

Emily Dickinson's Ecological Consciousness: An Eco-Critical Reading of Selected Poems

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Abstract: *Emily Dickinson's lifetime work comprises over 1800 poems, which are often rich in meaning and frequently feature nature as a common theme. In her poetry, nature is portrayed as a living and independent subject, full of mystery and wisdom. Many poems express an ecological thought of awe and respect for nature and its laws, reflecting a relationship between humans and nature that is both contradictory and harmonious. They also propose expectations for the human-nature relationship, providing important insights for humanity facing ecological crises. This paper starts from Dickinson's personal life and the transcendentalist thought of her era, and interprets Emily Dickinson's poems from an ecocritical perspective.*

Keywords: *Emily Dickinson; ecocriticism; ecological consciousness*

1. Introduction

In the 19th century, Hölderlin envisioned a future where “Voll Verdienst, doch dichterisch, wohnt der Mensch auf dieser Erde”, that is “Full of merit yet poetic, man dwells on this earth”. This verse, interpreted by Heidegger, became a key statement of ecological aesthetics in the 20th century and a source of comfort for many nature lovers. Similarly, Emily Dickinson, a contemporary of Hölderlin, drew inspiration and experience from her garden and nature. Her poetry reflects her intimate and complex relationship with nature, as later scholars have noted: “Whether she wrote about love or war, ugliness or beauty, vanity or virtue, heaven or hell, her flower garden often provided her with the narratives, tropes, and imagery she required”^[1].

Emily Dickinson is a prominent figure in American literature, as Richard Chase argues that she and Whitman represent “the ultimate accomplishment of American poetry”^[2]. About a third of Dickinson's poems deal with natural themes, exploring nature's vastness, portraying nature's beauty, and reflecting on nature's relation to humanity. Nature is not only the backdrop of her life and work, but also the fountainhead of her inspiration.

The term “ecological criticism” was coined by William Lockett in 1978, but Emily Dickinson, a nineteenth-century American poet who was influenced by naturalism and transcendentalism, had already expressed a profound ecological awareness in her poetry. Her poems reflect her unique views on the relationship between humans and nature, which were shaped by her personal and historical context. This article will analyze Dickinson's poetic representation of nature from an ecocritical perspective, and examine how her ecological consciousness, natural thought and transcendentalism affected her poetic style and themes.

2. Echoes of Two Eras: Transcendentalism and Ecocriticism in American Literature

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was a nineteenth-century American poet who lived in Amherst, Massachusetts, a rural town where she received her education and spent most of her life. Her poetry was influenced by the historical and cultural context of her time, especially the American Transcendentalism or the “American Renaissance” period, which was marked by the philosophical ideas of Emerson and other writers who advocated for individualism, nature and spirituality. More than a century later, the emergence and development of ecocriticism in the United States, as a response to the ecological crisis and environmental degradation, offered a new perspective to reevaluate Dickinson's poetry and its ecological implications. This article will begin with Emily Dickinson's life times and personal experience and explore the connections and differences between transcendentalism and ecocriticism.

2.1. *Emily Dickinson and Transcendentalism*

Emily Dickinson's poetry is not an explicit reflection of her life experiences. The majority of her poems were published posthumously by her family and friends. Researchers often rely on descriptions from those close to her or letters to reconstruct Emily Dickinson's life. A well-known fact about Emily Dickinson's life is that she lived in seclusion and never left her home after 1862. She never married. However, contrary to the image of a solitary poet living in a corner and melancholic, Emily Dickinson actually lived in a large house of fourteen acres left by her father. She even took care of several gardens with her mother and sister. Until the last few years of her life, Dickinson praised the flowers she cultivated in letters to friends: "though to cower before a flower is perhaps unwise - but Beauty is often timidity - perhaps oftener - pain"^[1]. Emily Dickinson's love for nature is evident.

During Emily Dickinson's lifetime, transcendentalism was a highly influential movement in the United States. The term was originally derived from the writings of Immanuel Kant and popularized by Emerson, Thoreau, and others. Transcendentalism catered to the needs of the American literary world at that time and opposed the social conformity, materialism, and commercialism that were increasingly dominant in American society. It is characterized by prioritizing spiritual things, emphasizing the experiential world and senses beyond the material, and linking the human spirit with the natural world. As Emerson said in *On Nature*, "that spirit creates; that behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present... that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old", "The world proceeds from the same spirit as the body of man"^[3]. It can be said that transcendentalism places human spirit and nature in a very high position.

Emily Dickinson's poetry was significantly influenced by transcendentalism, a movement that originated in Massachusetts, where she lived. The natural beauty of New England, which deeply impressed the transcendentalists, also served as an important source of inspiration for her poetry. While she does not fall into the category of the Transcendentalists, she was well-regarded by Emerson and read his work thoughtfully^[4]. Transcendentalism and Emerson can also be found in some of her poems, such as in her famous poem "Nature is what we see". In this poem, Dickinson reflects transcendentalism's view of nature: "NATURE is what we see, /The Hill, the Afternoon— /Squirrel, Eclipse, the Bumblebee, /Nay - Nature is Heaven"^[5]. The poem links heaven, man, and nature together and emphasizes the spiritual nature of the world around us.

2.2. *Ecocriticism and transcendentalism*

Ecocriticism, a new critical method in the field of cultural literature, emerged in response to the global ecological crisis and the deterioration of the human living environment. The conflict between humans and nature has gradually intensified, and it has been influenced by the continuous green movement in the international community. William Rueckert, an American scholar, first proposed the term Ecocriticism, which he defined as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature"^[6]. Lawrence Buell, a leading figure in Ecocriticism, further defined and interpreted it as "the study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis"^[7], emphasizing the relationship between environmental protection practices, literature, and natural environments.

The content of ecological criticism emphasizes the relationship between humans and nature for that "the ecological crisis is fundamentally a crisis of human nature and a crisis of human lifestyle choices"^[8]. Therefore, ecological criticism cannot be separated from criticism of human-centeredness and strives to eliminate the binary opposition between humans and nature, awakening people's concern for nature. For instance, the renowned ecological literary work *Silent Spring* first criticized the harm of DDT, a synthetic compound, to nature, pointing out the jeopardization of human intervention to nature. It aimed to prove the necessity of environmental protection by criticizing human ecological destruction behavior and awaken people's general ecological awareness.

The rediscovery of the natural writing tradition in classical literature and the reinterpretation of classical works from an ecological perspective are both the content and the main critical method of ecological criticism. For example, many poets of English Romanticism and their works are reinterpreted and examined in the historic context of environmental damage caused by the Industrial Revolution, and are considered as pioneers of ecological criticism. As a result, many transcendentalist writers' works naturally enter the field of ecological criticism. For instance, Buell, an important representative of ecological criticism, praises Thoreau's works and thoughts, calling his image as an "Environmental

Sainthood". He even compares him with Osiris, the god of plants and agriculture in ancient Egyptian mythology, highlighting the importance and greatness of the spirit conveyed in Thoreau's works: "Like the body of Osiris, Thoreau's spirit has been scattered and transplanted in a thousand forms through his transmutation into cultural property" [7].

Ecological criticism and transcendentalism share a number of similarities, especially in their focus on the relationship between humans and nature, particularly the relationship between humans and animals and plants. With the changes of the times and the development of society, this relationship has received far more attention today than it did in the 19th century. The call to reject human-centeredness was already reflected in the works of transcendentalists. Therefore, studying Emily Dickinson's ecological ideas from an ecological criticism perspective is essentially a dialogue with the holistic natural view dominated by transcendentalism. Ecological criticism and transcendentalism originally had a high degree of consistency, which makes interpretation possible.

3. Interpretation of Emily Dickinson's Ecological Consciousness

The preceding text briefly introduced Emily Dickinson's biography. Her life experiences are not controversial, and her love for nature is evident in her life. Although this is widely known, Dickinson's love for nature may be even greater. One example is that Dickinson's reputation as a gardener was even much more renowned than a poet. At the time of her death, most of the attendees were residents of the Amherst area, and apart from a few relatives and friends, in their views, "While some who attended the funeral knew she had been a poet, all knew that Emily Dickinson was a gardener" [1]. Susan Dickinson, Emily's friend and later sister-in-law, wrote her obituary. In addition to praising her poetry, Susan also lauded Emily's domestic and horticultural skills and enthusiasm "There are many houses among all classes into which treasures of fruit and flowers were constantly sent, that will forever miss those evidences of her unselfish consideration...One can only speak of 'duties beautifully done'; of her gentle till- age of the rare flowers filling her conservatory, into which, as into the heavenly Paradise, entered nothing that could defile, and which was ever abloom in frost or sunshine, so well she knew her chemistries"[9].

During Emily Dickinson's childhood and adolescence, she enjoyed walking in the woods, which may have been influenced by Emerson's call in "Nature" that "In the woods, we return to reason and faith...the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God" [3]. She was almost an "instinctive walker in the woods" [1], as the flowers and scenery in the forest were different from those in the garden. For a literary creator, the "habitat" of childhood serves as a vital source of inspirations and significant experience. From an ecocritical perspective, "the childhood habitat plays an important role in shaping a writer's worldview and outlook on life" [10]. Whether it was the forest paths that Dickinson wandered in her youth or the several gardens that accompanied her throughout her life, they had a great impact on her writing and view of nature.

Ecocriticism theory employs an important research method of examining the representation of nature in literature by looking for the absence of nature in literary works [8]. This research method is often used to reinterpret classic works, intending to arouse people's ecological awareness through the absence of these natural elements, and essentially still criticizes anthropocentrism. In Dickinson's poetry, this "absence" is presented in another way. In the poem "Nature is what we see" mentioned earlier, although Dickinson seems to pay tribute to the transcendentalists from the first stanza, she raises her own calm philosophy in the last stanza: "Nature is what We know -/But have no Art to say -/So impotent our Wisdom is /To Her Sincerity -" [5]. Can we really know and master nature with our "impotent" wisdom? The same point is also reflected in Dickinson's other poems, such as in "What mystery pervades a well!" The poet writes, "But nature is a stranger yet;/The ones that cite her most/Have never passed her haunted house, /Nor simplified her ghost... That those who know her, know her less /The nearer her they get" [5]. Emerson advocated that nature can be fully understood through "intuition", but Dickinson doubted this notion and once again stated that humans cannot fully penetrate the mystery of nature. Compared with anthropocentric writing, Dickinson elevated nature to a higher position, and even believed that humans are the ones who can be "absent".

Dickinson's writings often depict "nature" as an independent subject. This description at times borders on animism, as if it has its own emotions, and the narrator can communicate with nature on an equal physical or verbal level, like the interaction between two human beings, two equal subjects. In the poem "I started Early - Took my Dog", the narrator has an intimate contact with the ocean "But no Man moved Me - till the Tide/Went past my simple Shoe-/And past my Apron- and my Belt...And made as

He would eat me up...I felt His Silver Heel/ Opon my Anle - /Then My Shoes/Would overflow with Pearl -Until We met the Solid Town - /No One He seemed to know - /And bowing - with a Mighty look -/At me - The Sea withdrew -”^[5]. The ocean becomes a playful companion for the narrator, and the surging waves are described as various anthropomorphic behaviors. The ocean even has a “silver heel” as a body part, and finally bows out with a “mighty look”. It is full of vitality and energy. In Dickinson’s poetry, the description of nature in a passive and secondary position is changed. Nature is an independent and powerful subject, containing infinite mysteries and power.

Despite the fact that the United States was in the early stages of industrialization in the 19th century and had not yet experienced a large-scale ecological crisis caused by the development of science and technology, literature has always had a foresight. The works of poets in the Romanticism period already contain reflections on “modernity” and the dramatic changes that were taking place in the social field. Even Emily Dickinson, who lived in a small cabin, had the perception of these changes and clearly stated her doubts and rebuttals to the prevailing scientism in her poems. However, this does not mean that Dickinson was a conservative who denied industrialization and modernization. In fact, she repeatedly expressed her affirmation of science and technology. In “I like to see it lap the miles,” Dickinson marvels at the speed and flexibility of the train that travels thousands of miles a day and shuttles through the mountains. She also describes it as “supercilious” and “neigh like Boanerges.” Boanerges is the name Jesus gave to one of his disciples, James, describing his swift and decisive personality and his voice like a bell. Literally, it means “son of thunder,” but here it is used to describe the noise made by the train. At the same time, the train in Dickinson’s pen looks at everything along the way with a “supercilious” eye, showing her critical attitude towards this new technology.

Emily Dickinson’s poetry also explores the theme of the destructive power of nature and the consequences of disrespecting the laws of nature. In her poem, “Nature - sometimes sears a Sapling - /Sometimes - scalps a Tree -”^[5], Dickinson portrays nature as both a force of life and destruction. She also describes how volcanoes can “Taking Villages for breakfast”^[5] and how even ships and navigation technology, which represent the pinnacle of human science and technology, can be overturned and sunk by strong winds under the impact of wind and waves. For example, in “It tossed - and tossed -/A little Brig I knew - o’ertook by Blast - /It spun - and spun -/And groped delirious, for Morn -/It slipped - and slipped - /As One that drunken - stopt - /It’s white foot tripped - /Then dropped from sight”^[5], Dickinson vividly describes a ship struggling to stay afloat in a storm. Through these descriptions, Dickinson warns that if humans do not respect the laws of nature and blindly develop and remake nature, they will eventually bear the consequences. In fact, she predicts that humans will face predicaments in the coming 20th century if they continue to ignore these warnings.

To sum up, Dickinson’s poetry is rooted in the ideological soil of American Romanticism and transcendentalism, but is not strictly confined to it. Instead, she actively develops a diverse and distinctive ecological consciousness. In Dickinson’s works, the power of human science and technology is affirmed, but at the same time, she warns that human should not ignore the natural law and blindly develop science and technology. This still has implications for ecological conservation today.

4. Conclusion

Emily Dickinson’s poetry that centers around nature is characterized by a complex and diverse relationship between humans and nature. According to the poet, our understanding of nature is multifaceted and multi-perspective. While humans can resonate with nature, they cannot fully comprehend its mysteries. Nature is not always in a passive or secondary position, but an independent entity. Therefore, the poet suggests that respecting the laws of nature and revering it is the correct way to coexist with it. It can be said that the poet’s insightful vision transcends her time and reveals potential ecological crises. She explains the attitude people should adopt towards nature. In this sense, the poet’s ecological view and ecological wisdom provide us with useful insights in today’s ecological crisis era and play an important pioneering role.

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