

Original Paper

Caged Madwomen: Plath and Dickinson's Resistance

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Abstract

This paper explores the “madwoman” in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson. In 19th- and 20th-century America, women held a lowly status, with domesticity as their sole role. Yet Dickinson's ideas transcended her era, while Plath's thinking was ahead of the conservative 1950s-1960s. Though separated by a century, their resistance to patriarchy and struggle for female subjectivity were remarkably similar. Their language, imagery, and habits were seen as madness—but this was their chosen rebellion. Plath employs intense, confessional imagery to express dissatisfaction, while Dickinson presents spiritual struggle through reserved verse. This paper first analyzes the dual constraints of patriarchal society. It then examines how “madness” becomes a strategy of resistance in their poems, albeit a vulnerable one given the historical context. Ultimately, both poets turn to the power of poetic language to deconstruct patriarchal symbols. They reconstruct female identity and reclaim female subjectivity, transforming from defined “others” into independent beings. Their efforts are not fully successful, yet they inspire many women to fight for themselves. By comparing these distinct strategies, this paper reveals how female writers use literary forms to critique and break free from oppression.

Keywords

female predicament, madness, body alienation, linguistic resistance

1. Introduction

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) and Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) are two of the most original poets in American literature. Plath confronted women's psychological plight and body alienation. Her writing is deeply personal. Dickinson lives in seclusion in 19th-century New England. She explores the depth and boundary of the soul. Her verses are concise. Although their historical background and creative styles

are different, their poetry all expresses profound concern for the female condition.

There is a wealth of research on Dickinson. Scholars focus on textual criticism, nature and death themes, and feminine consciousness. Plath studies center on confessional poetry, feminist views, and trauma writing. This study examines the “madwoman” archetype in both poets. It reveals female resistance to patriarchy. It traces their spiritual paths. This expands feminist criticism. It also guides modern women.

The “madwoman” in Dickinson’s poetry resists social norms. Society demands female obedience. She deliberately sets herself apart. Within her inner world, she maintains independent thought. She resists the status of women. Women were treated as appendages. Plath’s portrait of the “madwoman” seems to be more typical. She writes woman’s pain and trauma. These come from patriarchal oppression. She uses extreme “madness”. She aims to shatter patriarchal authority. This fierce expression is a clear declaration. It declares rebellion against the oppressive order. It is also a cry. Women yearn to reclaim their true selves.

Through this investigation, the paper tries to reveal how both poets achieved a transformation from “the other” to the subject in their time and provide some guidance and inspiration for modern women.

2. Method

From the perspective of feminist criticism, this paper aims to examine how the two female poets consciously construct the “madwomen” in their poems. By comparing the “madwomen” in Dickinson’s and Plath’s poems and combining Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar*, this study focuses on their resistance to patriarchal social norms through language strategies and symbolic mechanisms.

The full text analysis is carried out in turn: First, clarify the double social shackles that restrict women’s creation from the 19th to the 20th century. The deprivation of discourse power and the stereotyping of social roles; secondly, it demonstrates the camouflage function and counterattack efficiency of “madness” in its text; finally, it explores the path of dismantling the patriarchal discourse system and the possibility of reshaping women’s self-consciousness on this basis.

With this analytical framework, we can carry out a systematic comparative study of the two poets in different historical contexts, and simultaneously reveal the internal inheritance relationship presented by their resistance paths.

3. Patriarchal Discipline: Women’s Dual Oppression

3.1 Deprivation of Rights: Prohibiting Women from Voicing Their Thoughts

As far as the deep control of women in patriarchal society is concerned, deprivation of their right to express is the most basic ruling strategy. This deprivation has two aspects: in the private sphere, women are prohibited from engaging in literary writing; in the public domain, they are also refused to speak.

As a result, women's ideological content and emotional world are either misinterpreted or suppressed, and eventually become silent.

The systematic suppression of women's expression by patriarchy has fundamentally blocked the construction process of women's subjectivity. This core dilemma has received distinctive literary responses in the creative practice of Dickinson and Plath.

They shut me up in Prose, which constitutes Dickinson's poetic response to the dilemma of aphasia. The "prose" image in the poem directly refers to the prohibition of expression and its strict norms imposed on women in the patriarchal society. Through the core metaphor of "confinement", the poet shows the personal experience of women being excluded from the discourse system. However, the poem also conveys that even if the voice is suppressed, women's ideological vitality and imagination potential never give up their adherence to the right to self-expression.

A century later, Plath confronted a more insidious modern discourse control towards women. In mid-20th century America, women gained greater access to education and publication, yet a woman's entire existence was equated with family and the fulfillment of prescribed gender roles (Li, 2019). In that time, they lost the opportunity to create.

The language in her poem *Daddy* is even more representative. The poet used imagery like "black shoes" and "Nazis" to show the confinement and brutality of patriarchy. The repeated lines "I never could talk to you. The tongue stuck in my jaw" (pp. 24-25) metaphorically depicting patriarchy's suppression of female speech. The closing line, "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" (p. 80). It represents an explosive culmination of emotion. They constitute has gone beyond the spiritual disenchantment of the father's image, and has been upgraded to an unabashed challenge declaration against the patriarchal order as a whole.

In the mainstream society, when women are expected to speak in a gentle way, Plath goes the opposite way and adopts a straightforward, violent language posture. This kind of expression orientation is not simply emotional catharsis, but a kind of active plunder of discourse power.

3.2 Role Rigidity: The Confinement of the "Angel in the House"

The idealized female paradigm of "angel in the house" can be traced back to Victoria Britain in the middle of the 19th century. In the long narrative poem of the same name published by the poet Coventry Patmore in 1854, this image was systematically constructed for the first time.

This ideology is controlled in two dimensions: in space, women are framed in family territory; morally, it takes chastity, piety and emotional repression as the norm, and its effectiveness in serving others as the value scale. As Yu Lei observes that women were deemed politically inferior to men, their existence circumscribed by this prevailing man/woman dualism; confined largely to the private sphere, they were expected to embody the "angel in the house"—pure, pious, and perfectly submissive (Yu, 2006).

Dickinson's poetry subverts the passive female role prescribed by patriarchy, reclaiming women's

agency and subjectivity (Chen, 2011). Dickinson realized resistance to this role through a lifetime of seclusion. Dickinson's choice was absolute. She rejected marriage and confined herself within her family home. Yet this seemingly extreme self-imprisonment was, in fact, an act of self-resistance.

Poetry offered Dickinson a more expansive spiritual realm where she could think freely and express herself. In *I dwell in Possibility*, poetry becomes a symbolic space. Through this space, Dickinson envisions alternatives to the prescribed path of wife and mother: the possibility of intellectual inquiry, the possibility of spiritual solitude, and the possibility of creative self-definition.

Plath confronted a modern version of the same myth. Post-war American consumerism packaged the "happy housewife" as the ultimate standard of female achievement.

In *The Applicant*, Plath profoundly exposes the hollowness of this myth. She uses absurd dialogue to critique patriarchy's oppression of women. In the poem, the "business manager" pitches women like merchandise, dissecting them into functional "parts", for example, tea-servers, cooks, even referring to them as "it", completely disregarding their humanity.

The deprivation of voice and the fixation of roles form a mutually reinforcing mechanism of oppression. Society first strips women of their voice in the public sphere, confining them to the home; then it beautifies this confinement through the myth of the "angel in the house", packaging imprisonment as virtue; finally, when women attempt to break free from this system, their voices are dismissed as "madness".

4. Dual Confinement: Body and Spirit's "Madness"

4.1 Body Alienation: Women as Passive Objects under Patriarchal Discipline

The discipline of women's bodies in patriarchal society aims to transform women's bodies into passive objects that bear familial responsibilities while satisfying male aesthetics and desires, their autonomy and subjectivity utterly stripped away.

Dickinson endured isolation and threat within patriarchal culture, yet she preferred solitude to self-betrayal (Ren, 2013). So she rejected this discipline—the confinement of women to the home and the expectation of purity and self-sacrifice that defined Victorian femininity. Rather than directly resisting the constraints imposed upon the body, she constructed a value system where "spiritual space surpasses physical space".

I Dwell in Possibility exemplifies this approach. In this poetry, the poet wrote: "I dwell in Possibility. A fairer House than Prose. More numerous of Windows. Superior for Doors" (pp. 1-4). It is a metaphor for the spiritual freedom gained after breaking free from body constraints. She takes root in poetry as an "inhabitant", yet fundamentally refuses to confine her body to the limited space permitted by patriarchy. This writing does not directly express physical suffering, but through the construction of a spiritual space, it rejects the patriarchal logic that "confinement of a woman's body equates to control

over her soul”.

Unlike Dickinson’s restrained expression, Plath uses sharp, intense poems to directly portray the pain and despair of the female body being alienated and manipulated. In *Lady Lazarus*, Plath takes the female body as a vessel to denounce patriarchy’s alienation of women. The metaphor “A sort of walking miracle, my skin Bright as a Nazi lampshade” (pp. 4-5) likens the female body to an object to be plundered and reshaped, exposing its objectified predicament. In the last line, she write “Out of the ash. I rise with my red hair. And I eat men like air” (pp. 82-84). The poet resist alienation through the body’s “rebirth”, venting fierce indignation against the brutalization and definition of women’s bodies, and declaring the reclaiming of body sovereignty.

Plath’s poems pierce to the heart of patriarchy’s brutal essence that woman’s body never truly belongs to herself. Instead, it remains passive, dominated and reshaped by the patriarchal system. This body alienation stands as the most direct, most naked manifestation of patriarchal oppression to women.

4.2 Spiritual Awakening: “Madness” as a Mask of Resistance

When body autonomy and freedom are utterly stripped away, resistance in the realm of the spirit becomes women’s sole path to escape. The patriarchal society holds the right to define “rationality” and “normality”, and its judgment scale is completely within the masculine thinking paradigm. Women’s consciousness and resistance are naturally referred to as “madness”, which is then excluded from the social community.

Dickinson and Plath redefine “madness” with poetic practice: it is not a symptom of mental disorder, but a “mask” actively adopted by women to reject patriarchal discipline after the awakening of subjective consciousness.

By imposing patriarchy on her label of “the other”, Dickinson reverses and forges into a core force that resists social norms. Her resistance is dual: on the one hand, it is seen in daily practice, such as she wears white all the year round, so as to symbolically reject the society’s fantasy of female weakness and angel posture; on the other hand, in the production of poetry, she continues to construct self-identity and clearly draws a line with the traditional female role (Han, 2008).

In the poems of *Because I Couldn’t Stop for Death*, Dickinson continues to get involved in the proposition of “death”, “loneliness”, and “eternity”, so as to loosen the linear life trajectory of “birth-marriage-childbirth-death” imposed on women. This dissociation from the mainstream value order, although referred to as “madness” by patriarchal discourse, constitutes the most vivid testimony of its spiritual liberation.

Plath’s “madness” is an explosive rebellion. The women in her work donned “madness” as a mask, utterly shattering society’s definitions and constraints of “normal” femininity to launch the most ferocious spiritual assault on patriarchy.

For instance, in *The Bell Jar*, the protagonist Esther’s refusal to marry, her insistence on abortion, and

her rejection of psychiatric treatment all embody Plath's defiance. Behind these acts of madness lies Plath's rebellion against oppression. *The Bell Jar* empowers women to take charge of their own fate in a socially suffocating environment, galvanizing them to fight for equality, freedom, and self-actualization (Sun, 2018). This "madness" is not a self-destructive descent into ruin, but an active attack after spiritual awakening.

4.3 *The Vicious Cycle: A Powerless Struggle against a Cruel Fate*

Although "madness" is used as a mask for women's spiritual resistance, patriarchy, as a set of overall dominant structure permeated in social norms, family relations and discourse system, its powerful mechanism makes it difficult for women's resistance practice to transcend the closed cycle of "oppression—resistance—re-oppression".

Dickinson and Plath's poems not only highlight women's persistent pursuit of spiritual freedom, but also acutely reveal the powerlessness inherent in such struggles. In Dickinson's *I dwell in possibility*, she constructs an endless spiritual territory, but her flesh is always imprisoned in a closed space; Plath performs a thrilling resurrection ceremony in *Lady Lazarus*, but this rebirth occurs in a world still full of oppression. Their frustration in real life and family field, in a sense, provides a hidden channel for the achievement of their literary achievements.

Patriarchy firmly binds women through multiple chains, for example, family responsibilities, societal judgments and more, making individual resistance insufficient to alter the overall power structure. The more fiercely women resist, the more intense the suppression they face, ultimately trapping them in a self-defeating cycle: "resistance fails—deeper oppression—resistance again".

This method of ending oppression through self-destruction both demonstrates the resoluteness of resistance and implicitly reveals a tragic acceptance of the patriarchal system's overwhelming oppressive force.

5. Path to Freedom: Linguistic and Identity Resistance

5.1 *Linguistic Breakthrough: Deconstructing Patriarchal Symbolic Hegemony*

Patriarchy runs on the surface structure of social system and power distribution, and is also embedded in the deep coding logic of language symbol system. The traditional language with masculinity as the organizational principle continues to anchor women in the symbolic order of subordination and passivity. Through the solidification of metaphor and the normalization of the discursive path, this discourse system has achieved effective suppression of female expression.

Dickinson's language practice is embodied in a kind of "silent struggle" and "metaphorical rewriting". Consciously alienated from the metrical conventions of traditional poetry and the habitual expressions of mainstream discourse, she deconstructs the coherence and authority of patriarchal language with broken syntactic structure, jumping semantic logic, unconventional scheduling of dashes and capital

letters, and frees words from their disciplinary functions. In the choice of words, she resolutely abandoned the patriarchal words such as “tame” and “obedience”, which anchored women to a rigid identity; instead, it focuses on images that highlight spiritual independence, such as “loneliness”, “death”, and “soul”, and gives these words a reconstructed symbolic meaning with a personalized interpretation path.

Unlike Dickinson’s implicit resistance, Plath’s linguistic breakthrough manifests as “violent deconstruction” and “blunt declaration of war”. In her poetry, she dares to subvert the core symbols of the patriarchal system, imbuing them with rebellious connotations. In *Daddy*, she deconstructs the patriarchal authority symbolized by “Daddy” into oppressive and violent imagery like “black shoes”, “fascism”, and “the devil”. This completely shatters the sacredness and authority traditionally associated with the “father” symbol in language, exposing the patriarchal authority’s spiritual control and violent oppression of women. Moreover, Plath’s language is direct and forceful. She unflinchingly employs bodily symbols such as “skin”, “blood”, and “bones”, shattering the patriarchal language’s “beautification” and “concealment” of the female body.

The language strategies of the two poets, whether Dickinson’s metaphorical rewriting or Plath’s symbolic dismantling, all aim to break the monopoly on the discourse field. They prove by creation that the meaning of language is far from being covered by communication tools, and its essence lies in the bearing and reproduction of power relations.

5.2 Identity Reconstruction: The Awakening from “Other” to “Subject”

The breakthrough at the linguistic level ultimately points to a deeper proposition—the reconstruction of identity. Within the dominant framework of the patriarchal system, women have always succumbed to the marginal position of the “other”. The poetic creations of Dickinson and Plath fundamentally represent women’s awakening from this “other” identity and their process of constructing a “subject” identity.

Dickinson’s identity reconstruction manifests as “the hermit’s steadfastness” and “spiritual autonomy”. In *The Soul selects her own Society*, this sense of subjectivity becomes even more pronounced. In the poetry, she writes: “The soul selects her own society, Then shuts the door” (pp. 1-2). The “soul” symbolizes the female subject consciousness, possessing absolute autonomy in choice, uninfluenced by external power, wealth, or public opinion. This kind of writing of soul autonomy marks that women have jumped from the passive acceptance of the “other” position to the “subject” position that can be self-determined, and has realized the fundamental transformation of the nature of identity.

The process of Plath’s identity reconstruction is essentially a “warrior’s awakening” and “self-reconstruction”. Her poems faithfully record the dramatic transformation from “dependent other” to “independent subject”—a journey filled with pain, struggle and rejection. In his early poems, the imprint of “the other” is still deeply engraved in his way of discourse; however, through the double

experience of marriage failure and spiritual crisis, her poetic consciousness gradually awakened and matured, and the value judgment of the patriarchal system has since lost its normative effect on her creation. She confirms a fundamental proposition with her own practice: the dominant position of women does not need to be confirmed by men, and it can only be generated from the inner awakening and persistence of women themselves.

From Dickinson's persistent pursuit of "spiritual autonomy" to Plath's reshaping of "self-identity", the identity reconstruction practice of the two poets together reached a fundamental cognition: women's "subject" status is not naturally given, but is generated through continuous struggle and persistence. This poetic practice provides a precious literary reference and spiritual inspiration for the construction of female subjectivity in later generations.

6. Conclusion

Through a comparative analysis of Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath, this paper explores the significance of "madwoman" as a symbol of poetry's resistance to multiple symbols. Their subversive role is reflected in two interrelated levels: linguistic level and psychological level. In terms of language, the two poets broke the ideal of "angel in the house" in the Victorian era through syntactic fracture, shocking images and strategic misappropriation of madness as a critical perspective. At the psychological level, they fight against the shackles of the internalization of patriarchal order with subjective initiative. Although this resistance has paid a heavy personal price, their works reveal a lasting truth: women's creativity and discourse authority can transcend institutional repression. For contemporary readers, Dickinson and Plath provide a complementary paradigm—the former embodies a kind of silent and tenacious persistence, highlighting the autonomy of thought; the latter shows a warm and bold courage to transform pain into aesthetic power. The two together clarify a fundamental requirement: liberation begins with the courage to speak up, resist, and define yourself. Their legacy appeals to regain the voice of women, which should not be the echo of the edge, but should become the core and irreplaceable contribution in cultural memory.

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