

Review

Environmental and personal elements shaping the poetry of Emily Dickinson

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson is said to be a "poet-child." With her natural inspiration of a poet she could feel deeply. She was in constant suffering from loneliness, separation and bereavement. Emily then turned to words in order to express not only personal subjective phenomena but these by turn turned into universal ones. She raised a cry of veto against an unsatisfactory life. The poet in her adapted a private inner life. Of expression which is that of childhood. In her search of the immortal she found it not (only) in a dream of life after death but rather she found it the essentials within us. These essentials are correlated with the eternally child-like in all human beings. Children are to her sons of Gods. They are more of angels though they do not have much knowledge. When Emily assumed the role of the eternal child she was trying to achieve a constant process of rebirth. Emily notes the daily routine of the life she is passing from. The image of children playing games during a school recess is the starting point and focus of the poem. This scene catches her sight then the sense of motion is quickened or rather one should say that the sense of time comes to an end as they pass the cycle of the day and the seasons of the year at a period of both ripeness and decline. The world "passed" echoes through the stanza. Emily conveys her feeling of being now outside time and change for she corrects herself to say that the sun passed them, as it of course does all who are in the grave. This poem starts wittily and shrewdly by the lines: Because I could not stop for Death; He kindly stopped for me. In that respect, Emily typically American. For "the American Artist sees life with fresh questioning eyes as a child does in his optimistic nativity, searching for his real self". This interest in childhood is also a romantic trait since the Romantics in general regarded children with an awe and respect akin to the divine. This attitude also relates Emily to her Puritan up-bringing. In an age of flourishing civilization and decaying morals and spiritual beliefs, the puritans and Emily Dickinson were searching for a center of stability and solidity so they resorted to the inner self. "Emily never outgrew her childish impishness which is reflected in much of her poetry". She wrote with a style so light, simple and lively that it jumped, hopped and danced like a ballerina. Sometimes her style expressed a tone of a mischievous child with its gay nonsense which concealed under statements of irony and rebellion, artistically speaking Emily was that potent that her words expressed moods – and her sounds conveyed meanings. Her imagery was often endowed with an eerie excitement which could belong to no one but could. Even physically Emily was described by Higginson, her preceptor, in this childlike frame. "A step like a pattering child's in entry and in glided a little plain women with two smooth bands of reddish hair . . . She came to me with two lilies, which she put in a sort of childlike way into my hand and said 'these are my introduction 'in a soft frightened breathless childlike voice.'" In Emily Dickinson, the very human childhood was her tongue and the seraphic angelic childhood in their heart.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson, shaping the poetry, poet child

INTRODUCTION

Though Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was a poet of isolation yet one cannot approach her works critically

from a formalistic point of view only. To understand her poetry better we will try to cast an examining look at her

life with its environmental and personal elements which formulated and shaped her poetry.

We assume in this paper to prove that the child image was the pivotal point around which Emily's poetry and thoughts rotated. If this is true we should attempt to know its reason and its results. We should also try to understand Emily herself as poet child and her relation with her father and mothers.

"That you and I in hand as we e'er do in heart might ramble away as children, among the woods and fields, and forget these many years, and these sorrowing cares, and each become a child again"...

Emily Dickinson did not come to be known to the world until after her death. She was born and lived in Amherst, New England of the 19th century. The family ties within Emily's circle were of a very strange type. That might have been a reason why she remained throughout her life a spinster, and throughout more than half of her life a recluse ".The fact that her family circle remained unbroken until her father's death in 1887 made it possible for Emily to protect her childhood relation to her parents almost to the end of her life."

Edward Dickinson, a lawyer and Emily's father, was a great shaping figure of her life. From her earliest childhood, Emily felt a respect for him akin to awe. He was very much a man of the stern world of New England. He was conscientious, affectionate and tender-hearted man.

Emily could recollect that he used to go out to the barn in the cold with food in his hands to feed the birds. Once when there was a beautiful rainbow in the sky, he made sure to ring the church bell himself so as to attract people's attention to the beauty of the sky.

To Emily Dickinson the Father figure is always standing in the forefront. In many of her poems the word "Father" is used with an ambivalent sense which could refer to her own father, or God, or some other source of protection, or to the whole of the external surrounding society.

In this respect of her constant need for a source of protection or a fatherly figure she remained an eternal child-like character.

The death of Emily's father was supposed to be the severest blow she had ever received from fate. She then wrote "Home is far from Home, since my father died." The second "Home" means to Emily an image of shelter, protection, warmth and love. There still survives as well a half sheet of paper headed "Dear Father – "and signed below "Emily ".The space between is blank. This illuminates her acute sense of awareness that death severs the means of communication. It also expresses the vacuum, nothingness, loss and emptiness that she felt after the loss of her father.

Emily was unusually sensitive and even an introvert 'child' with all the make up of a poet by nature.

The Father figure to her was a godly one. Child's psychology would tell us that such children consider their parents as gods. Sooner or later when they come to

realize that parents are not so infallible" they then may be reattached to a concept of God towards whom the attitude will be very similar to that of the little child towards his parents⁰". This attitude in Emily Dickinson is part of her protective attitude which she adopted since she was constantly aware of loss, agony and deprivation.

The Mother figure for Emily Dickinson on the other side is not a very clear one. The mother seems to be partially obscured by others. The mention of a mother and children in her poetry refers more to Mother Nature with all men as her children. Emily refers to her with an assumption of protectiveness and sense of belonging for which she was always searching.

Nature is sometimes the nest or the bosom for lonely, frightened and cold children as herself where they would find love, protection and warmth.

Nature – the Gentlest Mother is Impatient of no child.

In another poem she refers to Nature directly as:

Mama never forgets her birds, Though in another tree – she looks down just as often and just as tenderly As when her little mortal nest with cunning care she wove – If either of her" sparrows fall ",She" notices ",above.

The word "above" makes one stop to think if it would possibly refer to God who is an agent of protection and love.

Once Emily feels lost or disappointed at something, she writes in one of her letters "What in-dead is Earth but a Nest, from whose ruin we are all falling"? In many of Emily's poems there are references to a "Master". It could be her father, God, her imaginary lovers or men friends. In her letters she was able to create for herself a deliberate persona of a little girl" – Emilie – "standing like Herrick's child before its Benefactor, heaving up either hands or luring her literary advisors – Mr. Higginson – protective interest by an exaggerated account of her parents' insensitivity. Higginson is another protective Figure of hers. He was at that time a famous literary man. He became interested in Emily's character and poetry after she had sent him few of her poems asking him of her work throbbed with life or not.

All of Emily's men friends were old enough to be her father which still proves the point of her childlike need for protection.

The nature of such a poetic character is actually very subtle and complicated. It is ambivalent and complex ranging from ecstasy to agony, and from being a child to being a mother. She is extremely loving to all yet sometimes she becomes violent, selfish and possessive.

To Higginson she once wrote:

Could you tell me what home is? I never had a mother. I suppose a mother was one to whom you hurry when you are troubled ... My father thought he had taught me but I did not understand and I was afraid to say I did not afraid, to ask anyone else lest he should know". We then see that though she had a loved her parents dearly yet sometimes she turns into a bewildered rebel trying to attract Higginson's sympathy. Here she is" the child."

Later on we see still a different reaction to her parents. After her father's death she has written that his heart was pure and terrible, and that no other like it ever existed. When her mother fell sick and became an invalid, we find that a gushing stream of love and tenderness flows out of Emily. She writes " :We were never intimate Mother and Children while she was our Mother – but ... when she became our child, the affection came ⁰".here she is" the mother ."In psychology this is a comprehensible phenomenon. Such a complex in character springs from two unifying sources of a protective behavior and a motherly one.

Those times seem far off now, a great way, as things we did when children. I wish we were children now. I wish we were always children, how to grow up I don't know those words sent from Emily to her brother Austin. They might give us an insight into the psychic pressures responsible for her poetry which were those of love and loss" .

The sequence runs from awe to love and pain, from loss to despair and death, and back again to love and the ecstasy inspired by natural beauty".

From her very early years Emily was conscious of the terrible force of death which deprives her of friends and relatives.

She was often taken to funeral ceremonies and that made her awareness of loss more acute. She writes in one of her letters:

I'm growing selfish in my dear home, but I do love it so, and when some pleasant friend invites me to pass a week with her, I look at my father and mother and Vinnie, and all my friends, and I say no – no I can't leave them, what if they die when I'm gone.

Here we see that Emily's extreme love extended to possessiveness. If she was that happy in her childhood and loved her life as a child, she was then possessed by a desire to remain perpetually so, but life and reality were to harsh and brutal for such an artistic, poetic and delicate nature. Death and loss are always lurking somewhere far or near. Those she loved had to die for the passage of time is inevitable and crushing.

Time fades away both her beautiful zinnia flowers and serf's little daughter :'Here she identifies death of inanimate nature with that of animate human beings i.e. the little girl.

The dear father dies: Carlo – the dog-dies; Gilbert – the beloved nephew – dies; spring, childhood and youth all die and fade away. The good old days are doomed to vanish. Society is quickly and harshly changing. Industry, commercialism and pragmatism are monarchs in the new American society of her time. The Civil War caused lots of losses among fellow brothers in humanity. The whole world seems to be tumbling over Emily's head, and she can't do anything about it so she keeps to herself in her own poetic world.

Emily Dickinson had been a mature child with a high degree of intelligence and hyper sensitivity. This point is important for us in order to understand the nature of her

childlike attitude assumed by her in her poetry. That fanciful world of childhood is not childish, naive or credulous; on the contrary it is very much mature and tells of experience and insight more than of innocence.

It is clear from what have been said that Emily lived a happy childhood and that was the reason why she always longed and yearned for it. When she grew up to face reality with all its harshness, loss, death and frustrations the only way out for her was escapism or transcendence to the rosy world of dreams and memories of soothing childhood. Her attitude was not a negative one of cowardice but rather ones of intentional escape from crude mundane life through using it as subject matter of her poetry.

Emily Dickinson had a very fine sense of what could be called a modern sense of fright, deprivation and agony. But that gave birth to her finest poems which are considered by many as the forerunners of the desperate cries for help and escape of modern man.

Emily Dickinson, like Blake, could amalgamate her experience and her innocence in order to reach a higher third of organized innocence. This duality which is braided into her poems sprang out of her sense of agony, and of ecstasy.

Her agony is clear when she writes after her loss of dear ones:

*I never lost as much but twice And that was in the sod.
Twice have I stood a beggar before the door of God.
...burglar! Banker – Father!
I am poor once more!*

The poem ends in what seems to be an anguished cry of despair, rebellion, hopelessness then submission. First she complains to God of her loss. Then when He turns to her an indifferent ear, she strikes at him with her angry child like fists: *Burglar! Banker! Father!*

Life to Emily Dickinson was like a' well .'This serves as a perfect image of paradise. It is so near yet so far from man's limited comprehension. It is simple yet mysterious. Water in the well – which could mean life – is contained as if in a jar that could be easily handled or examined, yet it is still a fluid that one cannot grasp". And when one tries to probe its depths he is stooped by the surface which either reflects his own face or opens as that of an abyss".

The natural world is thus impenetrable and incomprehensible to the limited – childish – mind of man which could never totally apprehend the huge mind of God. Emily had to face more than that painful natural human discrepancy. Being a poet by nature her awareness of such essentials and subtleties of life alienated her from the surrounding society. She lacked real communication with people and was thus estranged. She was considered an eccentric half-mad spinster. She was in agony of an ivory tower imposed on her by external forces and internal make up which is the natural price paid by men of art and unique characters.

"Emily (then) pleaded unto God like a little child, then like

a little insignificant mouse while she thought in his eyes she looked like a rat⁰. But she finds Him to be a lonesome God in a cold heaven above a world whose machinery grinds out his perturb less plan". God is a ravenous " Mastiff .,"And " Inquisitor ,"a swindler of children like herself ... His games of hide-and-seek might entertain Him, but suppose that his Jokes should torture us to death" To Emily Pap above is a cat that torments the helpless mouse and trapped rat. That idea is expressed beautifully and playfully in:

Pap above!

Regard a Mouse

Overpowered by the Cat!

Reserve within thy kingdom

A" Mansion "for the Rat!

Thus Emily could reach the highest levels of philosophizing and metaphysics in a deceptively simple style similar to that of cartoon films of children.

This poem could possibly be compared to Tom and Jerry of the Micky Mouse. Agony is submerged with ecstasy in a visual moving picture ranging to the absurd. May be the absurd is only a fair reflection of an absurd life.

It was Emily Dickinson's awareness of human aspirations and limitations that made her first bewildered like a child; then she started questioning things then frustrated she rebelled". He quest was through an interior waste land, trackless and guide less, without even the name of the missing treasure." There was a burden laid on her of which she knew no source and no escape. She had like some modern literary heroes a sense of guilt that seemed more like a riddle. She could feel a process of growth and at the same time one of deterioration all over.

Emily's hunger was for a missing element – something deeply felt but unknown". What she needed was a way to alleviate the spiritual loneliness of carrying a burden she did not understand⁰. Thus" she resorts to, not only the familiar metaphors, but also to the playfully absurd, as in 'Papa Above"

Emily Dickinson's concept of childhood is not like the Words worthier one. The child to her is not the' rather of Man 'because he knows more or that he is nearer to God. To her man is continuously a child in the sense that he is weak and bewildered by the universe with all its complexity and mysteriousness. The real child then is in a bliss of ignorance and innocence. So in one sense all human beings are children because they can never gain full and through knowledge of the world around and within them.

In another sense the child is crowned in her world not because he knows more but because he is in a heaven of 'not knowing 'a bliss of ignorance.

To Emily the ideal state is some sort of the romantic innocence without experience or organized innocence since she was aware of the fall and conscious of growth and loss i.e price and prize. Emily Dickinson was childlike consciously, willingly and on purpose. This adoption of a child's stand was her means of transcending harsh

reality, and at the same time criticizing it.

Emily restored to childhood as re compensation and balm of the woe she felt as a result of constant less inflicted on her:

"I lost a world O the other day!

Has Anybody found?

... A Rich man – might not notice it –

Yet – to my frugal Eye.

Of more Esteem than Ducats –

Oh find it – Sir – for me!

Emily Dickinson is not only aware of inevitable loss but she is also conscious of aspirations and hopes doomed to frustrations:

The nearest Dream recedes – unrealized –

The Heaven we chase,

Like the June Bee – before the School Boy,

Invites the Race –

Stoops – to an easy Clever –

Dips – evades – teases – deploys –

Then – to the Royal Clouds

Lifts his light Pinnacle–

Heedless of the Boy –

Staring-bewildered-at the Mocking sky

Homesick for steadfast Honey–

Ah, the Bee flies not

That brews that rare variety!

Emily Dickinson realized in her loneliness the full implications of the individualist's defeat by circumstance or reckless providence. The Heaven in the previous poem or the bee stands for God. She loves him dearly in her own way and in a manner of intimacy that could not be reached except by mystics.

Yet she always blamed Him like a little child be rating her parent for refusing all her desires. She pleads unto him, but receives only negative answers. He is not sympathetic with her and so is the whole world. She then turns into a rebellious black sheep wanting to destroy all. Yet expresses protest in a seemingly quiet, absurd, irrational playfulness. **The volcano within is controlled with the ice without.**

Over the fence –

Strawberries – grow –

Over the fence –

I could climb – If I tried,

I knew–

Berries are nice!

But – If I stained my Apron –

God could certainly scold!

Oh, dear, - I guess if He were

A Boy–

He'd – climb – If he could!

Emily Dickinson is in many ways similar to Blake" She took over the simplest forms of the song and the hymn and turned this simplicity to (her) own uses⁰.

Her work seemed to be almost dictated inspiration which on the surface level appears naive or innocent while its depths yield infinitude that encompasses the whole of

existence, originality and power. She was hampered by misunderstanding and traditionally stiffened society, and lack of true response, but that helped her to display an innate peculiar terrifying honesty in a world frightened to be honest. Although her external world was limited and confined yet her internal world of the self was of unimaginable depth and width that it could almost include all elements of nature including God, the Universe and Man.

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