

# Ambivalence: Space in Emily Dickinson's "Wild Nights-Wild Nights!"

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**Abstract:** In Emily Dickinson's "Wild Nights-Wild Nights!" the metaphorical space includes "Eden", "port" and "sea." By examining the meaning of "thee" and the perspective of the speaker, it can be inferred that the speaker is in an actual space – a house. Combined with the boat-sea metaphor the poem is built on, the house is the boat. While the speaker desires for the outside world – the "sea", she also shows an attachment to the house/boat by choosing to stay in the "port," hence the speaker expresses the ambivalence toward the house/boat and the outside world/sea. Meanwhile, in terms of Dickinson herself, house, a home for soul and writing, is always a significant element to her, which can be referred to a safe and loving space, while the outside world the patriarchal society, the industrial city or the love passion against which the speaker has made her own choice.

**Keywords:** space; house; boat; patriarchal society; Eden; sea

## 1. Introduction

The "thee" and "Ah" in Emily Dickinson's "Wild Nights-Wild Nights!" are two ambiguous words to handle. Different explanations to the words will lead to different understandings to the poem. Does the "thee" refer to the "sea" or other objects? Does the "Ah" make the "Eden" and "sea" equal or separated? On the other hand, considering the intermediate space – "port", and the speaker's affection to the implied house in the poem, it seems that there is an ambivalence to the internal world – house and the external world. This thesis will go through the whole poem to find out how the ambivalence to the internal space and external space is developed.

While some scholars focus on the erotic themes (Reynolds, 2002), rhythms (Shoptaw 2004), stylistic features (Gao 2017), modernity (Liu 2004), metaphors (Zou, 2011; Li 2014) and love passion (Zhai, 2010) in Dickinson's "Wild Nights-Wild Nights!", it also has much to offer in terms of its space.

## 2. House/boat

In the wild nights, first the speaker mentions "thee." Who is "thee"? Does it refer to "the sea" in the last stanza? The same question has been raised by James L. Dean in his "Dickinson's 'Wild Nights.'" (1993, p. 91-93) There are two possibilities. One of them is that "thee" indicates "the sea," which renders the whole poem as a boat-sea metaphor. The speaker herself is a boat which is pulled on shore or moored in port. The boat wants to be with the sea even under the risk of wild winds, because the sea is a safe "port" and romantic "Eden" for the boat's heart and spirit, no matter how fatal it can be, which can be seen from "Might I but moor – tonight/ In thee! (Todd, 2016, p. 200)" But normally, a boat is not supposed to be moored "in" the sea unless the boat has already sunk. Thus, the poem presents a death image contributed by the speaker's insanity and enthusiasm to the attachment to "thee"— "the sea". Here the "Ah" in the last stanza can be a sigh on the basis that "Eden" is an appositive word for "the sea." Eventually, the whole poem is built on a perfect boat-sea metaphor.

The other possibility is that the first "thee" refers not to "the sea" but a person, a different object from the "sea", which will at last lead us to the boat-sea metaphor as well, though. The only difference is that before the speaker reaches the metaphor, there are one question to be raised. Where is the speaker if she is not a boat drifting somewhere? In her house. This is based on the speaker's perspective presented in the poem. The speaker is having nights of wild storms, but the poem is almost soundless, except for the first stanza. Even in the first stanza, "luxury" outweighs the "Wild nights." In short, the speaker is protected from the storms, which to some extent gives birth to those words of enclosed space and tranquility: port, Eden and moor. What is protecting her? A boat, a shelter, or say, a house. Here the

house is compared to a boat, carrying the speaker to the sea.

In addition to the perspective of the speaker, there are also some other proofs for the implied “house”. First of all, the implied author, which according to Abrams and Harpham’s *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, “although related to the actual author, is nonetheless part of the total fiction, whom the author gradually brings into being in the course of his composition, and who plays an important role in the overall effect of a work on the reader” (2014, p. 288). So, for the implied author’s writing must there be a dwelling. As to the actual author, Dickinson, more evidence can be found from her living condition at that time. The “Wild Nights-Wild Nights!” was written in 1861, when Dickinson had been living in seclusion. Liu Shoulan in her *Research on Dickinson* has mentioned that Dickinson was inclined to live by herself in her father’s house in her 20s and she only left the town Amherst twice for seeing doctors with her eye disease in 1864 and 1865 (2006, p. 24). Dickinson was affectionately attached to her house. In a letter written to her brother, she said that

Home is a holy thing – nothing of doubt or distrust can enter it’s blessed portals. I feel it more and more as the great world goes on and one and another forsake, in which you place your trust – here seems indeed to be a bit of Eden which not the sin of any can utterly destroy – smaller it is indeed, and it may be less fair, but fairer it is and brighter than all the world beside (Johnson & Ward, p. 150-151).

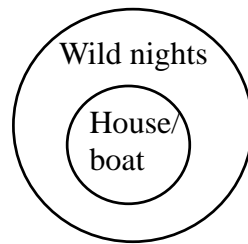
Here the “Eden” and “smaller” can be easily related to the “Eden” and “boat” in “Wild Nights-Wild Nights!” by the reader. Here Dickinson suggested that even her house is small, but it better than other places whatsoever. Moreover, Dickinson wrote to her friend Abiah Root, “Abiah, you fancy me at home in my own little chamber, writing you a letter, but you are greatly mistaken. I am on the blue Susquehanna paddling down to you” (p. 69). Here is an imagery of “boat” which indicates her house. Can this “boat” be taken as a reference to the implied “boat” in the poem? Thus, in short, it is reasonable to assume that the actual author Dickinson, the implied author and the speaker is attached to “the house”. In the light of her other letters to her relatives and friends, Dickinson’s attachment to her house can come with manifold factors, including her fancy of villages rather than cities, her preference for a small personal space rather than a big one, and her imagination as her best vehicle to visit the outside world.

The house, as Gaston Bachelard has said in *The Poetics of Space*, is necessary for a man. Without the house, “man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is body and soul. It is the human being’s first world” (p. 7). The house shelters people from being hurt by the outside world. Here in this poem the outside world is the “wild nights.” How do people usually spend their “wild nights” in their houses? Bachelard gives an example of those who suffer from insomnia in downtown. They imagine “the big city is a clamorous sea” and their beds are small boats “lost at the sea; that sudden whistling is the wind in the sails” (1964, p. 28). “Wild nights” is the domineering outer world which can be dangerous and frustrating for the speaker. Besieged by “Wild nights,” is it the wild winds and heavy rains that inspire the speaker’s imagination of “thee”? In a room of the house, the speaker starts to miss “thee,” See how the leading figure in the novel *L’ amoureuse initiation* reacts to his longing for his lover:

We are shown him in his palace, where he leads a fervent existence, setting aside certain corners to which he often repairs. As, for instance, ‘That little dark corner between the fireplace and the oak chest, where you used to hide,’ when she went away. It should be noted that he did not wait for her in the vast palace, but in a corner reserved for a gloomy waiting, where he could digest his anger at her faithlessness” (qtd. in Bachelard, p. 140).

As to the speaker, she can be digesting her emotional attachment to “thee” in her corner—the house/boat when the wild wind moaning outside. Assuming that the role of the speaker is tinted with Dickinson’s, the “Wild nights” can be wild nature, industrial society or patriarchal society, anything that is threatening the speaker and her house. Meanwhile, the speaker does not intend to go out to find “thee,” on the contrary, “wild nights should be our luxury” is a gesture to invite “thee” to come to her. Moreover, “our,” instead of “my” or “your,” shows thon’s confidence to the relationship and thon’s own glamour. All in all, although the speaker is eager for the sea, she is reluctant to leave her little house/boat.

In conclusion, in the speaker’s mind, the house/boat appears to be the center of the wild nights, as it is showed by the Figure 1.



*Fig. 1. The House/boat and Wild Nights in the Speaker's mind*

### 3. Port and Eden/Sea

Then in the second stanza the house/boat is in "port", an intermediate space between the land and the sea. Being in port is being in a part of the sea, the tranquil part of the sea, instead of the wild sea in the wild nights around the "port". Here the speaker manifests her ambivalence that although she likes to stay by the "sea", while she is afraid to be hurt by the "sea". But it is easy to pick a part of the sea to like, however, it is impossible to choose only a part of person or society to love, because such an entire is not to be broken. Similarly, "Sea" is a large whole space, including the tranquil part and the wild part. Even if we were "Far from the immensities of sea and land, merely through memory, we could recapture, by means of meditation, the resonances of this contemplation of grandeur" (p. 183). Furthermore, this kind of "contemplation" always "flees the object nearby and right away it is far off, elsewhere, in the space of elsewhere" (p. 184). Staying at home, the speaker ignores the nearby object but imagine the immensity of "the Sea." When the speaker is mooring "in" the sea, she can obtain the limitlessness of the dimension of water (p. 205). To moor in the "sea", there are sacrifices to make.

Now how to explain the "Ah" between the "Eden" and "the Sea"? Here "Eden" is an appositive word for "the Sea", as a metaphor for "sea". The speaker first may have a divine feeling in the "port", and by "Ah" the feeling is interrupted, she realizes the empirical "Sea". As what John Shoptaw has put in "Listening to Dickinson", "the speaker then indulges in the becalmed domestic fantasy of 'Rowing in Eden-' without chart or compass, until she remembers what she's missing ('Ah! the Sea!')" (2004, p. 26). Thus, "Ah" is not only a simple sigh that equals the "sea" to "Eden", but also a sudden disillusionment with imaginary "Eden", hence the reality "sea". "Eden" is a religious space for Christian world, always reminds people of heaven and God. Does the speaker use the word to express her hope to row in an ideal celestial place, out of the secularity? If it is, there will not be followed by "Ah" and "the sea". The speaker might be temporarily allured by the imaginary heavenly "Eden", but soon she remembers the real "sea". In "Emily Dickinson's Existential Dramas", Fred. D. White states, "I shall also argue that Dickinson's world-view is existential, which is to say that her personae regard the individual self, and not any divine agency, as solely responsible for the events that shape their lives, which are intrinsically limited, flawed, and separate from nature" (2004, p. 91). Dickinson weighs the reality – "sea" more than the divine "Eden", which might lead to the "Ah" as a transitional word from "Eden" to the "sea".

According to Emily's other poems about "Eden", the meaning of "Eden" is also different from common sense. She confided that she "shall not feel at Home - I know-/I don't like Paradise-", "Eden'll be lonesome" and she would "run away/from" God if it was not the "Judgement Day" (Johnson, 1960, p. 197). She is not into heaven or God and try to be away from them. Inwardly Dickinson is a "theological rebel" (Barker, 2004, p.80). Dickinson even thinks that the "fallen life" is more desired than the heaven/paradise/Eden. After all, she recognizes "the Fact that Earth is Heaven-" (Johnson, 1960, p. 602).

In a word, the speaker's mind, instead of staying in "Eden", realizes she is mooring to the "port", floating on the "sea". In the speaker's mind, the space of "Eden" and "the sea" is radiant from the center space "house/boat" and "Wild nights" is the external space. Here another figure can be used to explain the speaker's mind.

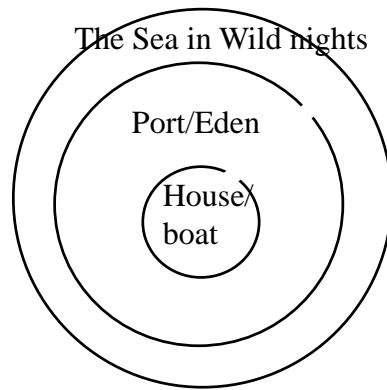


Fig. 2. The House/boat, Eden, Port, and the Sea in Wild nights in the speaker's mind

As the speaker comes to "the Sea" in the "port" from "Eden," she exclaimed her attachment to "the sea" as a child calls her mother. By mooring "in" the sea, the speaker seems to recall the days when she was in her mother's comfortable womb. Located in the "port", a safe place connecting the land and the "sea", protecting the speaker from the wild ups and downs of "the Sea" and the passionate roaring storm which are more like the sexual relationship between man and woman, the speaker shows the ambivalence that she is afraid of the destruction by the "sea", while eager to feel the power of the "sea". Is it "the Sea" a metaphor for male other and the masculine society or the love passion? The speaker, in a small boat, faced with such a thrilling sea, choosing to stay in the "port" and asking for the permission to moor in it, which manifests the speaker's active obedience even enjoyment to the limited wildness. In *The Madwomen in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have discussed about how Dickinson treats her imaginary lover and herself as follows:

Because she viewed the world with childlike Awe, her imaginary lover became larger than life, a solar colossus to scorch and then blind her when he abandoned her to night's possibilities of loneliness, coldness, darkness. More, because she has so often dramatically defined herself as the "slightest" in the house, she now imagined herself dwindling further into a wilted daisy, a small whimpering animal, a barely visible "it" — the ultimate Nobody (p. 602).

In this poem, she is a "Nobody" in the corner of her small house/boat in the face of the intimidating giant sea, but it is she herself that wishes to be enclosed by the sea. Why does the speaker move herself from her house of safety into the junction to the wild masculine sea? Is the house playing the role of a shelter but also a prison? Thanks to "tonight," she gets the chance to feel the outside world, falling herself from the house/boat into the tranquil sea while leaving the wildness outside the "port", although the passion is temporary. After "tonight," she will still go back to her house and be alone.

Like the house, the sea is also twofold: an attached and admirable object (the part in the "port") and a destructive force (the part in wild nights). The speaker desires to integrate with the sea while she knows clearly that she might be destroyed by it, which is perhaps the reason why she stays in the "port" and adds "tonight" to limit the duration of her taking risks in the sea. It can be a self-protection.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, on the one hand, the speaker's house makes her safe, but at the same time locks her up. On the other hand, the sea alludes her into it, while can destroy her easily. She is torn between them and still cannot help asking for only one wild night to indulge herself staying in the port, near the wildness. Space is in the speaker's mind, presenting by the ambivalence in the poem. And all the imagination, "all important words, all the words marked for grandeur by a poet, are keys to the universe, to the dual universe of the Cosmos and the depths of the human spirit" (Gilbert, 2000, p. 198). For Dickinson, she might have the ambivalence to her house – the secluded life and the "sea" – complicated, dangerous and passionate world outside.

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