

## Original Paper

# A Study on the Themes of Emily Dickinson's Poetry

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### Abstract

*Emily Dickinson is thought of as the most famous American female poet in the history of American literature. She wrote 1,789 poems in her whole life. She had written a wide variety of poems. This paper conducts a study of the themes of her poems by close reading. Extolling truth, kindness and beauty is one of the most important themes of her poetry. Love for the nature is another important theme of her poetry. Besides, she conducted many philosophical reflections on fame, belief, love and loneliness. Many of her poems not only provide people with the enjoyment of beautiful words and artistic conception, but also inspire them to a certain extent. Through probing into the themes of her poetry, we can know more about her original and profound insight into nature and life.*

### Keywords

*Emily Dickinson, poetry, themes, New Criticism*

## 1. Introduction

Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts on December 10, 1830. She is now considered as the greatest American female poet and one of the greatest female poets in the history of world literature. "Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was a deceptively quiet nineteenth-century American woman who wrote with the fire, innovation, and skill of a twentieth-century master. Long before the Modernist and feminist movements, Dickinson wrote astonishingly prescient poetry that embodied principles of fragmentation, isolation, independence, and self-reliance" (Martin, 2008, pp. iii-v). As for Emily Dickinson's poems, R. W. Franklin's 1998 edition, titled *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, which contains all 1,789 of her known poems, is regarded as the most reliable source.

This paper intends to probe into the main themes of Emily Dickinson's poetry by the approach of close reading, which is a term used by the New Critics for that kind of analysis of a text that applies the principles of New Criticism. According to New Criticism, one can make "a close and detailed analysis of the text itself to arrive at an interpretation without referring to historical, authorial, or cultural

concerns” (Brooks, 2006, p. 263).

## 2. The Themes of Emily Dickinson’s Poetry

### 2.1 Extolling Truth, Kindness and Beauty

The poem “*Tell All the Truth*” is a humorous yet philosophical poem. After all, mankind’s vision is narrow, and its wisdom is limited. Thus, there should be a process in revealing mankind the truth. Otherwise, it may backfire. With a relaxed and humorous tone, this poem tells an abstract and profound truth. Emily Dickinson writes:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth’s superb surprise  
As Lightning to the Children eased  
With explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind—(Brooks, 2006, p. 193)

“The Truth must dazzle gradually” is a sentence with poetic flavor. According to common sense, when strong light dazzles someone, it can’t be a gradual process. This seemingly contradictory expression vividly explains a profound and abstract truth, that is, the truth should be gradually revealed, and when revealing it, one should take the human receptivity into consideration. If the truth is presented to the world in a direct and instantaneous manner, it may be difficult for people to accept it; moreover, it may have a counterproductive effect. This is a poem full of philosophy, in which the author conveys abstract ideas that can only be understood but not expressed in words through concise, concrete and vivid language.

And the poem titled “*If I Can Stop One Heart from Breaking*” has a power to move people’s heart. It expresses Emily Dickinson’s pursuit of kindness:

If I can stop one Heart from breaking  
I shall not live in vain  
If I can ease one Life the Aching  
Or cool one Pain  
Or help one fainting Robin  
Unto his Nest again I shall not live in vain. (Dickinson, 2005, p. 6)

In the poem *I Died for Beauty*, Emily Dickinson expresses her praise for truth and beauty. And in her eyes, “the two are one”. And those who die for beauty and those who die for truth are brothers, for they sacrifice themselves for the same thing.

I died for beauty, but was scarce  
Adjusted in the tomb,  
When one who died for truth was lain  
In an adjoining room.

He questioned softly why I failed?  
“For beauty,” I replied.  
“And I for truth,—the two are one;  
We brethren are,” he said.

And so, as kinsmen met a night,  
We talked between the rooms,  
Until the moss had reached our lips,  
And covered up our names. (Dickinson, 2005, p. 180)

From the above analysis we can see that extolling truth, kindness and beauty is an important theme of Emily Dickinson’s poetry. And this theme not only runs through her poetry, but also represents her lifelong pursuit.

## 2.2 *Love for the Nature*

Emily Dickinson’s poetry is filled with love for the nature. In the poem “*The Bee Is Not Afraid of Me*”, Emily Dickinson describes us a happy and harmonious summer scene with anthropomorphic strokes. This poem presents a fairy tale scene in summer’s day:

The bee is not afraid of me.  
I know the butterfly.  
The pretty people in the woods  
Receive me cordially—  
The brooks laugh louder when I come,  
The breezes madder play;  
Wherefore mine eye thy silver mists,  
Wherefore, Oh Summer’s Day? (Dickinson, 2005, p. 68)

The beauty of the summer's day presented by this poem makes readers unavoidably think of a line of Shakespeare's 18<sup>th</sup> sonnet: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 36)

In her poem "*Nature Is What We See*", Emily Dickinson directly writes about the nature:

Nature is what we see  
The hill, the afternoon—  
Squirrel, eclipse, the bumblebee,  
Nay,—Nature is heaven.

Nature is what we hear,  
The bobolink, the sea—  
Thunder, the cricket—  
Nay,—Nature is harmony.

Nature is what we know  
But have no art to say,  
So impotent our wisdom is  
To her simplicity. (Dickinson, 2005, p. 158)

In Emily Dickinson's eyes, the nature is "heaven", is "harmony", is what we can't truly know. The nature is the source of life.

### 2.3 Philosophical Thinking on Fame

On this small planet Earth, some people spend their brief and precious lives on meaningless things, such as competing for fame and reputation and boasting of themselves. In the eyes of Emily Dickinson, this approach is no different from a frog preaching to a muddy pond. The poet disdains being such a big shot.

The poem "*I'm No Body! Who Are You?*" uses the image of a frog as a metaphor for those who pursue fame, which is very vivid and impressive. This poem embodies Emily Dickinson's thoughts of fame:

I'm nobody! Who are you?  
Are you nobody too?  
Then there's a pair of us!  
Don't tell! they'd banish us—you know  
How dreary to be somebody!  
How public like a frog  
To tell one's name the livelong June

To an admiring bog! (Dickinson, 2005, p. 12)

This poem shows us that Emily Dickinson doesn't care or seek for being famous and she satirizes those who seek for being famous and boast of themselves all day long. This poem is footnote of her life: She chooses not to seek for being "somebody", instead, she chooses to be "nobody" to live a simple life. The poem "*How Happy Is the Little Stone*" is also an embodiment of her philosophical thinking on fame:

How happy is the little stone,  
The rambles in the road alone,  
And doesn't care about careers,  
And exigencies never fears;  
Whose coat of elemental brown  
A passing universe put on;  
And independent as the sun,  
Associates or glows alone,  
Fulfilling absolute decree  
In casual simplicity. (Dickinson, 2005, p. 58)

The little stone lives a simple and unadorned life, not caring about gains and losses, nor afraid of crises approaching. It lives independently, naturally and truly, filled with joy and contentment in its heart. In her poem "*Fame Is a Fickle Food*", she speaks of the fatal harm of fame. Fame is changeable, fleeting and deadly harmful. If human beings take the pursuit of fame as their goal of life, they will unavoidably have a tragic ending.

Fame is a fickle food  
Upon a shifting plate,  
Whose table once a Guest, but not  
The second time, is set.  
Whose crumbs the crows inspect,  
And with ironic caw  
Flap past it to the Farmer's corn;  
Men eat of it and die. (Dickinson, 2005, p. 146)

The novel metaphorical expression of comparing the abstract thing of fame to toxic and deadly food leaves a deep impression on readers. It also vividly expresses the author's view on pursuing fame,

which is that such a life pursuit is not only meaningless, but extremely harmful.

From the above poems, we can clearly see Emily Dickinson's attitude towards fame. From these poems, we can find the reason why she would like to live a simple, pure and natural life like a happy little stone, who is independent, not caring about "careers" and not fearing "exigencies". We can also find the reason why she would not have her poems published in her whole life.

#### 2.4 Thinking on Belief

"Dickinson was affected by the influences of Puritanism throughout her life. The religion was rooted in the beliefs of simplicity and predestination, as well as the hope for transcendent moments of grace that confirmed one's unity with a sublime God". (Martin, 2008, p. 27) Thinking on religious belief is one important theme in Emily Dickinson's poetry. In the poem entitled "*Some Keep the Sabbath Going to Church*", Emily Dickinson uses vivid symbolic techniques to articulate her profound and abstract views on religious belief:

Some keep the *Sabbath* going to Church—  
I keep it, staying at Home—  
With a *Bobolink* for a *Chorister*—  
And an Orchard, for a *Dome*—

Some keep the Sabbath in *Surplice*—  
I just wear my Wings—  
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,  
Our little *Sexton*—sings.

God *preaches*, a noted *Clergyman*—  
And the *sermon* is never long,  
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last—  
I'm going, all along. (Sui, 1998, p. 100)

In Emily Dickinson's eyes, what should be focused on is possessing a devout heart, by which one can communicate with God directly. For the "I" in this poem, her church is the nature, in which she can elevate her spiritual realm and embark on the spiritual path to heaven earlier than those going to church to keep sabbath. For the protagonist of this poem, what should be attached importance to is not religious rite but a devout heart that truly believes in God. This poem of Emily Dickinson reminds people of Tolstoy's words: The kingdom of gods is within you.

Thinking on belief also goes through many other poems of Emily Dickinson. Here I will list some of them and make some analysis. She describes Jesus Christ in the 203<sup>rd</sup>, 567<sup>th</sup>, 698<sup>th</sup>, 1487<sup>th</sup> and 1735<sup>th</sup>

poems. In the 502<sup>nd</sup> poem of hers, she expresses her longing for being guided by Jesus:

At least to pray is left, is left.  
O Jesus! in the air  
I know not which thy chamber is,—  
I'm knocking everywhere.  
  
Thou stirrest earthquake in the South,  
And maelstrom in the Sea;  
Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth,  
Hast thou no Arm for Me? (Dickinson, 2005, p. 198)

From this poem, it can be clearly seen that Emily Dickinson searches for Jesus everywhere, and is eager to receive his guidance. Through this poem, we can deeply feel her sense of loneliness, which comes from her feeling being neglected by Jesus.

In a letter written to Abiah Root in 1850, Emily Dickinson also expresses her eagerness for salvation and her worries towards whether Jesus would save her:

What shall we do my darling, when trial grows more, and more, when the dim, lone light expires,  
and it's dark, so very dark, and we wander, and know not where, and cannot get out of the  
forest — whose is the hand to help us, and to lead, and forever guide us, they talk of a "Jesus of  
Nazareth," will you tell me if it be he? (Johnson, 1986, p. 98)

Due to a lack of religious experience and her love for the human world, sometimes Emily Dickinson was unsure whether Jesus Christ would guide her, and even suspected that she was in a state of being banished.

Yet her uncertainties were soon gone. The poem entitled "*I Never Saw a Moor*" expresses Emily Dickinson's confidence in being able to be accepted as a member in the heaven. Though "I never spoke with God", "yet certain am I of the spot" in heaven.

I never saw a moor,  
I never saw the sea;  
Yet know I how the heather looks,  
And what a wave must be.  
I never spoke with God,  
Nor visited in heaven;

Yet certain am I of the spot  
As if the chart were given. (Dickinson, 2005, p. 184)

This poem implies the author's knowing the standards for ascending to heaven and her being confident in meeting the standards for ascending to heaven.

### 2.5 *Longing for Love*

Love is one of the main themes in Emily Dickinson's poetic creation. For example, in the poem "*Love Is Anterior to Life*", Emily Dickinson writes:

Love is anterior to life,  
Posterior to death,  
Initial of creation, and  
The exponent of breath. (Dickinson, 2005, p. 96)

Although this poem is short, it clearly expounds the importance of love. Life comes from love. Without love, life will not exist. It is the "initial of creation". Creation is originated from love. And love outlives death. And every breath that human beings take is resulted from love.

In another poem titled "*That I Did Always Love*", Emily Dickinson expresses her sincere feelings toward her lover:

That I did always love,  
I bring thee proof:  
That till I loved  
I did not love enough.

That I shall love always,  
I offer thee  
That love is life,  
And life hath immortality.

This, dost thou doubt, sweet?  
Then have I  
Nothing to show  
But Calvary. (Dickinson, 2005, p. 100)

Though this poem is relatively straightforward and adopts a straightforward style, without emphasizing the use of imagery, it can better allow readers to experience the author's strong emotions, which are so strong that they cannot be expressed in a roundabout manner.

In the following poem "*Who Has Not Found the Heaven Below*", Emily Dickinson tells of the importance of love. Love can bring one nearer to the heaven and God, for "His furniture is love". Here, love refers to universal love, or say the care for or sympathy with others, with those who are suffering. If one only seeks for the heaven above, without caring about the pain of the people on the earth, he will not be able to find the heaven above. Though this poem is short and concise, written in easily understandable words, yet it is full of philosophical elements and has deep connotation. In this poem, Emily Dickinson writes:

Who has not found the heaven below  
Will fail of it above.  
God's residence is next to mine,  
His furniture is love. (Dickinson, 2005, p. 36)

Just because love is so important, the poet thinks that she has no time to hate. Life is so short, and there are so many marvelous people and things to love, thus the poet would not spend any time on hate:

I Had no time to hate, because  
The grave would hinder me,  
And life was not so ample  
I Could finish enmity.

Nor had I time to love; but since  
Some industry must be,  
The little toil of love, I thought,  
Was large enough for me. (Dickinson, 2004, p. 128)

From this poem, we can clearly see Emily Dickinson's attitude toward love and hate. In Emily Dickinson's eyes, the lifetime of human beings is too short. They should abandon the idea of hatred, because even if they spend all their time on love, they will still find that they don't have enough time to do so. From this poem, we can also see Emily Dickinson's lofty spiritual realm.

## 2.6 Thinking on Loneliness

Ordinary people are often tormented by the ordinary emotion of loneliness, but Emily Dickinson has her own unique understanding of loneliness. Thinking on loneliness becomes a main theme in her

poetry. And the poem “*There Is Another Loneliness*” expresses Emily Dickinson’s thoughts about loneliness:

There is another Loneliness  
That many die without,  
Not want or friend occasions it,  
Or circumstances or lot.

But nature sometimes, sometimes thought,  
And whoso it befall  
Is richer than could be divulged  
By mortal numeral. (Dickinson, 2005, p. 150)

In Nietzsche’s view, the loneliness of pursuing truth is the highest state of loneliness. Such people’s life goals are no longer to get along with others, but to pursue truth. They will immerse themselves in thinking and pursue the true meaning of life. And Emily Dickinson is exactly the kind of person mentioned by Nietzsche.

In fact, Emily Dickinson doesn’t feel lonely at all. In the eyes of Emily Dickinson, even if there were no grasslands, then if there were a clover and a bee in front of her, she could still fantasize about it in her heart and create a grassland filled with countless clovers, with swarms of bees wandering among them. Even if there were only one clover and no bee could be found, it doesn’t matter. It’s just a matter of expanding the imagination a bit, and the poet could still live in the grassland created by her. As a poet, she would not be lonely, because in her heart there are boundless grasslands, her spirit is full and abundant, and she would not be trapped by external monotony and loneliness.

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,  
One clover, and a bee,  
And revery.  
The revery alone will do,  
If bees are few. (Dickinson, 2004, p. 231)

From the above poems, it can be clearly seen that Emily Dickinson, living in her vast and prosperous spiritual world, utters her voices by means of poetry in many things, which even include the political system of her country. Let’s see her poem titled “*My Country Need Not Change Her Gown*”.

My country need not change her gown,  
Her triple suit as sweet  
As when 'twas cut at Lexington,  
And first pronounced "a fit."

Great Britain disapproves, "the stars";  
Disparagement discreet,—  
There's something in their attitude  
That taunts her bayonet.

From the poetic lines like "My country need not change her gown/her triple suit as sweet", we can see Emily Dickinson's approval of America's political system and care about the political affairs of her country.

### 3. Conclusion

In the preface of the book *Poems by Emily Dickinson*, Higginson, Emily Dickinson's pen friend, commented on Emily Dickinson's poetry enthusiastically: "It is believed that the thoughtful reader will find in these pages a quality more suggestive of the poetry of William Blake than of anything to be elsewhere found,—flashes of wholly original and profound insight into nature and life; words and phrases exhibiting an extraordinary vividness of descriptive and imaginative power, yet often set in a seemingly whimsical or even rugged frame" (Higginson, 1890, pp. ii-vi).

From Emily Dickinson's poems, we can see that she pondered over various things in the world and uttered her voices freely. The themes of her poetry mainly include extolling truth, kindness and beauty, love for the nature, philosophical thinking on fame, thinking on belief, longing for love, and thinking on loneliness. She didn't care about fame and wouldn't have her poems published. She lived like a hermit and enjoyed her loneliness. Her state of life had something to do with the fact that the society she lived in was patriarchal.

According to feminism, "western societies are patriarchal, being controlled by men. Either consciously or unconsciously, men have oppressed women, allowing them little or no voice in the political, social, or economic issues of their society. By not giving voice, and therefore value, to women's opinions, responses, and writings, men have suppressed the female, defined what it means to be feminine, and thereby de-voiced, devalued, and trivialized what it means to be a woman. Men have made women the 'nonsignificant Other'" (Brooks, 2006, p. 268). Yet nothing could impede Emily Dickinson from thinking freely and deeply by means of poetry. Through her poetic creation, Emily Dickinson proved to the world that she wasn't the "nonsignificant Other", but one of the greatest poets in the whole world.

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