

The Melancholy and Gloomy Atmosphere in Dickinson's Poems

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ABSTRACT

Emily Dickinson has written letters and verses since her early life. Even though she is well-known with her sharp senses of humor and concise writing style, most of her poems reflect melancholy and gloomy atmosphere. One reason for the reflection may be her occasionally prickly relation with her environment. Nevertheless, her poems were not merely devoted to private and feminized sphere of introspection but also related to public affairs and national importance. Understanding her nature can provide deeper access to her poems' meaning. She frequently articulates a desire to convey an important message and then smartly refuses to reveal its substance. She could illustrate people, events, motives, and emotions so convincingly so that the readers can feel it too. Her poetic strategy reveals a complicated scheme of variability—in praise of the infinite possibility of poetry and in protest against all prescribed patterns. Indeed, the poems, lines, and even word-sequences portray her intelligence to explore melancholy and gloomy atmosphere. Undeniably, her vision of the themes is set forth in perfect beauty. This paper tried to read Dickinson's poems closely and apply New Criticism mechanism that makes it possible to recognize deeply the melancholy and gloomy atmosphere in some of her poems.

Keywords: *Dickinson, Gloomy, Melancholy, Poem*

1. INTRODUCTION

Dickinson is clever in exploring problems in society. Analyzing Dickinson's poems lead us to come to a complicated thought. She offers her own experience as a woman who tries to communicate with others through poetry. She wrote her poetry with powerful passion which enables her to produce powerful portrait of poetic creation. Through boundless imagination and impressive ordering of the temporal world, she frequently talks about death, tomb, and cemetery. Melancholy and gloomy atmosphere, undoubtedly, color the results of her contemplation.

Besides death, tomb, and cemetery, some dominant words used in her poems are "sewing" and "sowing." Sewing was exclusively used in a female sphere, while sowing refers to male activities. This phenomenon, especially, reflect the nineteenth-century American culture in which Dickinson spent most of her life. Women in that era, especially those from middle- and upper-class, earned their livelihoods through sewing. This job was highly appreciated. On the other hand, sowing portrays masculinity. It was a job specifically for men.

2. METHOD

This paper used new criticism as a theoretical basis for analyzing Dickinson's poems. Some poems were randomly chosen to be used as the object of this study. As is known, in the application of new criticism, literary works are treated as an autonomous object and are not related to the life of the author. Roland Barthes called it "the death of the author." Within this framework, interpretations of these works are purely derived from the work itself and are not related to any aspect outside of literary works.

The standard step in new criticism is close reading. In this paper, some of Dickinson's poems are being read in depth and repeatedly to get the right interpretation of the poems discussed. Furthermore, the results of the discussion were verified to obtain correct and perfect conclusions.

3. DISCUSSION

Like all writers and poets, Dickinson forces the readers to understand her poems and follow her way of thinking. Yu writes, "a poet does not give us a new way of reading

a poem, but perhaps does give us some tools for clearing up misunderstandings about our process of reading” [1]. It indicates that the spoiling of perception towards a poem is not merely linked to the complexity of the poem, but also with the intelligence of the readers through good process of reading. One of such examples is written in the following lines, in which Dickinson tests our intellectuality to understand it.

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—
Untouched by Morning—
And untouched by Noon—
Lie the meek members of the Resurrection—

Dickinson wrote the poem “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—” in 1861. She tried to contrast between the stillness of the tomb and the incessant motion in the universe outside. The dead feel safe in their graves, and the living goes around the world in never ending motion. The statement “Safe in their Alabaster Chamber” attracts our anxiety to understand the substance. Is it really safe? Or, does it imply something else? Dickinson emphasizes that the dead is “safe”. It reflects her personal power, which may be described as an enchanted perception about common things and abstract concepts [2]. She wrapped something melancholy and gloomy as if it is peaceful and happy.

The whole poem reminds us of temporary life on the world and the eternal life after death. Dickinson was praised for her “translation of quite ordinary everyday experiences into moments of startling beauty” [3]. Death is a normal occurrence in our everyday life and Dickinson wrote beautifully that death is like staying somewhere safely while waiting for “Resurrection”, in which we will live again to take responsibility for the deeds done during our lifetime. Everything in the universe is just “Diadems drop and Doges surrender/ Soundless as dots on a Disc of Snow.” Nothing is never ending, everything is temporary.

Again, in the following lines, Dickinson signals the melancholy and gloomy atmosphere through the portrayal of the darkness of nights.

Wild Nights—Wild Nights!
Were I with thee?
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury!

Does the term “Wild Nights” signal specific night in the poet’s life? Are these kinds of nights a reflection of the nights in the country where the poet stayed? Dickinson is an ambassador of American culture [4]. She frequently voiced the American taste. Apart from Dickinson’s past life, the lines in the poem “Wild Nights” are examples of this. Dickinson knows well how the Americans spend their nights, especially those who live in big cities. “Wild Nights should be/ Our luxury!” is a kind of expectation. The poet employs “should be” to imply that, as a matter of fact, the condition is gloomy, something that is contrary with what she expects.

In a different way, Dickinson explores her surroundings through a beautiful picture. She portrays the dark sides of her environment, “I taste a liquor never brewed/ From Tankards scooped in Pearl/ Not all the

Frankfort Berries/ Yield such an Alcohol!” She wants to declare that she has drunk a special whisky that has never been drunk before. It is the best beer. Behind her pride of drinking the best beer, the speaker implicitly wants to inform that she is frustrated with her surroundings and needs a medium to express her feelings. In the third stanza, she vows, “When Butterflies renounce their drams/ I shall but drink the more!” She does not want to stop drinking. She wants more. This is a frustrating condition.

Dickinson is a witty poet. Although Emerson said that every person can become a poet [5], Dickinson, however, is special. Critics appreciate her complete capacity of being a poet. She can combine the roughness of reality and the beauty of imagination. Her language in some of her poems is complicated, while in other poems, however, is very simple. Below is a part of her poem “Before I could not stop for Death.” Interestingly, the language is simple, but it talks about something deep; a journey toward eternity.

Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality.

The diction of the poem is simple on one side. But on the other side, the topic behind it is complicated. It talks about every man’s fate. One day we will die, no matter we are willing to do it or not. The lines portray that the speaker tries to treat death as coming kindly to her without giving pains. Again, Dickinson avoid herself from being sad. But what she is talking about is melancholy and gloomy. Although she hides her feelings with “He kindly stopped for me,” but readers can catch easily what her actual feelings are.

The poet closes the poem by saying, “Since then ‘tis Centuries and yet/ Feels shorter than the Day/ I first surmised the Horses’ Heads/ Were toward Eternity.” It is a kind of readiness to welcome the fate. The speaker feels that time goes very fast and finally ready to go to eternity. Through the lines, Dickinson dismantle the build-up of liturgical metalanguage [6]. She believes that death is certain and nobody can get rid of it.

Talking about death is repeatedly done by Dickinson. She does it brilliantly. The following lines are from “Bereavement in their death to feel.” A poem written in 1862 but published in 1935. Since there were no reason found as to why this poem was published lately, it produces problem of interpretation. Does the poem reflect the condition of the time when the poem was created, or does it represent the condition of the time when the poem was published? The first stanza triggers some questions.

Bereavement in their death to feel
Whom We have never seen—
A Vital Kinsmanship import
Our Soul and theirs—between—

These lines leave the readers in a mystery. Dickinson does not tell the readers who feel bereaved and who died. She also does not mention whose kin it is. Kin of every man, or her own kin. Regardless the questionable statements, they show melancholy and gloomy

atmosphere. Death always leave sadness among the families. The word “kinsmanship” in the poem does not refer to specific family or the poet’s family, but it covers all families in the universe.

In the ending of the poem, Dickinson writes, “In dying— ‘tis as if Our Souls/ Asconded—suddenly— “. It seems, to an extent, that the speaker wants to explain the normal process toward death. The soul leaves human body slowly and calmly.

Dickinson maintains the same tone of melancholy and gloomy in “Before I got my eye put out.” She promises to herself, that before she dies, she will enjoy the beautiful scenery, “The Meadows – mine –/ The Mountains – mine –/ All Forests – Stintless stars –/ As much of noon, as I could take –/ Between my finite eyes”. This is one of Dickinson’s strength. Her poetic language is specific and communicative. The value of poetic language is that it is impractical, disruptive, even obstructive; it impedes the communicative process rather than facilitating it [7]. Undoubtedly, Dickinson is good in it.

Stanza four elaborates how the speaker is aware of any condition, “The Motions of the Dipping Birds –/ The Morning’s Amber Road –/ For mine – to look at when I liked, / The news would strike me dead –” She does not care about what will happen. She keeps enjoying everything she likes. No one can stop her except “The news would strike her dead.”

A different taste is served by Dickinson in “A narrow Fellow in the Grass.” She talks about a snake and treats it as a fellow. Uniquely, she writes fellow as Fellow (with capital F), “A narrow Fellow in the Grass/ Occasionally rides.” Here, the word choice looks strange. The word portrayed a snake riding across the grass, while actually it moves across the grass. Dickinson’s word choice is exact. She employs metaphor to make the lines alive. She portrays as if a snake can ride across the grass like other creatures do. In many ways, however, poetic manifestos and poetic practice are not exact equivalencies [8]. This is beautifully done by Dickinson.

In the last stanza, Dickinson shows her specific style; melancholy and gloomy. She feels lonely when her “Fellow” is away.

But never met this Fellow
Attended or alone
Without a tighter Breathing
And Zero at the Bone.

The speaker claims that it is unwise to be afraid of a “fellow” as stated in the poem. So far, there is no evidence showing that a snake attacks or strikes a man in purpose. A snake attacks someone only if it is cornered. If it is in a good condition, it never hurts anyone. It is not aggressive, but fearful of others. It is really a good fellow. The poet even declares that she feels lonely if the “fellow” is apart from her. Sometimes other people—not the poem’s main characters—seems to appear in them. They are little puzzles embedded in the story. The interruption of the narrative seems to heighten, rather than solve, the poem’s fundamental problems [9]. The “fellow” here, certainly, is a special character created by the poet.

Meanwhile, “Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat” discusses a different thing. It is about creative process in

writing poetry. In this poem, Dickinson compares a poet to a craftsman, “Least Village has its Blacksmith/ Whose Anvil’s even ring/ Stands symbol for the finer Forge.” The life of a poet is like a “Blacksmith” who lives in a “village.” A poet, like a Blacksmith, needs craftsmanship. Anvil, forge, and hammer are tools frequently used by a blacksmith as a professional. A poet uses poetic soul in writing poetry. A poem sets out to offer dialogue but also very firmly regulates the term under which that dialogue is going to take place [10]. He/she needs poetic soul as a tool to create poetry.

“Good to hide, and hear ‘em hunt!” Dickinson writes. She starts her poem with casual half-word “em,” that reflects playfulness. This seems to be something slightly not serious. But the following lines imply that the whole poem brings seriousness. It is interesting here to know the reasons why the poet starts the poem playfully and ends it seriously. This phenomenon gives rise to the poet’s tendency of being melancholy and gloomy. For poet, freshness of viewpoint and unbiased exploration are rigorous. The degree to which human lives are happy or wretched may very well depend on the degree to which they are able to separate the innocence of their art from the exigencies of reality [11]. Playfulness and seriousness are ways of the poet to explore problems in society.

While the first stanza expresses something playfully, as there are only two stanzas, the poet becomes serious with her expression in the second stanza, “Good to know, and not tell, / Best, to know and tell./ Can one find the rare Ear/ Not too dull.” The speaker asserts that the poet knows something clearly, but recommends someone else not to tell, except if there is a “rare ear” that is able to hear the news wisely.

Through “I know that he exists,” Dickinson tells us about journey of life. She believes that God exists, but we can neither see nor hear Him with our “gross eyes.” Everything we do will be asked for responsibilities. Life in universe is just “an instant play” that takes place in a very short time. Dickinson claims, when the “instant play” ends, “...the fun/ look too expensive” and “...the jest/ have crawled too far.”

Dickinson talks to an unidentified audience in “This is My Letter to the World.” Uniquely, she neither mentions specifically to whom the letter sent nor the content of the message. She only says that the letter is for “the World.” In real life, it is impossible to write a letter to the world. The message is also never clearly told. What we can catch from the poem is Dickinson’s ways of expressing her feelings. It represents her situation as a poet. When she cannot talk to someone, she will talk to nature because “Nature” can say something “with tender Majesty.”

Civil War in the US is elaborated beautifully in “The Tint I cannot take—is best.” The poem was written in 1862 when the war was taking place. In stanza three, Dickinson declares, “The Moments of Dominion/ That happen on the Soul/ And leave it with a Discontent/ Too exquisite—to tell.” A dominion always triggers sufferings in the part of those whose life were occupied. They suffer both mentally and physically. To pay their sufferings, Dickinson reminds the colonialists, “Their Grasplless manners—mock us—/ Until the Cheated Eye/ Shuts arrogantly—in the Grave—/ Another way—to see—” Dickinson fear of mutability proves near-obsessional. She situates herself within the

well-worn tradition of lamenting the passing of time and season, which is familiar in poetry since antiquity [12]. Civil War is a tragic period which she laments deeply.

The two stanzas of "I send two sunsets" exhibit Dickinson's creativity in writing poetry. The first stanza explains her effort to win a competition.

I send Two Sunsets—
Day and I—in competition ran—
I finished Two—and several Stars—
While He—was making One—

The two sunsets are Day and I (the poet). Both Day and I run to compete to accomplish a project. Day succeeds to reach sunset only once a day, while the poet can produce two projects and even more, "I finished Two—and several Stars." The project refers to the poet's creation of poetry. The poet is able to write more than one poem in a day. The magnitude of our thoughts and feelings aren't fixed by what lies outside our windows [13]. The competition proceeds in stanza two. The poet claims that, "Mine—is the more convenient/ To Carry in the Hand". The poems created are more beautiful than the beauty of the day.

In another occasion Dickinson declares her relation with her father in "The parasol is the umbrella's daughter." In the poem, she complains that her father as a public figure is not only for her, but also for the society around them. Actually, she wants to have her father's attention totally, but her father has to do his duty as a member of the society. He is almost like a borrowed umbrella used by other people to take shelter from the rain. It is a kind of flexible moral realism [14]. Take a look at the following two-stanza poem.

The parasol is the umbrella's daughter,
And associates with a fan
While her father abuts the tempest
And abridges the rain.

The former assists a siren
In her serene display;
But her father is borne and honored,
And borrowed to this day.

Although the poet does not tell the readers explicitly that she is sad, but the lines, "But her father is borne and honored, / And borrowed to this day" prove that the poet cannot hide her melancholy feelings. It would be absurd to describe this stanza as a strictly not factual representation of Dickinson's voice [15]. She regrets that she has to share her father's attention with others.

4. CONCLUSION

Dickinson's poems seem to be written in a religious spirit. Possibly, it is quite acceptable that one may argue that in this case, she is a transcendental poet. In general, the variant of themes in her poems testify that melancholy and gloomy atmosphere is almost unavoidably found throughout her poems. They implicitly point out how the

beauty of literary works can be born not only from happiness, but also from sadness.

Dickinson's poems may sound slightly monotonous at first glance. However, after a number of readings, the readers will find that the substance of the poems is rich with both private and public spheres. Moreover, they also exhibit social problems and national importance of her life time. Finally, we may say that Dickinson's poems are avantgarde and become a literary cannon across centuries.

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