

A Study on Emily Dickinson's Poems from Life Ethics Perspective

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Keywords: Emily dickinson, Poems, Life ethics

Abstract: Emily Dickinson, one of the American pioneers of modern poems in the 20th century, laid a foundation for the development of American modernist poems. This thesis aims to analyze Emily Dickinson's poems from the perspective of ethical value of life, and excavates the ethical value of life of Dickinson's poems by means of modern people's moral consciousness and ethical ideas. This paper deals with the research status of Dickinson's poems; analyzes the life ethics embodied in her poems; discusses her poems come from the loneliness of her life; reflects the value of her poems in remodeling life ethics by exploring the open-minded death view, strong female consciousness and harmonious natural view embodied in her poems. Getting the conclusion that poems, which come from life, can perceive life with the ethical concept. Poems can reshape the morality of life and ethical ideas, to realize artistic value of life ethics. The artistic value of poems plays a positive role in construction of life ethics.

1. Introduction

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), a famous American poetess, left 1,789 poems to the world in her life (1,775 poems in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson (three volumes)*, edited and published in chronological order by Johnson in 1955. Franklin published an annotated edition of *Dickinson's Poems (three volumes)* in 1998, which included 1,789 poems). Dickinson has 1,049 letters and 124 fragments of prose. As soon as her work was published, she received the attention of American critics.

2. Research Status

A review article by the famous American writer Conrad Aiken (1889-1973) in 1924 marked the beginning of the academic study of Emily Dickinson's poems. In this article, he also discussed the psychological reasons for her seclusion, the influence on her thoughts, the themes of her poems and the style, etc. In the 1960s and 1970s, many critics discussed her life story with great interest, her relationship with Puritanism, romanticism and transcendentalism. They tried to understand her life through poems, or used her life events to interpret her poems and teased out the life ethics reflected in her poems. However, the most prominent criticism in the 1960s and 1970s was psychoanalytic criticism and feminist criticism of Emily Dickinson, which conducted a comprehensive and extensive study of Dickinson's poems and published a large number of research results. In the 1980s and 1990s, Emily Dickinson's poems research has entered a period of seeking meaning diversification since she gained the status of a western classic writer. Higginson pointed out that her poems embodied the sympathy, confusion, and even frustration and horror common to a group of more experienced readers. This reflects the betrayal and modernity of Dickinson's works.[1]

The research on Dickinson's works has been carried out from multiple perspectives. More than 500 of Dickinson's poems are about nature. She vividly presented all natural things to the readers, such as landscapes, birds, beasts, flowers, trees and the four seasons. She also used her unique techniques and images to show her love and admiration for nature and her wonderful mood in nature to the readers. Dickinson also wrote more than 500 death poems, she used exquisite techniques and rich imagination to turn the horror of death into eternity. In her eyes, death was like a journey, and eternal life could walk together. Her view of nature, life and death fully embodies her understanding of herself and life, which is a new perspective of the ethical value of life. Therefore,

reinterpreting Dickinson's works from the perspective of life ethics, promoting the acceptance and recognition of the ethical values of Dickinson's works based on people's inherent ethical value of life, exploring the dialectical relationship between literary works and life deeply, this will prompt people to reconstruct their life ethics and make people's life full of positive energy.[2]

3. Life Ethics in Emily Dickinson's Poems

Dickinson lived in seclusion all her life and had hardly any external experience. All her energy was focused on exploring the inner world of herself. Her poems are not only the manifestation of her contradictory and complicated religious views, but also the way she seeks and constructs the temple of belief. Dickinson's poems creation is fundamentally to construct a spiritual space contrary to traditional religion, which is closely related to Dickinson's religious concept.

3.1 Earthly Paradise: I Dwell In Possibility

Religious ethics believes in the omnipotent object of worship, pay attention to the restraint effect of rules and disciplines and pursues the realm of life without desire. Dickinson lived in a strong religious atmosphere in the 19th century, but she questioned tradition with her independent self, deviated from orthodox religion and turned to seek for her own religion. Dickinson also lived in her father's house all her life, but she has carried out a silent spiritual rebellion in this house full of rich atmosphere of piety.[3]

A famous poem perfectly expresses the great significance and value of the residence of poems for Dickinson:

I dwell in Possibility- / A fairer House than Prose- / More numerous of Windows- / Superior- for Doors- / Of Chambers as the Cedars- / Impregnable of Eye- / And for an Everlasting Roof / The Gambrels of the Sky- / Of Visitors - the fairest- / For Occupation - This- / The spreading wide my narrow Hands / To gather Paradise- (Emily Dickinson, Thomas H Johnson, 1960)

Obviously, for Dickinson, poems are a more luxurious house, it transcend the house provided by her father. "More" (Emily Dickinson, Thomas H Johnson, 1960), "Superior" (Emily Dickinson, Thomas H Johnson, 1960), "Everlasting" (Emily Dickinson, Thomas H Johnson, 1960), and so on, each word points to infinity. Dickinson used the imagery of houses to make infinity concrete. However, she looked beyond specific doors and windows. This house is entirely the poetess's own. It is no longer the father's house, it is the habitat of her own soul. The last stanza of the poem means that she embraces this house is to embrace the paradise she built. It is in poems that she brought together everything she has experienced in earthly life, natural scenery and family life, as well as her transcendental imagination of eternal, death, God and heaven, and built a perfect earthly paradise, which was the ultimate habitat of her body and soul. Dickinson not only broke the traditional religious beliefs, but also constructed a unique belief and pursued a free realm of life. This makes her poems transcend literary creation in general sense.[4]

3.2 Love: If I Can Stop One Heart from Breaking

In Dickinson's opinion, there was no democracy in the society at that time, which was just a superficial appearance of hypocrisy. With the rapid development of productive forces, the great changes of social stratum have been caused and the gap between the rich and the poor has become serious. She believed that poverty in the real world was mainly due to the lack of equality. In *If I Can Stop One Heart from Breaking*, the poetess made a wish: "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." (Emily Dickinson, Thomas H Johnson, 1960)

This is a poem full of love, which reflects the poetess's pursuit of the value of human life. The poetess thought that if I could save the man who was going to be heartbroken, if I could bring happiness to those who were nearly broken down and relieve their pain, or if I could send a weak robin back to its nest, I would not live in vain. It means that when we give love, we also realize the value of life.

People often say that roses give fragrance in hand. While we help and care for others, not only can others get relief from pain, but our lives will shine brilliantly. When a little love rises to great love and redemption; when the person who gives love rises from one or two to the whole nation, this love is undoubtedly heavy and more valuable and the giver of this love is also undoubtedly noble.

As the most brilliant animal, human beings come to this earth to bring civilization and change the world. However, we are also consuming a lot of resources, destroying the environment and becoming the predators of life. We have the power to dominate, but they are used to destroying species and the future. This is the cruelest moral deficiency of human beings. The spirit of love and selfless dedication advocated by the poetess is of great practical significance. Today, more than one hundred years later, we re-examine the noble ethics in her poems, which still has great reference significance for the harmonious society we are trying to build at present.

4. Dialectical Relationship between Dickinson's Poems and Life

Dickinson's creative inspiration mainly comes from her life. She retired to her home at the age of 25, abandoned social intercourse and hardly left home. Her life was lonely. She lived in loneliness, explored in loneliness, loved in loneliness. Loneliness gave her more thinking and provided her with the motivation and source of creation.

At the age of 23, she was on her way to treat eye disease when she met the romantic priest Wordsworth, who had a wife. They fell in love with each other at first sight. Because of priest's fragility, he did not have the courage to get out of the shackles of his family. In April 1862, the priest left Emily and went away. In that year, she created *The Soul Selects Her Own Society*. She also dreamed of finding her soul mate.

Dickinson thought that "The Soul selects her own Society- / Then- shuts the Door- " (Emily Dickinson, Thomas H Johnson, 1960). It is a sacred decision, and it can't be interfered with. Once you fall in love with a person, you will firmly give your soul and life to another soul. However, love is often influenced by external factors. "she notes the Chariots- pausing- / At her low Gate- " (Emily Dickinson, Thomas H Johnson, 1960) which is a hint of the complexity of external factors and the power of interference. However, the soul is unmoved. These further illustrate the difficulty of faithful love and the perseverance of the soul. In this poem, the use of the "an Emperor be kneeling" (Emily Dickinson, Thomas H Johnson, 1960: 143), "Stone" (Emily Dickinson, Thomas H Johnson, 1960) and other images all indicated the poetess's firm determination. She used this to show her yearning for love and her love with Wordsworth.

The dash after each clause not only express her firm decision, but also reveal her inner disappointment and waiting. Finally, Dickinson enjoyed the joy of true love again in her 40s. He was Judge Lord, a good friend of her father. It is more reasonable that this love failed to bring Dickinson into the palace of marriage. Having become accustomed to loneliness, Dickinson was unwilling and unable to devote the enthusiasm and energy to the marriage at that time. She hid this love in her heart, no matter painful or sweet, until she died, never to marry.

Therefore, for Dickinson, loneliness is not only a state of existence that reflects the quality of people's will, but also a state of wisdom. Dickinson absorbed the essence of transcendentalism and developed her particular interpretation: a sense of distance in solitude. Such a sense of distance dose not only exists in her life but also in her poems, which adds a different while unique flavor to the art of her poetry. Therefore, her poems have become a unique scene in American literature and even in world literature. We can see her life through her poems and her poems also reflect her attitude towards life.

5. Influence of Personal Experience on Poems

Dickinson was born in a family with a strong religious atmosphere. In her heart, God was the companion of her lonely world. Due to illness, Dickinson dropped out of school in 1845 and began to think about religion. When her beloved headmaster and the young poet Leonard Humphrey died,

she was very sad. She became suspicious of religion. She doubted the Bible's interpretation of death, she wanted to know how God could take the lives of their loved ones. This suspicion led to her spiritual conflict and made her miserable until she finally got rid of the bondage of religion.

In the process of belief transformation, the poetess showed extreme confusion and pain. After 30, Dickinson stopped going to church. She wrote: 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. (Emily Dickinson, Thomas H Johnson, 1960)

In this poem, "Dome" (Emily Dickinson, Thomas H Johnson, 1960: 153) implies the church, about "Wings" (Emily Dickinson, Thomas H Johnson, 1960: 153), the poetess compared herself to the free birds in the orchard, so her clothes were feathers and wings. The "Heaven" [1] in line 11 refers to the heaven in the religious sense, but the heaven she lived in was a secular heaven. This embodies Dickinson's transcendentalism. The last two sentences of the poem show that the poetess does not need to go to heaven to see God after death, because her home is heaven. Dickinson compared her religious life with that of ordinary Christians and concluded that her own particular religious life was superior.

In her view, if she had to believe in God, she had to believe that terrible diseases and deaths were also God's gift. So she would rather keep her faith. This contradictory mentality is throughout her life and has become one of the main sources of her thought and creation. All her life, Dickinson used poems to create an ideal life which she lacked and longed for in real life. After experienced the pain and struggle from seeking God's refuge at first to questioned God later, she finally returned to peace. The poetess pursued hard in the contradiction of belief. Poetry is a means to attain pleasure, a way to preach her doctrine, and a medium to express her world outlook, an outlet for her despair and a remedy to pacify her soul. It means that her poems help her overcome the complex psychology of anxiety, fear and longing, record the journey of soul exploration. And finally she reached the spiritual transcendence, found her own heaven and formed her own unique world view.

6. Conclusion

Dickinson's poems represent the voices of American women in the middle and late 19th century and embody the strong consciousness of the rise of female self-consciousness. She accepted modernist writing techniques, challenged authority, pursued free and independent creative ideas, the concept changes from fear of death to acceptance of death in death poems; the harmony between man and nature in natural poems, and so on. And from the perspectives of ecological naturalism, feminist self-consciousness, transcendentalism and anti-religious consciousness, this paper explores the ethical value of life embodied in Dickinson's works, promotes the acceptance and recognition of the ethical value of life in Dickinson's poems, and finds out the inherent connection between poems and life, so that Dickinson's poems not only have artistic value, but also have life guidance value. At the same time, this thesis advocates that literary creation should respect life ethics.

Acknowledgment

The research in this paper was supported by Foundation Project: Basic scientific research expenses of provincial universities in Heilongjiang Province, Special Fund for "Arts-Physical Education-Foreign Languages" of Northeast Petroleum University. This is the periodical result of A Study of the Ethical Value of Life in American Imagist Poetry. Project Number: 2019YTW-W-01.

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