

A Gendered Analysis of Emily Dickinson's Poetry and her Feminine Consciousness - Taking *They shut me up in Prose* - as an Example

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Abstract. Emily Dickinson was one of the greatest female poets in the history of Western literature and a pioneer of modernist poetry. Her reclusive life was considered eccentric at her time. Her poetry is unique in style and expression, and she wrote about women's desire for freedom and independence, as well as her ambition of breaking the restrictions for women in a patriarchal society. She believed that poetry was a superior literary form compared to prose and that women could also express themselves through poetry. This essay focuses on the feminine consciousness expressed in Emily Dickinson's poetry. By analyzing her poem, *They shut me up in Prose* - from a gendered or feminist perspective, this essay discusses the relationship between Emily Dickinson's female identity and her career as a poet: Emily Dickinson's feminist thought expressed in her poetry was influenced by the women's rights movement in the 19th century America, as well as her own life and education experience, and poetry was her way to rebel against the patriarchal literary tradition.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson; *They shut me up in Prose* -; feminine consciousness; patriarchal society.

1. Introduction

In the 19th century, the literary scene was dominated by men, with few female writers, and even fewer female poets. Poetry was considered a literary form for men. At that time, the English word 'poetess' indicated the stereotype that women were less able to create poetry as they lacked the talents and qualities in their nature [1]. In such a patriarchal literary environment, Emily Dickinson amazed the world with about 1800 innovative poems she wrote, most of which were revealed after her death. In her poetry, she wrote about various topics including nature, love, religion, and her reflection on life. However, as a female poet, her works expressed some ideas that were different from those written by male poets.

Emily Dickinson was known for being 'unconventional' both in her life and writing. Born in an austere lawyer family with a strong belief in Calvinism, Emily Dickinson received strict theological education, but she suffered from a spiritual crisis and was always questioning the religious tradition in her family. She lived a reclusive life since 25 and only corresponded with friends through letters, in which many of her poems were included. Her religious crisis and solitary lifestyle contributed to her desire for freedom and independence, which is an important theme in her poetry.

Emily Dickinson had written several poems about women's pursuit of freedom and the art of poetry. In the poem *I Dwell in Possibility* -, she stated the opinion that poetry is a superior literary form to prose: *I dwell in Possibility -/A fairer House than Prose* -. In another poem, *They shut me up in Prose* -, she expressed her ambition to be a female poet, despite the social convention that women could only write in prose, which limited her imagination and creativity. By associating literary writing with women's liberation, Emily Dickinson showed her 'feminine consciousness', which is a key concept in feminist literary critics. Therefore, her poetry could be interpreted from a gendered or feminist perspective.

There is already plenty of scholarly research focusing on Emily Dickinson and feminism from different perspectives. Some discussed eco-feminism thoughts expressed in Emily Dickinson's poetry, mainly the objectification of nature and women [2]. Some used textual editing methods to re-examine Emily Dickinson's letters and manuscripts, to discover Emily Dickinson's anxiety on her gender

identity [3]. Notably, Emily Dickinson's poems about women's role in family and marriage have been widely discussed, such as *I'm Wife - I've finished that -* and *I gave myself to Him*. However, not many scholars have paid much attention to her poems about women's poetry writing, which is a gap in the study of Emily Dickinson and her works.

This thesis intends to discuss Emily Dickinson's feminine consciousness expressed in her poetry, taking *They shut me up in Prose* - as an example. By applying gender theories and feminist literary critics, this thesis aims at finding out the relevance between Emily Dickinson's career as a poet and her identity as a woman, thus revealing Emily Dickinson's status in the history of women's literature.

2. A close analysis of Emily Dickinson's poem They shut me up in Prose -

2.1. Background of the poem

As Emily Dickinson published few poems during her life, it could be hardly determined the exact time when she wrote *They shut me up in Prose* -. However, Emily Dickinson sewed her poems into small books or fascicles, and this poem was in Fascicle 21, which dated from 1862. Therefore, it could be roughly concluded that this poem was written in her 30s. Along with *I Dwell in Possibility* -, this poem can also be viewed as one of her 'meta-poetry' poems, that is, poems about the art of poetry. However, compared to *I Dwell in Possibility*, this poem shows more of Emily Dickinson's awareness as a woman who expresses herself by writing poetry.

2.2. A textual analysis of the poem

2.2.1 Emily Dickinson's innovation of poetic forms

Emily Dickinson's poems are rather short and simple, usually no more than 8 to 12 lines. She liked to experiment with new forms of poetry and language. In her poems, Emily Dickinson often deliberately broke the English grammatical rules, rhyme, and metrics, which contributes to her distinctive poetic style.

They shut me up in Prose - is made up of three quatrains, which is a typical form in Emily Dickinson's poetry. Most lines in this poem are written in iambic trimeter but with a few variations. The second stanza begins with a stressed syllable, 'Still!', which breaks the iambic pattern. The third line in the second stanza, 'They might as well have lodged a Bird', is written in iambic tetrameter. The third line in the last stanza, 'Look down upon Captivity -', also has eight syllables, but it is not strictly in iambic tetrameter, as the last two syllables in the word 'captivity' are not stressed.

Emily Dickinson often used slant rhymes in her poetry, which is also unconventional in her era. By alternating rhyme patterns in the poem, she created a complex tension between lines and stanzas. The first two stanzas include both slant rhymes (like 'girl' and 'still' in the first stanza) and exact rhymes (like 'round' and 'pound' in the second stanza). The rhyme in the last stanza is quite odd: the word 'will' in the first line rhymes with the word 'still' in the last line of the first stanza, while the rest three lines in the last stanza do not rhyme at all.

Emily Dickinson's innovative use of metrics and rhyme patterns enriches the linguistic fluidity of the poem. By experimenting with new poetic forms, Emily Dickinson freed herself from the restrictions of poetic conventions, so that she could focus more on the images, thoughts, and emotions expressed in her poetry [4].

2.2.2 The content and theme of the poem: a women who was never 'shut up in prose'

This poem is written in the first person. Much evidence suggests that the speaker in this poem is a woman who pursues freedom and independence through poetry, and the poem focuses on the relationship between the speaker ('I') and 'they'. In this poem, 'they' refers to the majority of the society around her. Surrounded by the patriarchal society, women are considered inferior to men, which limits their freedom in many aspects. The first stanza of the poem describes the situation she faced: 'They shut me up in Prose'. As a core word in this poem, 'prose' here has a double meaning: Literally, it could refer to any literary form other than poetry, like novels, stories, and essays. When

poetry was regarded as men's art, most women could only express their thoughts in prose. It could also be understood as the prosaic conventions and expectations imposed on women, including issues on marriage, family, and childcare. Both meanings of the word 'prose' are associated with the social restrictions placed upon women.

The speaker then compares this feeling of restriction to her own experience of being locked in the closet when she was a little girl. She was enclosed because people like her being 'still'. The word 'still' was put in quotation marks, which implies a sense of sarcasm - the patriarchal society attempts to enclose women for the benefit of men.

In the second stanza, the speaker takes her perspective away from reality. She envisions that if 'they' who bind her with traditional social norms could see the ever-flowing ideas and inspiration in her mind, they would realize that these conventions cannot hinder her desire for freedom and that they are binding her as if they were imprisoning a bird for treason. In this stanza, the speaker uses the bird as a metaphor for herself to symbolize freedom and liberation. The bird can soar in the sky and fly wherever it wants to go; thus for it, the national boundaries do not exist. It is foolish for human beings to impose their notion of national boundaries on the bird and to condemn it to the crime of treason. Similarly, the constraints 'they' impose on the speaker as a woman are also stupid.

The last stanza of the poem continues with the metaphor of the bird. Notably, the subject of the first line is 'himself', which not only breaks the English grammatical rule but also uses a masculine pronoun to refer to the bird as a metaphor for a woman. It is suggested that the speaker does not consider herself an ordinary woman who sticks to boring conventions but rather a woman with courage, power, and determination, which are often regarded as masculine qualities - in this line, Emily Dickinson was using 'bisexual perspective' to convey her desire for freedom as a woman [5]. With these qualities, she could resist those who attempt to imprison her creativity and imagination. At the end of the poem, the speaker imagines herself breaking out from the restrictions, just like the bird soaring in the sky. From such a high perspective, all restrictions that once enclosed her are insignificant and negligible. The second line in this stanza includes a new metaphor - the star, which symbolizes height and eternity. By contrast, the restrictions in the human world are temporary and will finally fade with time [6].

Emily Dickinson often used metaphor and symbolism in her poems to express abstract concepts and complex emotions. The language in this poem is rather simple but figurative, with a powerful irony, which creates the image of an ambitious woman who uses her verses as a weapon to fight for freedom against patriarchal restrictions.

3. Analysis of Emily Dickinson's Feminine Consciousness

This poem could be seen as Emily Dickinson's self-declaration as a female poet. By using figurative symbolism and metaphors, she expressed her ambition of breaking the stereotype that only men have the talents to write poetry. Emily Dickinson considered poetry as a superior literary form compared to prose. Therefore, poetry could provide her with more freedom of self-expression. Emily Dickinson not only achieved her ambition as a great female poet but also experienced rather boldly in terms of poetic forms and styles. Even though most of her poems were rediscovered and published after her death, she finally broke the stereotype that only men could be accomplished in poetry.

From the perspective of era background and personal experiences, Emily Dickinson had not studied the theories of feminism, but she lived in an era of radical social change when women's rights became a major attention of society. In early 19th century America, women launched a campaign to fight for their rights and liberation called the Women's Suffrage Movement. In 1848, 300 activists (most were women, but including some men) gathered at Seneca Falls in New York and signed the Declaration of Sentiments, a historic document against gender discrimination. These movements sparked the awakening of women across America, with more and more women joining the fight for gender equality.

Emily Dickinson lived in seclusion for most of her life, which protected her from the patriarchal social conventions to some extent [7]. Moreover, by interacting with literary friends through letters, she was exposed to earlier literary works written by female authors, including Elizabeth Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, a novel in verse about a woman's pursuit of her career as a poet and her suffering in a society dominated by men. These works also awaken Emily Dickinson's feminine consciousness and ambition to be a poet.

In this poem, Emily Dickinson expressed her awakening of feminine consciousness. Feminine consciousness can be defined from various perspectives. It can refer to women's awareness that they are treated as 'others' by men, thus suffering from discrimination and violence, which are not natural but decided by social structure. Upon realizing this, women choose to resist the injustice of the patriarchal society with their actions and words. As is analyzed above, Emily Dickinson expressed her own ambition of breaking the social restriction imposed on women, especially on women's expression of their creativity and imagination [8].

According to the gender theory of Simone de Beauvoir, 'One is not born, but becomes a woman'. In other words, gender is not a natural concept, but a social one [9]. The roles of different genders are developed throughout the history of human society. In the patriarchal society, women's life was bounded by marriage, family, and childcare. They were regarded as belongings of their husbands, and their main duties were to serve their husbands and raise their children, which left them little time and a chance to 'be themselves'. In 1983, feminist literary critic Joanna Russ published *How to Suppress Women's Writing*. In this book, she mentioned the fact that while women often appear in poetry and are praised by poets, the writers of these poems are mostly male. In the patriarchal literary scene, male writers consider those works by women as 'the art of others'. They refuse to admit that women are creative individuals just like themselves, and they apply different critical standards to works by male and female writers [10].

Many of Emily Dickinson's poems show her awareness of women's plight in 19th-century America. Besides this poem focusing on women's literary pursuits, she also wrote about women's situations in marriage and family life despite that she was not married all her life. Her well-known poem *I gave myself to Him* - could be interpreted in many ways, but it could be seen as a narrative poem of a wife talking about the risk of marriage: in Emily Dickinson's time, women's marriages were mostly arranged by their families, not decided by themselves, especially in the higher social classes. In this poem, the female speaker thinks marriage is but a 'solemn contract of life', just like a business contract between a man and a woman, without any affection or love. And this contract leads to the loss of the woman's 'life', meaning that she loses her freedom and becomes merely a belonging of her husband. This 'contract' is solemn but not equal at all. This is a common suffering faced by millions of women in the patriarchal 19th century America when Emily Dickinson lived.

In summary, even though Emily Dickinson was not directly exposed to the campaigns and thoughts of feminism, she was conscious of her identity as a woman and what miserable life meant in her time. However, she used her poetry to express herself and fight for her freedom. She wrote only for herself, not for publishing, which could explain why she only published few of her poems in her life. However, this is what made her a great and unique poet in literary history.

4. Conclusion

In her poem *They shut me up in Prose* -, Emily Dickinson used her unique form of verse to rebel against the patriarchal tradition that women are naturally less talented in poetry than men. The awakening of Emily Dickinson's feminine consciousness is related closely to the social context of 19th-century America and her own experience. Emily Dickinson had never joined the campaigns for women's rights, but her poetry shows that she was aware of the sufferings and struggles of women of her era and her desire to write for her freedom. Therefore, Emily Dickinson's poetry could be interpreted from a feminist point of view.

This essay gives a close analysis of Emily Dickinson's poem *They shut me up in Prose* - from its background, form (including metrics and rhyme), content, poetic devices, and theme, then interpret it using gender theories and feminist literary critics. This analysis could help readers understand Emily Dickinson and her poetry from a gendered perspective. In addition, it focuses on a poem that was not discussed by many scholars, which fills the gap of previous research and promotes the understanding of Emily Dickinson's identity as a female poet, as well as the relationship between gender and writing.

However, this research still has some limitations. Firstly, it only focuses on one short poem by Emily Dickinson, which limits the perspective of the research. Also, when analyzing the poem *They shut me up in Prose* -, this research only applied one single method, which is close textual analysis, and did not involve other textual materials like Emily Dickinson's manuscripts and letters which also reveal Emily Dickinson's views about her gender identity and writing. Finally, this essay did not systematically examine the theories of feminism and its relationship with Emily Dickinson's social background and writing. Future researchers could focus further on Emily Dickinson's feminine consciousness expressed in other poems and apply gender theories from various perspectives.

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