest”, and “because I could not stop for Death”.

By those who ne'er succeed/Not one of all the purple host/Who took the flag today/Can tell the definition/So clear, of victory/As he, defeated, dying/On whose forbidden ear/The distant strains of triumph/Break, agonized and clear./Requires sorest need/To comprehend a nectar.

Those who think they have not achieved success think it is precious because they have intense need for it. The poet cites one specific kind of success---victory in battle: that is, the soldier hears the sounds of victory just before he dies. The victors are described as a “Purple Host”. “Host” is an archaic word for army or great number. “purple” refers to a wound received in battle. Real success, then, is a deep realization of the heavy price one prays. It is an inward feeling rather than public acclaim or material gain. Success can be determined by oneself.

Because I could not stop for Death/He kindly stopped for me/The Carriage held but just Ourselves/And Immortality. We slowly drove/He knew no haste/And I had put away/My labor and my Leisure too.

Without doubt Emily Dickinson’s richest personifications of Death are those which portray him as a gentleman caller or as a suitor. This poem is one of her most popular poems which as its controlling image a well-realized rendition of the complex character of Death and which is also a remarkably succinct statement of Dickinson’s own ambivalent reactions to death. The poem is a dramatic representation of the passage from this world of the living to the afterlife. [5]

In its depiction of Death on one hand as the courtly suitor and on the other as the fraudulent seducer, the poem reflects a basic ambiguity about death and immortality. Death is a release from a lifetime of work and suffering, it is the gateway to a lasting peace in paradise, or is it simply a cold, mindless annihilation.

3. Influences on Emily Dickinson’s Poetry

Emily Dickinson was seemingly as innocent of theories about technique as a poet could be, as her test for poetry shows—“If I read a book and it makes my body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry”. Her poetry rebelled from conventional forms not because she was aware of the act as rebellion against established methods, but because she was an unusual figure.

Although the myth of Dickinson’s alienation from her society is slowly dissolving, it has not been sufficiently recognized just how open she was to forces within her surrounding culture. In some ways, of course, Dickinson was the quintessentially private poet. It is also important to note, however, that she had a keen eye on American popular and drew poetic sustenance from it. In deed, there is evidence that she had a deep, frustrated desire for popularity. A major reason for her enduring popularity is that she was extraordinarily receptive to the popular literature and culture of her own time. She was thoroughly familiar not only with classic literary sources---especially the Bible, Shakespeare, Keats, the Bronte sisters, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emerson, and Thoreau—but also with many popular contemporaries that have since fallen from view. Her poems and letters reveal that she was a highly receptive witness of many phenomena in nineteenth century popular culture, including imaginative sermons, reform movements, penny newspapers, best-selling novels, and women’s literature. She was unique among American women of her day in the breath of
her awareness of the most experimental tendencies in contemporary American culture. Much of her poetry can be viewed as an individualistic adaptation of popular literary strategies.

Admittedly, critics have long pondered the Wadsworth-Dickinson relationship, hard evidence of which is frustratingly slim. Her response to Wadsworth had been prepared for by her increasing preference for imaginative preaching, often against her father’s wishes. By aligning herself with several of the most progressive religious stylists of the day, Emily Dickinson was launching a silent but major rebellion against the doctrinal tradition valued by her father. Her excitement about Wadsworth, therefore, can be viewed as a natural outgrowth of her increasing attraction to the new religious style. Wadsworth’s style was adventurous, anecdotal, and very imaginative, with a tendency to the startling and paradoxical. Emily Dickinson once praised his “inscrutable roguery” and seemed to copy his impish style in many poems and in her message to Holland. J.G.

What new religious stylists like Wadsworth and Park had finally taught Emily Dickinson is that religion could be freely applied to many secular situations and expressed through startling imagery. Because of Dickinson’s extensive use of witty conceits, many critics have likened her to the metaphysical poets of the Renaissance or to the American Puritan poet Edward Taylor. There is, however, a crucial difference between the metaphysical and Dickinson: all their creative flights are finally confined by Christian doctrine, whereas she soars adventurously beyond doctrine by mixing the sacred and the secular, the Christian and the pagan, and she had been taught how to achieve this mixture by her popular religious culture.

Another popular genre that influenced Dickinson was popular sensational literature, ranging from the crime-filled penny newspapers that arose in the 1830s to the sensational pamphlet fiction that flooded America in the 1840s and 1850s.

4. Conclusion

Dickinson’s poetry are usually based on her familiar experiences in life, which show her happiness and sadness and describe her inner world. While living in a solitary and inactive life, known as "Amherst recluse" in American literature, Emily Dickinson has created 1775 ingenious poems in her whole life, covering numerous themes, such as nature, love, life, God and friendship and so on. Influenced by the society and those famous scholars around her, she created her poetry with profound implications and unique styles. Nature in her poem is both friendly and indifferent, benevolent and cruel, regarded as the combination of contradiction and complexity. Love in her writing is filled with happiness and sadness, the up-and-down feelings reflect the contradiction and multi-color in her inner world vividly. More to the point, she constantly talked to her spirits, reflecting on the meaning of life, which plays a substantial role in her later creation, she elaborated on this topic from different perspective of views. Have not confined to the limited life space, she creates poetry in a novel and strange way, filled with deep denotation and honest feeling, making her efforts to dig the deepest hope and agony in human’s heart.

The range of her poetry suggests not her limited experiences but the power of her creativity and imagination. She wrote of God, man, nature, and death with a knowledge that seemed impossible in one so sheltered. She found meaning in the smallest of things, and in the common. She wrote with freshness and unconventionality. She could express feelings of deepest poignancy in terms of wit. Though her poems are obscure, mysterious and paradoxical, they are short, fresh and original, marked by the vigor of her images, the daring of her thought and the beauty of her expression. In summary, from Emily Dickinson’s multiple subjects of poetry and distinctive outlooks on the nature, love and life, the substantial role she has played in American poetry is further affirmed.
Acknowledgement

The thesis is supported by Jiangsu Excellent Project of Social Science Applied Research (20SWC-17)

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