

Exploring the Nature of Life in Emily Dickinson's Poems

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Abstract: Emily Dickinson was one of the pioneers of twentieth-century modernist poetry in the United States, and her poetry is rich in subject matter, with poemson the theme of the nature of life being an important part of Emily Dickinson's work and particularly noted by researchers. Through the method of textual analysis, this essay analyzes herlife-theme poemfrom the perspective of content analysis and rhetorical criticism, combined with Dickinson's life experience. Herpoems explore the issues of life and eternity from many sides, with the significance of finding the true nature of life and revealing the true meaning of life. It is a milestone in the creation of new American poetry.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson, The Nature of Life, Textual analysis.

1. Introduction

Dickinson is widely regarded as one of the greatest American poets of the nineteenth century, known for her unique style and themes. Her poetry reflects her mysterious emotional experiences and the distinctive character that shaped her work. Scholars often categorize Dickinson's themes into nature, love, life, religious beliefs, and the exploration of the human self. Her poems on the nature of life have been the most influential and extensively studied. They make up about one-third of her total output, and researchers consider them to be the most exceptional part of her poetry, closely related to her life experiences.

Dickinson grew up in a devout Puritan family that greatly influenced her religious beliefs. As an adult, she experienced personal setbacks, including the failure to achieve fame and fortune, as well as the successive deaths of friends and relatives. These experiences caused significant changes in her psyche, leading her to produce a large number of poems with imagery of despair, sadness, joy, hope, and confusion. Her poems reflect a paradoxical understanding of the nature of life, which she never fully reconciles.

The value of Dickinson's poems on the nature of life lies in their analysis and examination of life. By placing life within aspecificcontext, she interrogates and explores it, transforming despair and anxiety into an eternal pursuit of life. Her poems present a unique perspective on the meaning of life and the search for its true nature, mapping her rich, profound, and mysterious inner world. This perspective, a kind of reverse view on life, contains a wise philosophy of life that future generations should explore and study.

2. The Relationship Between Man and God in The Light of Life

Dickinson's poetry intricately weaves together the themes of God and the nature of life, revealing a multifaceted approach that arises from her ambivalent views on religion. While she ardently believed in the existence of God, her struggle to truly comprehend and find him gave rise to doubts. In her poetic expressions, she oscillated between heartfelt praises, referring to God as a friendly neighbour, and stern rebukes, even daring to call him a thief. However, it is her exploration of the final stage of life and the afterlife that deviates from traditional notions of resurrection, presenting a

world beyond as mysterious and elusive, yet with an underlying yearning for eternity. Throughout her life, Dickinson relentlessly sought to establish a definitive attitude toward God, a stance that mirrored her outlook on the world. Yet, she found herself unable to fully embrace the Christian faith nor wholeheartedly abandon God and religion, as materialists do, subscribing to the belief that the passing of life signifies the simultaneous annihilation of the soul and inner body. Despite her unwavering belief in the existence of God, she persistently questioned his mercy. It is the intricate and ambivalent nature of her relationship with God that ultimately contributes to the complexity and ever-evolving understanding she portrays in her exploration of the nature of life.

Emily Dickinson's religious consciousness is deeply rooted in the Christian cultural milieu of her upbringing. Hailing from a prosperous family, she was blessed with a privileged education during her formative years. Growing up within the embrace of a devout Christian household, guided by her pious parents, she engaged in prayer and worship from the earliest stages of her life. While these religious traditions undoubtedly instilled a profound sense of spirituality within her, Dickinson's curious mind continuously probed and challenged the teachings of Christianity, never succumbing to the pressures of aligning herself with any specific denomination. In her private musings, she recorded the belief that faith, in and of itself, can be a burdensome cross to bear, causing one to stumble under its weight, yet never relinquishing it completely. To her, personal faith stood as an intrinsic birthright of every human being.

However, it was after Dickinson turned 34 that a series of devastating encounters with loss struck her immediate circle of family and friends, leaving her profoundly shattered. These personal tragedies became catalysts for her deep introspection and an intensive exploration of death's ultimate significance in her own life. In the face of these distressing experiences, the tenets of religious doctrine no longer provided satisfactory answers to her profound existential inquiries, leading to a profound dissonance between her internal contemplations and her religious identity. Doubts about the faith she once held dear began to take root. The conventional Christian doctrine, which proclaimed an omnipotent God, failed to offer solace for the premature deaths of those she cherished. In her eyes, God's perceived inaction engendered a profound sense of abandonment, deepening her doubts. Dickinson gradually

distanced herself from the image of God as a benevolent guardian of mankind. Although she maintained an unwavering belief in God's existence, she harboured reservations concerning the bestowal of divine grace and the prospects of attaining salvation. This skepticism is vividly captured in her poignant poem #338, where she employs the word "hid" to convey her doubts, reflecting her profound scepticism towards God and the subsequent turmoil her reflections on faith and life stirred within her. As she grappled with the limitations of religious practice in alleviating her inner confusion and pain, a glimmer of hope for eternity persisted. Nonetheless, her intricate puzzlement concerning the nature of God engendered a prevailing sense of pessimism and disappointment.

In Emily Dickinson's poem "There's a Certain Slant of Light," she masterfully combines the themes of God, light, and the nature of life, resulting in a nuanced exploration of her ambivalent views on religion. The speaker in the poem explicitly connects the divine with light in the first stanza, likening the sensation evoked by this light to the weighty resonance of cathedral tunes. The simile of the "Heft of Cathedral Tunes" evokes the grandeur and power of organ music, capable of filling the vast space of a cathedral. This comparison symbolizes God's truth, which encompasses the entire world. However, juxtaposed with this imagery, the poem creates an oppressive atmosphere, setting the stage for the subsequent themes of depression and despair. It paves the way for the exploration of the speaker's belief in the hurt and the passing of life inflicted by God, leaving no possibility of escape.

This poem serves as a reflection of Dickinson's own intricate understanding of the interplay between the nature of life and religion. The use of the term "heavenly" suggests that the winter light symbolizes God. The speaker asserts that this particular slant of light brings forth a sensation of "Heavenly Hurt." This juxtaposition of heavenly and hurt may initially appear contradictory, as heavenly things are typically associated with pleasantness rather than pain. However, Dickinson suggests that if God grants life to human beings, he is also responsible for the inherent despair that accompanies it, for life and death are inseparable. When this "heavenly hurt" occurs, the landscape itself seems to tremble with fear, and shadows hold their breath in anticipation. This reflects Dickinson's profound questioning and contemplation of Christianity and her complex relationship with God.

Beyond the evocative imagery, Dickinson employs an unconventional use of capital letters that adds to the poem's sense of defamiliarization. The capitalized words in the opening lines, such as "Slant," "Winter Afternoons," "Heft," and "Cathedral Tunes," are strategically chosen to emphasize their significance. Through the deliberate use of dashes, these capitalized words create a heavy and desperate atmosphere, which prepares the reader for the exploration of depression and the inescapable hurt and the pass of life inflicted by God. In the third stanza, the word "Any" is capitalized and placed between dashes, drawing attention to its meaning and underscoring the subjectivity of the "internal difference" being discussed. The speaker asserts that these matters cannot be taught or defined, highlighting their enigmatic nature.

While this poem delves into religious themes, it does not adopt the conventional didactic tone found in traditional religious poetry. Instead, it serves as a thought-provoking invitation for introspection. Dickinson's use of terms derived from the Bible, such as God, heaven, and immortality, moves

beyond the mere dogmas of Christian doctrine. She imbues them with personal significance, prompting readers to contemplate the intricate relationship between religion and the nature of life. By interrogating and reinterpreting these concepts, Dickinson invites us to engage in a deeper exploration of our own beliefs and the mysteries of existence.

3. Innovative Description of the Nature of Life

Dickinson's contemplation of life was undeniably intertwined with her religious beliefs. Her introspection and questioning of religion shaped her paradoxical perspective on the nature of life and served as a catalyst for her profound musings on the nature of life, death, and eternity. Throughout her works, Dickinson exhibits a complex and ambivalent attitude towards the fading of life. On one hand, she perceives death not merely as the cessation of life, but as the transcendence of life and a pathway to eternal bliss. On the other hand, she portrays the passing of life as a fearsome and enigmatic force that represents God's inexorable will. In Dickinson's poems, she oscillates between fearing death and embracing the hope of eternal life, reflecting a myriad of contradictory emotions. These contradictions truly epitomize Dickinson's exploration of the nature of life in her poetry.

During Dickinson's formative years, she endured the loss of numerous loved ones. The deaths of individuals such as the young poet Leonard Humphrey, her close friends Holland and Samuel Bowles, Judge Otis, her father, her nephew Gilbert, Charles, and her dear friend Ben Newton deeply impacted her, plunging her into grief and prompting her existential search for the meaning of life. These experiences engendered profound sorrow within the sensitive Dickinson, fostering a profound fascination with the nature of life and compelling the poet to delve into the philosophical inquiry of the meaning of life and immortality. As she reached the age of 25, Dickinson embarked on a reclusive lifestyle, living alone on the outskirts of town near the forest, in close proximity to the public cemetery. The deaths of friends and townsfolk unfolded before her eyes as families laid their loved ones to rest. Witnessing the anguish of a mother mourning the loss of her daughter or the quiet passing of an elderly man living alone, Dickinson gradually developed a unique and profound comprehension of life. Her seclusion from worldly affairs afforded her ample time for contemplation and exploration of life's profound questions, unburdened by the constraints of conventional customs and personal experiences.

In "Because I Could Not Stop for Death," She eloquently presents her perspectives on life and immortality in a serene and lyrical tone. The poet has crafted beautiful imagery around the thematic concept of life. Using a harmonious and varied tone and mood, it reflects Dickinson's understanding of the meaning of life at different stages of her life. This is part of Dickinson's poems on the nature of life that deserves careful study.

Dickinson's use of punctuation displays a distinctiveness that varies greatly between her early and late poems, indicating shifts in her thoughts and attitudes. According to Liu Shoulan's research, from 1858 to 1859, when Dickinson experienced profound joy and sorrow, her intense emotions led her to employ exclamation marks extensively in her poems and letters. In the period from 1860 to 1863, as her life

grew gradually calmer, she abandoned the exclamation marks of her youth and relied more on the horizontal dash. At times, she even used dashes in place of all punctuation marks. The prolific use of dashes reveals Dickinson's ambivalence toward the inevitable reality of life. On one hand, the unpredictability and uncertainty of life naturally engendered fear and dread in Dickinson. Simultaneously, her questioning of God's mercy and contemplation of religion involuntarily cast doubt on the existence of an afterlife. Yet, on the other hand, she viewed the duality of life as a natural part of life, a necessary pathway to eternal existence. The end of life could be an eternal, peaceful slumber or the beginning of a new life, urging people to embrace it rather than fear it. These unconventional punctuation choices offer a refreshing experience for readers. By slowing down the poem's pace and controlling the rhythm and musicality of the stanzas, Dickinson prompts readers to reflect on the poem's ideas. In "There's a Certain Slant of Light," commas and dashes play a significant role in establishing rhythm at the beginning of the poem, while in the second stanza, dashes separate and connect ideas, creating a deeper meaning. The speaker's internal suffering, depicted as an "internal difference," is conveyed through natural imagery and the use of dashes enhances the tone in the final lines. Ending the poem with a dash instead of a full stop underscores the theme of uncertainty and the internal conflicts it presents, leaving readers with further questions about the nature of life and eternity.

Dickinson extensively employs synesthesia in numerous poems exploring the theme of the nature of life, blending different senses to render familiar emotions strange and vivid. In the first stanza of "There's a Certain Slant of Light," Dickinson assigns weight to the "slant of light" through the word "Oppresses" and imparts sound to light with "Cathedral Tunes." The speaker initially experiences heaviness and despair, akin to a weight pressing down on their soul. This sensation is likened to the heaviness one might feel when listening to somber church organ music, referred to as "Cathedral Tunes." By fusing visual, sensory, and auditory elements together, Dickinson successfully conveys the ineffable feeling of a winter day and creates a heavy atmosphere. In the fourth verse, the visual sense transitions to the auditory sense, echoing the first verse, as the entire landscape listens when the "slant of light" arrives. Expanding upon the symbolic association between winter and the passing of life, the speaker's despair may stem from an awareness of death's inevitability. The winter sunlight, filtering down to the speaker as the day wanes, prompts contemplation of the fleeting nature of life, evoking a sense of heaviness.

While acknowledging the inevitability of the fading of life, Dickinson also reflects on the meaning of life and the nature of eternity through the lens of the fading of life. She cherishes

life and emphasizes living in the present moment while simultaneously respecting and revering death. Dickinson holds the belief that the spirit can transcend the physical body and pursue eternity. By recognizing the transience of life, she imbues it with special value. The verse "That it will never come again—Is what makes life so sweet" implies that life's uniqueness lies in its impermanence. The knowledge that life is finite makes each moment precious and sweet. It is the presence of the brevity of life that make it beautiful. Rather than viewing eternity as a distant future or an infinite expanse of time, Dickinson sees it as composed of accumulating each fleeting "now." "Forever is composed of nows" encapsulates Dickinson's understanding of eternity, urging us to live fully in the present moment and recognize the preciousness of life.

The significance of Dickinson's poems on the theme of the nature of life lies in its ability to transform despair and anxiety into a perpetual pursuit of life. Her poems offer a unique perspective on the meaning of life and the search for its true nature. Through her exploration of the nature of life, Dickinson maps out a rich, profound, and mysterious inner world. This alternative view on life contains a wise philosophy that future generations should delve into and study.

As one of the pioneers of twentieth-century modernist poetry in the United States, Emily Dickinson's contributions to American literature, particularly her poem on the theme of the nature of life, have solidified her status as one of the greatest American poets of the nineteenth century. Her ability to navigate the realms of the nature of life with depth and introspection has left an indelible mark on the landscape of poetry, making her work a milestone in the creation of new American poetry.

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