

Analysis of the Similar Characteristics in the Works of Dickinson and Bishop

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Abstract. Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop are both the most influential poets in western literary history. They both lived in a time of great change, and they both were seen as more silent than men. Dickinson lived a reclusive life until her death, she devoted almost her whole life to writing, and created 1775 poems in her lifetime. Her lonely life nourished her poetry, and despite frequent illness and unrequited affection, Dickinson's relationship with poetry was inextricably inseparable. As for the modern American poet Bishop, she always shuttles between different countries in her life. This experience of displacement and migration is not only her pleasure, but also the source of her loneliness and pain. There are many similarities in the life and creation of Bishop and Dickinson, both of whom have experienced the misfortune of growing up, and both have doubts about the identity as poets and as women. This paper explores the similarities between the two poets' creations and the causes from the aspects of time, physical condition and spiritual pursuit. The causes are their thoughts of life, death and female identity, as well as their pursuit of peace, which takes modern American poetry to a whole new level.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson; Elizabeth Bishop; mental health; self-identity.

1. Introduction

Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop are both keen observers who perceive the world through the eyes of poetry, well-known for their lyrical depiction of nature and fine presentation of delicate sentiments. Dickinson lived in seclusion and had no intention of publishing her works, which led critics to agree that she was focusing on expressing her feelings, unaware of the outside world. However, nearly half of Dickinson's poems were completed between 1861 and 1865, during the Civil War, which was exactly the peak of Dickinson's poetry composition, and a large number of war imagery vocabularies appeared in her poems during that time. Dickinson's constant use of creation as an intermediary to maintain a delicate relationship between herself and the turbulent times makes her expression historically important, especially as an honored female poet born in tense times. In the years that followed, Elizabeth Bishop also represented her correlation with the times through her own life. Despite being born into a wealthy family in New England, America, Bishop was not mentally unfamiliar with an itinerant life from an early age. She entered the literary society in New York during the Great Depression in the 1930s and traveled to France, Spain and other countries later, which had an irreplaceable influence on her early works. Bishop lived in Brazil for 18 years, and that period of settled life deeply shaped her personality and the texture of her writing. Although the two poets were born 81 years apart, they share certain similarities in writing style, ideological themes and artistic pursuits. Whether from the perspective of the historical context, physical condition is a mental dilemma. What is clear is that they both experienced the turmoil of the Times, the threatening health conditions, and the spiritual exile situation. Dickinson witnessed the American Civil War and faced the reality of her country's invasion and expansion as a reclusive woman, while Bishop had to witness the American economic depression in her youth, and her mental problems, such as alcoholism, can be seen from her early poems. On the other hand, the medical concern of Dickinson's adult life was an eye affliction suffered during the most prolific period of producing poems. In addition to that, another thing that these two female poets have in common is that they are both in a unique position in the rapid development stage of American capitalism because of their non-mainstream identity. They are faced with the absence of spiritual hometown and have experienced the feeling of not being

recognized in the general contemporary society, as well as the feeling of going through fruitless, marginalized love.

As two sensitive poetesses, one being silent at home and invisible to outsiders, the other remotes on geographical migration and using poetry as a vocal tool, their works are both evaluated as powerful and delicate. They are not true loners; they are warriors who use words to echo their own voice in a time of female reticence; they were meant to echo the silent scenery and the exquisite feelings that contemporaries did not pay attention to in the soul, also to create the value of their own existence. For a long time, female creators have been repressed in society to make a real voice; however, in the poems of Dickinson and Bishop, the mute female poet gives her voice in the way of natural expression. Starting from the similarities between their works, the research on their creation uses the comparison of rhetoric, theme of expression and commonly used images in comparative literature to explore how they act in the face of similar social, physical and spiritual dilemmas under different backgrounds. The similarity between them on the road of literature plays a great role in the awakening of modern women's consciousness and the increasing weight of women in the literary world. It is necessary to closely link the creation process of Bishop and Dickinson with the thinking of cultural construction with female poets as the main body through comparative study, which can examine the change of the status of female writers who have been silent for a long time in the changes of society and can also reflect the significance of the creation voice from the perspective of women for the whole literary world.

2. Depression and Turbulence: The Similar Nature of The Times

Dickinson and Bishop both lived in a time of great change. Dickinson lived during one of the most critical periods in America; the United States pursued an ideology that was destined to extend the nation across the continent. Foreign aggression, expansion and other war-related male-dominated behaviors were shrouded throughout the whole era. In this context, the American Civil War from 1861-1865 played an important role in Dickinson's life. Through the exchange of letters, Dickinson's continuous attention to the Civil War could be seen. Of her more than 1,000 letters, 69 were written between 1861 and 1865, eight of which referred directly to the Civil War and much more indirectly[1]. What is remarkable about this period is that Dickinson is thought to have produced half of her entire poems during this time. In 1862, she wrote the poem "He gave away his life" to her brother's friend Frazar who had been killed in the battle by a shell in the head [2], and this was a terrible death of war that happened around Dickinson, who was in her thirties at the time. The use of words like "magnified", reveals Dickinson's anti-war attitude, that is, war is an unjust murder, and the so-called glory brought by war is nothing, but an illusion created by politicians. This powerful external disaster further stimulates her to examine social contact with human beings. In her poems, she used highly emotional words to describe her anger and gave a distinctive voice during wartime. Statistically speaking, the Civil War had a profound influence on her poetry. Dickinson was inspired by the brutality of war and the meaning of death behind it. She wrote more than 500 poems between 1862 and 1864; the imagery associated with the war was more a discussion of death, injury and the existence of God [3].

In her "Our journey had advanced"[4], Dickinson described death in war as an inevitable and destructive force. In the last stanza, she talks about God, who appears at the end as a kind of acceptance, as a motherly figure welcomes lost children who have been killed and forever lost in the brutal war. The poems are startling. Even though she has never left her door, the poignant, inescapable scenes of death she explored in her poetry were a powerful indictment of war-making by a silent woman.

If the Civil War was a bloody stroke in American history, the Great Depression was another heavy dark period for the nation. Bishop lived through the Great Depression in New York in her 20s. by 1933, when the economic downtrend hit its lowest point, nearly 15 million Americans were unemployed, and the situation was more difficult for those who worked in urban areas for the fact

that almost half the country's banks had failed. Bishop was living at 16 Charles Street in Manhattan [5], New York, offered her major opportunities to be seen as an upcoming poet, yet it also provided a sense of anxiety and trepidation for her under the depressing social environment. She wrote "the Man-Moth" in 1935 [6], in which Bishop discussed the isolation that a marginalized creature felt in an urban city.

"He does not dare look out the window,
For the third rail, the unbroken draught of poison,
Runs there beside him. He regards it as a disease

He has inherited the susceptibility to. He has to keep his hands in his pockets, as others must wear mufflers [6]."

It is obvious that the Man-Moth is struggling with fitting in; in this stanza, he doubts the safety of the metro, which is usually seen as one of the symbols of modernization. The use of "susceptibility" can be interpreted as Bishop's anxiety as a young female living in a world where a male voice is considered authoritative. She reflected on the correlation between firm self-expression and the major trend of the times and wrote down the fear that she had of being assimilated or being thoroughly exposed to the public.

Both Bishop and Dickinson have used their poetry as a reflection of their turbulent historical background; they insisted on making their voices heard in the changes dominated by men. They are full of social consciousness and have real delicate feelings for human beings.

2.1. Written on the Body: The Similar Physical Condition

When one subconsciously worries about his or her physical health, the mental world is also imperceptibly affected by the woe. Physical pain has often been seen as one of the causative factors of philosophical thinking about the relationship between physical existence and the spiritual journey; it deepens one's awareness of the outside world and also gives inspiration to those who perceive the world through body experience. Both Bishop and Dickinson suffered from certain ailments at different stages of their lives, and those potential health threats influenced the themes they expressed and discussed in their works.

Bishop was not physically well throughout her life; in addition to her alcoholism, which was well-known in the literary field, she suffered from eczema, asthma and bronchitis from a young age [7]. As she wrote a letter to Anna Stevenson in 1964 saying, "one awful day I was sent home from 'first grade' because of my sores — and I imagine my hopeless shyness has dated from then." It should not be ignored that Bishop noticed the influence of her physical condition on her spiritual world early on, and this influence turned into a deep nourishment for her writing after she stepped into the literary circle. Particularly in 1934, when Bishop came to New York alone after graduating from Vassar, the city did not bring her pleasant feelings; on the contrary, she was very sick and survived the night with adrenalin and cough syrup on the very first New Year's Eve when she moved into New York. Bishop was panting on the floor, writing down a poem. "Land lies in water; it is shadowed green. Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges, showing the line of long sea—weeded ledges, where weeds hang to the simple blue from green." In her description, there is a sense of inversion, like the perspective of lying on the floor or the viewing angle of a weak, strengthless person trying to catch the world. The world is often more dangerous and stranger but, therefore, more unique and adventurous in the eyes of someone with a chronic health condition. The unusual sense of inversion is, therefore, a common element in Bishop's many poems, which many scholars believe is due to her alcoholism, the root of which can be interpreted psychologically as a result of traumas of sudden illness from early times. Illness makes people victims. However, the victimization can be a privilege for the writer because the frail body gives a writer like Bishop a different perspective, allowing her to care for the weak and the fragile and thus to see the world with a gentle heart. Ailing bodies also make poets adventurers for using their words instead bodies to go on quests into the spiritual world. Especially in Dickinson's work, the discussions of death and infirmity are common themes to read.

"The eyes glaze once-and that is Death-

Impossible to feign
The Beads upon the Forehead
By homely Anguish strung [3].”

In this poem, Dickinson talks about her conception of death; she suggests that death is inevitable, no discussion of which is complete without mentioning the presence of “anguish”. Her understanding of death partially comes from the anxiety caused by her physical pain. As someone who suffered from eye affliction in her adult life, especially during her most productive period of writing poems, her understanding of death is an end to a prolongation of the fear that is derived from agonizing in ways related to the physical yet beyond it.

For both Bishop and Dickinson, the body is the medium of the creative world and the practical one, and the pain is the valve of thinking. It is between illness and recovery, survival and death. They made a deep voice with poetry.

2.2. Eternal Exile: The Similar Spiritual Pursuit

In Dickinson’s poetry, she tried to explore numerous themes: the solemn beauty of nature, the attraction of death, the experience of love and loss, and the doubt of immortality. Her poems regularly contain the search for a certain hope and freedom, as well as the memory of irretrievable loss, which is an important theme in her spiritual journey. Dickinson’s spiritual pursuit was considered unconventional and rebellious in 19th-century America. Living alone and unmarried all her life, she suffered from the incomprehension of her contemporaries and the pressure of the mainstream beliefs in the patriarchal society, where women are the objects of male conquest and oppression as well as the accessories of men. Dickinson lived a secluded life in her room, expressing through her lifestyle and poetry her desire to break away from the West’s deeply rooted androcentric values, which see women as merely wives and Christians. However, Dickinson often felt lonely when she sought for herself, which was also because she pursued the freedom that women could not achieve at that time. Nevertheless, she still recorded her inner journey in her poems and constantly described the vitality that she longed for in the process of spiritual exile:

“I dwell in possibility —
A fairer house than prose —
More numerous of windows —
Superior — for Doors —
.....
Of visitors — the fairest —
For occupation — this —
The spreading wide my narrow hands
To gather Paradise — [3]”

In this poem, the line “fairer than prose” directly implies the importance of poetry to her mentally, while “windows” refer to the possibility that poetry presents to her. Poetry is a paramount “paradise” to her; she sees it as a place full of hope and freedom of expression. For Dickinson, poetry solved the spiritual question that the secular could not answer in a sacred way. Poetry showed the possibility of equal expression to every spiritually trapped person, and this possibility is infinite because the creation itself has no limits.

The identity of the poet Bishop is also abnormal. From the perspective of geography, she is a wandering traveler on the earth, and from the perspective of cultural identity, she is a lesbian in a conservative social environment. In Bishop’s middle age, with the tension of the Cold War and the McCarthy era, the persecution of homosexuals in America was getting deepening [8]. Under the threat of the white terror, Bishop traveled to Brazil in November 1951 to seek her own spiritual way out, a more inclusive, welcoming and diverse culture. In spiritual exile, she strongly realized that lesbianism was a kind of consciousness of self-desire which could not be repressed. It was the most primitive and strong emotion between two women since the time of Sappho. Unashamed of her identity and unbowed to society, Bishop simply went from public to underground and continued her homosexual

life, throughout which time her poetry was filled with depictions of same-sex passion. However, in 1975, Bishop's love left her, and at a moment of heartbreak, she wrote "one art"[9]. In this poem, the reader sees what Bishop has lost in the first half of her life during her continuous migration. Simple trivial things like "door keys" and meaningful things like "names", Bishop also uses metaphors such as "lost a continent" to show that the process of her constantly changing geographical location is also a process of constant loss. In the last stanza, she ends up directing the most painful kind of loss to the feeling of losing a loved one, making the act of losing connect to her spiritual void. "—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident the art of losing's not too hard to master though it may look like (Write it!) like a disaster." Bishop's reflections on gay culture are closely linked to her life experience, the women she loved eventually became part of her own identity, and the love she got and lost made her realize that she always seemed to be an outsider away from the mainstream. The feeling of being seen as different is not unfamiliar to Bishop, who has been quiet and lonely throughout her peripatetic life, as well as her descriptions of static landscapes poetry. However, she uses abstract and allegorical language to describe her anxiety that her identity is not recognized by society and the spiritual support she wants to find. Still taking her earlier work "The Man-Moth" as an example, thematically, the man-moth is a character who is a non-conforming outsider in the mid-20th century, which stays an obviously philosophical archetype and suffers from rejection for his identity [9]. Rhetorically, Bishop uses clinical description t as "The Man-Moth always seats himself facing the wrong way" to depict the confusion of the Man-Moth in the urban public. The Man-Moth is an outcast of the world, and so is Bishop, who had a rather lonely childhood and chose her way of life to be away from people and modern mass culture. The traces of poetry can be seen in every step of Bishop's choice. Poetry is the reassurance for her to confirm her self-worth in the conservative cultural environment and the benchmark for her to prevent assimilation by powerful cultures and to stick to herself in different environments [10]. However, Bishop always insisted on her identity as a wanderer and did not give up her pursuit of real literary freedom until the end of her life.

3. Conclusion

Poetry is a paradise of free expression, and free expression requires the poets to go deep into their own spiritual world and find the difference between themselves and the world. A good poet must know what he (or she) really wants in the world and weave it into the poems with a delicate feeling. Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop both describe their emotional and spiritual conditions in the anxious state of identity search through different lyrical and rhetorical ways. Their life experiences are also similar. From the perspectives of time, body and spirit, readers can see the intricate and close relationship between them and contemporary social and cultural factors. It is this deep connection that brings readers more diversified and universal cultural thinking beyond national boundaries. Even in the face of a lot of pressure and difficulties given by the times, Dickinson still used poetry to be the powerful voice of her trapped body in the war time, demonstrating her anti-war stance as a woman outside the battlefield, namely her reflection on the male power. Her literary achievements enriched the social connotation that literary works should have. In the conservative cultural environment in the middle of the 20th century, Bishop showed her moral and ethical rebellion against the hetero-dominated view of love with her poems, inspire people's action with her words, and encouraged people to seek the true spiritual home. Emily and Bishop's actions had both historical and intellectual depth, and undoubtedly demonstrated their outstanding talents and courage that men could not match. In doing so, they set another high point in American literature.

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