



AN ANALYSIS OF DICKINSON'S POEMS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TAOISM

Xiaotong Li¹, Rongying Zheng²

¹MA Candidate, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

Email:505055210@qq.com

²Associate Professor and MA supervisor, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.12.2.40](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.12.2.40)



Article info

Article Received:17/03/2024
Article Accepted: 23/04/2024
Published online:29/04/2024

Abstract

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), full name Emily Elizabeth Dickinson, was one of the greatest American poets of the 19th century, considered "the greatest female poet since Sappho". In 1869, Dickinson began to live in complete isolation, refusing to meet friends and visitors, and her habit of wearing a white dress earned her the nickname "Sister Amherst". Perhaps it was because of the trauma brought to her heart by the early breakup, which shaped her introverted character. As a result, in the face of a complex world, she learned to be alone with flowers, insects, and birds, with nature, with the perspective of a child to observe the world, and in loneliness and narcissism to seek a home. Reading her poems, one can feel a kind of neutral beauty and natural rhyme. Her view of life and poetic spirit are quite consistent with Taoist thought. Although she has endured the suffering of loneliness for a long time, she has always been able to achieve a dialectical unity between inner and outer things. She is not driven by utilitarianism or trapped by the environment. She is calm at heart and always seeks to belong. She is skilled at building her fantasy poetry house in solitude and with feminine delicacy.

Key Words: Dickinson, Taoism, Wuwei, Chuang Tzu, Nature

1. The Thought of Wu-Wei

Throughout many Chinese philosophical classics, the concepts of "no self" and "selflessness" have appeared as early as possible. According to Buddhists, "anatman" means that nothing in the world has an

independent real self and that everything comes from causes and harmony. Taoist classics also have a similar discussion of "no self." Lao-Tzu has a saying: "The sage does not distinguish between himself and the world; the needs of other people are as his own." *A Happy Excursion* (《庄子·逍遥游》) also has the saying that

"The perfect man ignores self; the divine man ignores achievement; the true sage ignores reputation," which is similar to "no self." The perfect man, the divine man, and the true sage, all of whom have different names but the same reality, all refer to the state of breaking away from self-obsession, abandoning the shackles of fame, pursuing things, and forgetting things. Wang Guowei proposed two types of states: "scene involving the self" and "scene excluding the self". "Scene involving the self" means that the author incorporates personal feelings into the literary image he creates, thus imbuing it with a tremendous emotional force. "Scene not involving the self," on the other hand, does not mean a lack of emotion; rather, the author tempers this emotional force by exercising restraint and achieving a perfect harmony between personal feelings and literary imagery. "Ego" and "Egolessness" can be used to evaluate the realm of poetry, but also as a standard to measure the realm of life.

The idea of "No-action" opposes the abuse of power by managers and advocates the realization of the maximum value of human beings under the condition of spiritual freedom. Chuang Tzu believed that desire and greed were understandable, natural, and reasonable, and could obtain acquiescence from others, but desire should have a bottom line and be measured. If the desire develops and expands too much beyond that bottom line, you will never feel satisfied. As a result, the Taoist term "Wuwei" also means "no self, nameless," or "not claiming credit for oneself." Let's appreciate the following poem (*I'm Nobody*):

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 your name the livelong day
To an admiring bog! (Johnson 288)

This poem is a direct answer to the question, "Who am I?" This is both a simple, dramatic monologue poem and a profound philosophical poem. In the poem, the narrator appears in the first person, whispering to the reader, who is also anonymous, about the way of "doing nothing." In the first verse of the poem, the poet divides the world into you, me and them through dialogue.

We readers, after a cursory glance at the poem, might come to the same opinion: to be a big man is like a frog. The great men speak their names, show off their fame, strive to be heard by the public, and become the center of attention in this way to gain recognition and praise, which shows the poet's aversion to being a great man between the lines. The "nobody", on the other hand, is the silent and unnoticed, with only "you," the poet's fictitious reader, as an audience. In the second stanza, however, the narrator instead claims, "How dreary to be somebody!" . Although the poet does not explicitly debunk why the great men have to sell themselves endlessly, the reason is hinted at in the poem: their fear of being forgotten leads them to become "nobody." On the contrary, although the narrator uses a self-deprecating tone throughout the poem, she confidently refers to the imaginary reader or anyone reading the poem as "nobody" like herself. As she says in her poem, "We happened to be a couple." The capitalized first letter of the word "Nobody" and the exclamation mark after the word reflect her pride in her identity. It also reflects the poet's belief that most ordinary people, like herself or her readers, are unwilling to sell themselves to satisfy and please others because they have a strong desire to hold on to a self that, in turn, is their own "big man."

Out of the context of the poem, in the binary opposition structure of "nobody" and "big man," it is obvious that the latter is the center. Dickinson lived alone in the world without losing herself. She wrote more than 1,700 poems in her lifetime, but only seven of

them were published after revisions by her editors, Higginson and Bowles. She believed that her work had lost its original meaning after the revisions, and those “surgeries” caused her to decide to quit the world of poetry publication. However, this is not a sign of weakness or submission, but a way of asserting herself. The willingness to refuse to chase the title of “big man” in order to gain fame and wealth is reflected in Taoist thought as “Wuwei,” “no desire” and “no struggle.” These three concepts of deferential deference are derived from the Taoist concept of “nature.” “Wuwei” does not mean passively waiting for the completion or success of something under the premise of inaction, but means that everything should be “done on the basis of nature, not forced to change the rhythm of nature”. In the same way, “no desire” does not mean that one should be ascetic, but rather “the realization of an obedient desire”. In other words, giving up the pursuit of something is also a human desire to achieve self fulfillment by following one’s heart. In Chapter 66 of *Tao Te Ching*, there is a saying about “no dispute (无争)” : “As he will not contend, so none in the world can contend with him (以其不争，故天下莫能与之争。)” This kind of “no dispute”, is the pursuit of fame and wealth, which will never be invincible. The most powerful assertion of self is to maintain your principles and beliefs and not to rely on the ideas and approval of others. Reinterprets Dickinson’s “I am Nobody! Who are you?” from the perspective of postmodern and Taoist “no action(无为)”, “no desire(无欲)”, “no dispute(无争)”. The gradual melting and subversion of the boundary between “nobody” and “somebody” in the poem, as well as the view of “not disputing”, shows Dickinson’s unremitting pursuit of the true self, and proves herself loudly through silent poems.

“The true sage ignores reputation,” mentioned in *A Happy Excursion* “the true sage” is a person whose mind is perfected, while a “nameless” is a person who pursues the path of nature rather than fame. On that level, *I’m*

Nobody! Who are You? is a poem about the pursuit of nature and about the self. In the poem, Dickinson declared her strong desire to be “nobody” rather than “somebody.”

2. The thought of accommodating to nature

Human life and the life of the natural species share the same root in natural connection, co-existing to achieve common prosperity. (Li Xia, 2004, p. 61) According to Taoism, life lies in nature. In other words, life depends on the natural environment because it cannot exist without the necessary supplies provided by nature. That’s why Lao-Tzu praised the greatness of nature. “Man models himself after Earth. Earth models itself after Heaven. Heaven models itself after Tao. And Tao models itself after Nature(人法地、地法天、天法道、道法自然)” (Chan, 1969, p. 152). According to Taoism, the essence of life is nature. Life comes from the Tao; therefore, being closest to the Tao is the natural state of life. And the essence of Tao is nature. This is not to say that Taoism should reduce the essence of man to natural instinct, but to explore the essence of man and human nature in terms of the originality of life, the connection between human life and the lives of all other subjects. The measurement of value is nature rather than humanity, because “nature” in Taoism excludes humanity and is beyond instinct, without good or evil properties, distilled down from the crystallization of rationalism from the life essence and human nature.

Chuang Tzu’s obedience to nature is the harmonious development of man and nature. In all her nature poems, Dickinson pursued a harmonious and intimate relationship between man and nature, which was the ecological concept of “unity of nature and man” of Chuang Tzu. “To know harmony means to be in accord with the eternal. To be in accord with the eternal means to be enlightened. To force the growth of life means ill omen. For the mind to employ the

vital force without restraint means violence” (Chan, 1969, p. 165).

In the poem “Nature” is what we see, nature was a paradisaical landscape for Dickinson: tall hills, bounding squirrels; nature is music of harmony: the sea is rough, the birds sing; nature and people coexist in harmony, and the world is like heaven. Nature is one of the most important themes in Dickinson’s poetry. Since Dickinson began living in seclusion, the garden outside her bedroom window has been the source of her natural poetry. In her eyes, nature was not only her inner companion but was also portrayed as cruel and dark. Among her poems, there are more than 500 nature poems, accounting for nearly a third of her total poems. In her poems, people see everything from bees, butterflies, squirrels, and flowers, to all that she can touch, see and imagine, all in harmony. Nature provided Dickinson with a constant source of resources for her search for truth and eternity in life. In her poems, nature is heaven, constructing harmony for her monotonous daily life, which coincides with Taoism’s quest for a state of harmony between man and nature, and embodies the “unity of nature and man.” In Lao-Tzu’s view, Dickinson and nature are essentially unified and appear in Tao. The large number of nature poems is a testimony to her interaction with nature because she can always find inspiration from the magical power of nature.

Chuang Tzu’s thought of accommodating to nature is also reflected in his outlook on life and death. Chuang Tzu believed that death was inevitable, so it was the right way to pursue truth, cherish life, and seek the transcendence of death. This view of life and death has certain aesthetic significance and modern value. Since ancient times, the theme of “death” has been repeated by people with a passion to integrate themselves into the universe -- the state of life and death.

In the poem *Because I could not stop for Death* (Johnson 712), when death comes to pick her up, with immortality in the carriage and they drive separately past the “school”, “Fields of Gazing Grain” and “the Setting Sun”. The above three images symbolize the different life stages of childhood, youth and old age respectively. This coincides with Lao-Tzu’s thoughts on the natural growth and process of life. The movement of sunrise and sunset, the change of the seasons, the alternation of day and night, etc., are all natural movements. The horse’s head is toward eternity, which means that death is not the end of life, and it is the way to immortality and eternity. It is the movement of the natural order and the endless cycle of life. The theoretical basis of Dickinson’s view of death can be found in Chuang Tzu’s Taoist death philosophy.

We can see from the poem *’Twas just this time, last year, I died.*: Death is only the end of one way and the beginning of another. In the harvest season of ears, apples, and pumpkins, everywhere is full of the joy of harvest.

From a Taoist perspective, Dickinson’s attempt to reconcile immortality with death can be interpreted as “Heaven and man are united as one.” In *’Twas just this time, last year, I died*, the term “heaven” refers to more than just the sky or the natural world in which humans live; it also represents the harmonious and unified relationship between humans and their natural, social, and living environments.

Conclusion

In Dickinson’s poems and letters, we can find the real existence of “Oriental” elements and Taoist thoughts in Dickinson’s life. When Dickinson was 16, he visited the Chinese Museum in Boston and was deeply impressed by its introduction to Chinese Taoist philosophy. In fact, elements of Oriental literature had already permeated American culture. Emerson even regarded the Eastern sage as a model of life wisdom, praising the “infinity of the Asian mind”

(Emerson, 1983). Dickinson is a “great poet who made great original contribution to American literature” (Jiang Feng, 1997) in American history. Dickinson expressed his unique feelings to the eastern culture through the poetic image writing, thus constructing the Oriental characteristics of Chuang Tzu’s Taoist values.

Works Cited

- [1]. Chan, Wing-tsit. (1969). *A Source Book In Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton University Press. 136-179
- [2]. Johnson, Thomas H..Ed. (1951). *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Harvard University Press.
- [3]. Kirkby, Joan. (2009) *Death and immortality*. Edit by Eliza Richards. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill:160-167.
- [4]. Roger T. Ames and David L Hall. (2003). *Daodejing: Making This Life Significant*. [M]. Trans. New York: Random House.
- [5]. Sam Hamill and J.P. Seaton. (1998). *The Essential ChuangTzu*. Boston: Shambhala Publications.
- [6]. 江枫. (1984). 《狄金森诗选》 [M].湖南人民出版社.
- [7]. 陆贝贝. (2016). 艾米莉·狄金森及其诗歌中的老子道家元素[D]. 上海:上海外国语大学.
- [8]. 李霞. (2004). 生死智慧——道家生命观研究[M]. 人民出版社.
- [9]. 王晓丹. (2016). 当代道家视域下狄金森诗歌中“自然”的解读[J]. 西北工业大学学报,36(1):108-112.
- [10]. 薛玉秀.(2015) 艾米莉·狄金森的道家思想解读[J]. 安徽文学,(11):42-43,48.
- [11]. 庄周,雷仲康.译注(2011).庄子 [M]. 太原: 山西古籍出版社.