

Emily Dickinson's Nature Poems: Expression of Anti-anthropocentrism

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Abstract: Recently, people gradually tend to treat nature with an arrogant attitude due to their increasing self-centeredness. But in the nineteenth century, Emily Dickinson has a passionate, abject love for nature and is committed to encapsulating it in her poetry. This article explores her way of treating nature from the perspective of anti-anthropocentrism and tries to find inspiration for humans on how to deal with their relationship with nature. On the one hand, it is essential for humans to appreciate the beauty of nature by observing and feeling it. If one looks closely at some creatures in nature like caterpillars and immerses oneself in nature as Dickinson did, one too can achieve pure joy. On the other hand, too much interference can destroy beauty when science turns everything into precise data. And given the Transcendental thoughts and natural facts, inherent rules of nature determine that inherent rules can not and should not be changed. Dickinson's love and respect for nature are worthy of human reflection.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson, human-nature relationship, anthropocentrism

1. Introduction

Emily Dickinson is the most revered and enigmatic female poet in American history throughout the 19th century. She was born as the daughter of Squire Edward Dickinson in Amherst, Massachusetts, which was “an academic, agricultural, and manufacturing town” at that time [1]. She comes from a wealthy, deeply religious household. She lived with her family in Amherst for virtually all of her 56 years and rarely left the house to socialize with others. She meticulously cultivated a wide range of plants in the garden, which was her favorite area of the home.

On the table by her window, Dickinson wrote about 1800 poems, and over 500 of these poems were related to nature directly and indirectly. She depicts everything in nature and reveals the mysteries of nature with meticulous depictions, unique perspectives, and real feelings. And nowadays, with the development of science, the relationship between man and nature has turned into a topic that needs to be emphasized more and more because the destroyed environment, the ever-extinct animals, and the dwindling resources are reminding self-centered humans that it's time to reflect on our attitudes towards nature. Countless scholars tend to find answers in Dickinson's poems about nature.

Dickinson has mixed thoughts toward nature. On the one hand, she shows great love for nature, is willing to get close to nature and celebrates the harmony between mankind and nature. This shows the influence of Transcendentalism. Transcendentalism, represented by Emerson and Thoreau, regarded the universe as the embodiment of God's spirit. Thus, the relationship between man and

nature should be harmonious [2]. On the other hand, the mysterious and powerful forces of nature also make her somewhat hostile to it. That's why she also explores the alienation of man from nature [3]. She has such complicated feelings since all kinds of factors have left a mark on her. Firstly, her upbringing and life experiences have created a fascination with nature. Her careless father and innocent mother led to her growing up in an environment that lacked thoughts. Because of this, she tended to find the "gentlest mother" in nature. Then, as she witnessed the cruel war and the death of several friends, she lived a life of isolation. Up to this point, all she had seen, felt, and known came from nature [4]. That's why she keeps emphasizing the close human-nature connection and finds harmony in nature. Second, Dickinson was ultimately raised in a deeply religious home. Her father was the leader of the town church, her brother was an ardent supporter of the local church, and her mother and sister were devout Christians. Therefore, Dickinson remained inevitably influenced by Puritanism [5]. Thus she sometimes feels the unbridgeable distance between God, nature and man. Just like what she conveys in "A narrow Fellow in the Grass", "Several of Nature's People / I know, and they know me / I feel for them a transport / Of Cordiality" (17-20) [6]. She somehow was familiar with the creatures in nature and willing to get close to them. But she also says: "But never met this Fellow / Attended or alone / Without a tighter Breathing / And Zero at the Bone" (21-24) [6]. She would still feel afraid of the symbol of evil and devil in Christian belief. Her complex attitude toward nature is entwined with her life experiences and religious attitudes in the ongoing quest for the Dickinson Mystery.

As can be seen from the literature above, researchers focus more on Dickinson's attitude toward nature. These studies have not only enriched the knowledge of Dickinson, but also have improved our understanding of nature. As Bennett and Royle said, "Human is not the center of the world, however much we might imagine or behave otherwise" [7]. It can be seen that man's relationship with nature is in an irrational state. Therefore, this article will focus more on how we can get inspiration from Emily Dickinson's poems about nature to explore the ways to treat nature properly. By analyzing specifically her poems related to nature, Dickinson hopes human beings to treat nature in an anti-anthropocentric way from two aspects. In the Oxford Dictionary, it means the point of view that "humans are not the only, or primary, holders of moral standing" [8]. It means that humans are not the center of the world. On the one hand, appreciating the beauty of nature. On the other hand, stop over-interfering with nature.

2. Appreciate the Beauty of Nature

If people want to live in harmony with nature, the first step is to really understand the independence of nature. Nature is not just for human beings. For a long time, only the value of nature for human use is regarded as important, which is a sign of a rude, arrogant and self-centered attitude. But in Emily Dickinson's mind, one can simply enjoy pure pleasure from the intrinsic value of nature, including its beauty.

On the one hand, Dickinson tries to discover the beauty of nature with her meticulous observation. She has a passion for appreciating everything in the world. She can even notice the negligible, even unappealing critters to the untrained eye. Her fascination with insects is a clear example. As Allewaert says, Emily Dickinson's insectophilia is evident not only in her partitioning figurations and flies and buzzings but also in her practice sometimes confining the insects with the poems she sent to her friends [9]. She also wrote many poems about caterpillars. In "A fuzzy fellow, without feet", Dickinson sets a riddle to describe the whole process of how a caterpillar becomes a butterfly with the detailed depiction of its appearance, habitat and activities. "How soft a Caterpillar steps" includes the soft touch felt when a caterpillar crawls on her hand. What's more, in both of the two poems, she uses an affectionate tone and tender words to show her love for the little creatures bluntly.

First, Dickinson makes exceptionally frequent use of exclamation sentences in the two poems. In

“A fuzzy fellow, without feet”, she uses exclamation points everywhere when she describes the caterpillar’s appearance, activities and living space. “A fuzzy fellow, without feet – / Yet doth exceeding run! / Of velvet, is his Countenance – / And his complexion, dun!” (1-4) [6]. The combination of the exclamation points and extremely short lines adds much enthusiasm to her tone. And the strong, crisp /ʌn / at the end of the lines even gives people the sense that she is yelling out with all her strength to root for the caterpillar’s metamorphosis. And In “How soft a Caterpillar steps”, Dickinson uses an exclamatory sentence at the beginning of the poem to convey the sensation of a caterpillar crawling across her hand. Instead of shaking off it, she senses the feeling it gives when walking and exclaims “how soft”, which reveals from the bottom of her heart she cares for and loves this small creature.

Second, the words she uses to describe the caterpillar are tender. In both poems, “velvet” and “plush” exit. In “A fuzzy fellow, without feet”, “From which he doth descend in plush” (7) [6]. In “How soft a Caterpillar steps”, she says “From such a Velvet world it came – / Such plushes at command” (3-4) [6]. These two words create a piece of tactile space for the reader, immersing them in the feeling of warmth and suppleness by giving them associations with plush objects. She projects her love of nature in her words, which reminds us to care more about the cuteness of nature itself.

On the other hand, Dickinson tends to get close to nature and experience the beauty of nature by herself. In addition to getting happiness from the insects, everything in nature can also be a source of enjoyment if people are willing to immerse in it. In “I taste a liquor never brewed”, Dickinson even revels in nature. “I taste a liquor never brewed – / From Tankards scooped in Pearl – / Not all the Frankfort Berries / Yield such an Alcohol! / Inebriate of air – am I – / And Debauchee of Dew –” (1-6) [6]. Dickinson is drunk on the air and dew, which are even more delicious and intoxicating than the most well-known wine made by the Frankfort berries. That means in her mind, nothing is more enjoyable than the unmodified and pure nature. And she is willing to be the “Debauchee” of nature, viewing it as an integral part of her life. “When ‘Landlords’ turn the drunken Bee / Our of the Foxglove’s door – / When Butterflies – renounce their ‘drams’ – / I shall but drink more!” (9-12) [6]. She cannot stop drinking this natural goodness, as if she could never stop feeling the nourishment of her spirit from the beauty of nature. Bees and butterflies need water, air, and nectar to survive. But Dickinson thinks she is even more inseparable from nature and enjoys it more than they do. “Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats – / And Saints – to windows run – / To see the little Tippler / Leaning against the – Sun!” (13-16) [6]. The Seraphs and the Saints, the sacred and highly respected ones, all have a supportive attitude toward her fascination with the beauty of nature. She herself has also reached a level that she could never have reached by drinking ordinary wine by being close to nature, which means the beauty of nature is beyond anything man-made.

In a word, Dickinson expresses in her poetry the idea that beauty is a gift from nature to mankind. Humans can never see the beauty of nature from above. It is only by personally penetrating nature with humility that we can truly feel it.

3. Stop Over-interfering with Nature

With the development of biological sciences and self-centeredness, humans have the tendency to treat nature with contempt. With the thoughts that they are superior to everything, people intervene in nature according to their needs and try to interfere in the lives of various creatures. But Dickinson strongly opposes this kind of behavior because of beauty destruction and inherent rules.

First, this unwarranted intervention would destroy the beauty of nature itself. She condemns some scientists for interfering with nature and destroying its beauty. “‘Arcturus’ is his other name – / I’d rather call him ‘Star’! / It’s very mean of Science / To go and interfere!” (1-4) [6]. For nature, each star has its own unique formation process and history. It is its own characteristic, and mankind is not in a position to take it upon himself to frame it with a name. “Star” leaves endless room for romance

and imagination. But “Arcturus”, the cold term, ruins everything. “I pull a flower from the woods – / A monster with a glass / Computes the stamens in a breath – / And has her in a ‘Class’!” (9-12) [6]. Advances in the natural sciences are good for mankind. But people seem to be caught in a kind of bewitching circle. The first reaction to seeing a creature is no longer to admire it, but to categorize it. All living things are just dead nodes on the evolutionary tree. “Whereas I took the Butterfly / Aforetime in my hat, / He sits erect in ‘Cabinets’ –” (13-15) [6]. The specimen butterflies in the cupboard are a complete loss of vibrant beauty compared to the live butterflies in the hat. Death may seem to give beauty eternity, but in fact, it banishes natural beauty forever. People have over-refined and scientized nature, instead of hindering the normal functioning of life and the blossoming of natural beauty.

Second, in Dickinson’s mind, nature has its own inherent rules that can not and should not be changed by human beings. As seen from a theoretical perspective, the laws of nature have all been precipitated over a long period of time. It is not in our power to make any changes to the inherent laws. In “A fuzzy fellow, without feet”, Dickinson fully recognizes that this process of transformation from caterpillar to butterfly is naturally determined and irrevocable. Therefore, she chooses to take a few steps back, admires the amazing natural process, and reveals the lovely butterfly secret. “By me! But who am I, / To tell the pretty secret / Of the Butterfly!” (18-20) [6]. It is worth mentioning that she adds “who am I” after “me”. She deliberately used inversion, putting “who” at the top of the list. In this way, the pronoun “who” overrides “I”. Dickinson does not want to emphasize herself and proclaim her own achievement in revealing the secret. What is important is simply the amazing natural process and the law itself. Dickinson also knows she should not interrupt the Caterpillar’s life and let it make its own career silently. “Intent upon it’s own career – / What use has it for me –” (7-8) [6]. The caterpillar has its own living tracks. Whether she sees it or not, it will always travel soundlessly. Even if she does something to interrupt the caterpillar, it is useless. Because humans can only change something superficial, like the name or life of one caterpillar. But we can never alter the established rules of nature. In the present and in the future, there are still thousands of caterpillars following the laws of metabolism and adapting to a natural way of life. This fact teaches that human power will always be weak in the face of nature. This makes the idea of human superiority and wanting to conquer nature extremely absurd.

From a religious point of view, people should not have practices that interfere with nature. It is universally acknowledged that Dickinson is deeply influenced by Transcendentalism. Emerson once said: “The first in time and the first in importance upon the mind is that of nature” [10]. Transcendentalists contend the importance of nature. Since God created everything and every rule in the world, he is present in all of these things. The best way to communicate with God is just getting close to nature. In “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church”, Dickinson even sees nature as paradise. “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 –” (1-4) [6]. Nature is Dickinson’s church. There, she builds connections with animals and plants, who are serving some holy purpose. “God preaches, a noted Clergyman – / And the sermon is never long, / So instead of getting to Heaven, at last – / I’m going, all along” (9-10) [6]. These lines demonstrate Dickinson’s agreement with the idea that God is everywhere. And in nature, God plays the role of the priest. One can hear God’s preaching directly. As a result, she says that all the time she is going to heaven because she is always talking to God in nature. In this regard, the highest respect should be shown to nature and its inherent law, just like what religious people do to God. It is impossible for people to dare to challenge the rules made by God.

To summarize, the constant intervention in nature and affecting the normal life of living beings is extremely harmful and unreasonable. The beauty destruction and inherent rules all remind us that acting on anthropocentrism does not work at all. Only with reverence and respect for the laws,

changes and development of nature is what we as human beings should do.

4. Conclusions

In Emily Dickinson's poems, humans can draw on a lot of experience on how to live with nature. Humans have become accustomed to being self-centered and arrogant in taking from nature. But Dickinson uses her life experiences, religious beliefs, knowledge and wisdom to remind people that an anti-anthropocentric approach is the way to go for the long haul. As a consequence, this article focuses on how Emily Dickinson approaches nature from an anti-anthropocentric perspective. To begin with, her poems inspire people to learn to admire the beauty of nature both with eyes and feelings. Every creature in nature, no matter how insignificant, has its own unique beauty and value. Just as Dickinson observes the tiny caterpillars with great affection, people should have good eyes for the beauty of nature. At the same time, Dickinson is also willing to get extremely close to nature by being exposed to nature and building connections with things in nature. It reveals that only when humans go and feel nature in a tangible way can they obtain intense pleasure. Moreover, humans should not interfere with nature too much. If people insist on doing so, the natural native beauty can be destroyed because while science has turned nature into precise data and branches, it has also obliterated its vitality and people's ability to find beauty. Another reason is that nature also has inherent rules that cannot and should not be changed based on natural facts and Transcendental thoughts. Humans should realize that their power is not equal to that of nature and stop interfering too much with its normal functioning. All of these show that Dickinson's poetry is urging people to reflect on their relationship with nature and to live in harmony with it in a sensible way.

At the same time, this article is still limited in some aspects. It concentrates solely on Emily Dickinson's five poems related to her anti-anthropocentric view. But Dickinson writes thousands of poems in her lifetime, and she has a very complex, even radically opposed, attitude toward nature at different times. Thus, future studies are suggested to pay more attention to her other ways of treating nature.

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