

The Burning Love in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson

Jun Li

The School of Foreign languages, Yunnan Normal University, Kunming 650500, China

Abstract: As a distinguished female poet, Emily Dickinson is considered to write many love poems in her life time. This paper attempts to understand the burning love through the implicit and explicit representation in her love poems. Through the use of the binary opposition and the bold description of the sexual affairs between lovers, the yearning for love is represented in her poems. Whether it is implicit or explicit description, the inequality between the male and the female is fully represented through Dickinson's love poems. The female not only suffered the emotional repression in a love relationship, but also is reduced to the subordinate social status in every aspects of the Victorian society.

Keywords: The burning love; The explicit representation; The implicit representation; The binary opposition; Emily Dickinson

Publication date: December, 2020

Publication online: 31 December, 2020

***Corresponding author:** Jun Li, ohlala_lee@163.com

1 Introduction

When people refer to the greatest poets in American romanticism, most people tend to have a natural association with Walt Whitman and his *Leaves of Grass*. However, in contrast to Walt Whitman, who declared himself the poet of the American people and claimed a public role, Emily Dickinson remained a poet with private experiences, publishing only a few poems during her lifetime. Her reputation is established on her posthumous publication. The mystery of Emily Dickinson and the biographical puzzles in her life shape the way some readers read her poems. In order to explain these puzzles and best understand her love poems, the foremost thing is to take a brief account on this great female poet's life

and her love relationships.

2 An introduction to the love relationships of Emily Dickinson

Many critics regard Dickinson as a recluse isolated from the human contact—an image that persists in the minds of some readers even today. Inferring from the sparse materials collected by the biographers, there are altogether three men who have love relationships with Emily Dickinson through her lifetime, namely, Samuel Bowles and Charles Wadsworth, both married when Dickinson firstly knew them, and lastly Judge Otis Philips Lord, a recent widower before Dickinson professed to him.

2.1 Emily Dickinson and Samuel Bowels

Samuel Bowels is an old friend of Dickinson's father, no more than four years older than Dickinson, but he is a married man. Emily has kept continuous correspondences with Bowels couples for more than twenty years. She wrote him in an implicit and riddle-like language to show her love for him, but this man, an editor of a publisher, obviously have no patience to solve those riddles and mysteries in the letters. Dickinson's love for him never stopped, lasting for a long period of time. On Contrast, Bowels remained blind towards Dickinson's burning love, only publishing her six poems in his newspaper^[1].

2.2 Emily Dickinson and Charles Wadsworth

Unfortunately, Dickinson falls in love with another married man--Charles Wadsworth, a priest, 17 years older than her. From their first encounter in Washington to his death, the two lovers have remained close connections by letter. Though deeply in love for each other, the relationship between them is only confined to the ideological exchange and the

emotional communication in letters. The two lovers met each other for three times in real contacts. If Wadsworth was a bachelor at that time, their love might have bloomed.

2.3 Emily Dickinson and Ottis Philips Lord

Ottis Philips Lord is not only an intimate friend of her father's but also her bosom friend during their acquaintances. Dickinson had known Lord before his wife died, but they have cherished their friendship until 1877 when the friendship was converted to the love relationship. However their love is regarded as if putting the boot on the wrong leg. When Dickinson boldly expressed her love for Lord and waited for his response, Lord kept silent for a long time. When Lord finally understood her love and accepted it, Dickinson resolutely rejected his proposal. Although Dickinson needs the nutrition of true love, she refuses to be a slave of his love. On the contrary, she just hope for keeping a distance from her lover. What she needs is just the mental satisfaction and spiritual consolation^[2].

From the above overview, we can infer that Emily Dickinson has experienced a lot of romantic relationships in her life time. Given the frustrated love she experienced, it is intelligible that Dickinson wrote many poems with the exploration of such emotional issues as love, passion, desire and frustration. Her love-themed poems can be paradoxically divided into two parts--one is the implicit depiction of mutual love between lovers while the other is the explicit description of the sexual affairs between lovers.

3 The representation of the burning love in the poems of Emily Dickinson

Dickinson usually uses metaphors or allegories to indicate her lovers' image, making her poetry more profound and connotative. Most objects used in her poems are often such eternal and stable masculine objects in nature such as the son, the high mountains, the sea, etc.. Conversely, she describes herself as an invisible daisy or a helpless rat at the mercy of God.

3.1 The implicit representation of mutual love between lovers

The binary opposition of "The sun/the daisy" is the most frequently used model to construct the image of lovers (Liu 114). In this model, men are likened to the sun with its powerful radiation while women are compared to the daisy longing for the sunshine's

heat. The adoption of this allegory originated from the Greek mythology. It is said that one of the maids of Apollo named Cledy chooses to be a daisy or a sunflower only due to her infatuation with Apollo, so that she can be soaked in the sun's rays and get the sunshine's caresses. This myth archetype is widely used in most literary works of art in 1860s. (Liu 115) we know that Dickinson' lovers are all older than her, playing a tutor-like role throughout her life. Therefore, these ideal "tutors" in her life appears in the image of the burning sun, shining, dazzling, brilliant and masculine, while the female in her poetry leave the impression of white petals in the readers' mind. They blossom quietly, unfolding their white petals with the implication that the female should be negative, humble and effeminate, seeking for the male protection and his favor. But "the king" is busy with the whole matters of the world, overlooking the existence of "the queen". The binary opposition is best presented in the following poem:

The Daisy follows soft the Sun—
And when his golden walk is done—
Sits shily at his feet—
He—waking—finds the flower there—
Wherefore—Marauder—art thou here?
Because, Sir, love is sweet!

We are the Flower—Thou the Sun!
Forgive us, if as days decline—
We nearer steal to Thee!
Enamored of the parting West—
The peace—the flight—the amethyst—
Night's possibility! (#106)

This poem fully reveals the conflict between the virtuous quality and helpless situation of the women in domestic and social status prevalent in Victorian Age. The sun is hanging high in the sky with its sunshine radiating towards different directions. Only after finishing the daytime business does he become aware of the little flower who adores him deeply for some time. The term "Marauder" is regarded as the daisy, who, like other flowers, can get some heat from the ejection of the sun rays. Obviously, the speaker in the poem claims herself as interior and humble as if she had robbed the sun of its heat, thus feeling guilty for her robbery. When the sun ask the daisy "wherefore", she doubtlessly professes her yearning for "sweet love". Her answer also indicates her courageous love for the sun^[3].

Another widely-used example to establish the lover's image is the contrast of "the bees/the flowers" (Liu 117). This kind of versification is perhaps based on the poet's inclination towards gardening. Let's look at a poem at first:

A Bee his burnished Carriage
Drove boldly to a Rose—
Combinedly alighting—
Himself—his Carriage was—
The Rose received his visit
With frank tranquility
Withholding not a Crescent
To his Cupidity—
Their Moment Consummated—
Remained for him—to flee—
Remained for her—of rapture
But the humility. (#1339)

In this poem, the bee flying among all kinds of beautiful flowers is the best embodiment of the male while the rose waiting for the bee's visit well represents the passive image of the female. This poem vividly pictures the scene of the bee's courtship, in which the bee bravely kisses his flower buds until he completely conquers the rose. However, sometimes the flower will be presented as a lady, regardless of the obtrusive bees:

The flower must not blame the Bee—
That seeketh his felicity
Too often at her door—

But teach the Footman from Vevay—
Mistress is "not at home"—to say—
To people—any more! (#206)

Although the bee is so often belittled by the arrogant flowers, he finally shows himself as a victor in the love contest and he insists on an assumption that his persistence in courtship will ultimately wins the love the "his queen".

Evidently, from the above two examples, the use of binary oppositions such as "The sun/the daisy" and "the bees/the flowers" are omnipresent in most love poems of Emily Dickinson. Physical objects are widely-used to create the images of lovers, representing the inequality between lovers in a love relationship and reflecting the unequal power relationships between the male and the female in Victorian age. Through the above analysis, we can see the female emotion is depressed in Victorian time without any initiative in a love relationship, indicating the female's inferior

domestic and social status compared to the male's superior social position.

3.2 The explicit representation of the sexual affairs between lovers

Apart from shyly exhibiting love relationships in love poems, Dickinson also contributes a large proportion of her poems to describing the climax moments in love affairs. In these poems, the speaker tears the bashful veil of "the daisy", audaciously uttering her hunger for the love "banquet". In contrast to Whitman's overt references to the body, sexuality, and sexual pleasure, Dickinson often employs metaphors, allusions, and allegories to convey sexual experience or the undercurrents of sexual tension, fully portraying her inner satisfaction and despair, emptiness and hope, enthusiasm and resistance in love poems. These poems commonly were created under the background of the Eden, the tranquility of which can be helpful to enjoy the "wild nights".

Come slowly, Eden!
Lips unused to Thee—
Bashful—sip thy Jessamines—
As the fainting Bee—

Reaching late his flower,
Round her chamber hums—
Counts his nectars—
Enters—and is lost in Balms. (#211)

In this poem, the model of "the bee/the flower" is used again to colorfully describe the possible moments of union for a pair of lovers. In addition, the use of "Jessamines" reminds the reader of Bowels because Bowels has once give Dickinson a flower of Jessamines as a present (Liu 118). The poet tries to associate such flower with love, thus making the intoxicated bees drunken in love.

Another frequently anthologized poems, "Wild Nights—Wild Nights!" (#249) presents the possibility of union and sexual satisfaction. Please appreciate this poem:

Wild Nights—Wild Nights!
Were I with thee
Wild Nights should be
Our Luxury!

Futile—the Winds—
To a Heart in port
Done with the Compass—

Done with the chart!

Rowing in Eden—
Ah, the Sea!
Might I but moor
Tonight—In thee!

This poem starts with the spondaic rhythm. Perhaps, the scene of the wild nights intensively reflects the enthusiastic emotion and the burning love of the poet. According to Melissa, “The middle stanza compares the heart to a sailor, who is freed from the demands of the journey or the quest, who is safe from the buffeting winds that can drive the sailor off course”(331). For the speaker, to be so intoxicated in the company of her lovers would be paradise. It would allow the “luxury” of wild nights to generate the sexually contented exclamation “Ah, the Sea!” Dickinson locates the sea of love in the Eden Garden which signifies the sweetness and the happiness of the love, adding too much romanticism and security to the love itself. Therefore, this typical poem stretches the poet’s thirst for intense love in wild nights.

From the above analysis, we can see that the explicit representation of the sexual affairs between lovers provides a great challenge towards the female emotional repression in Victorian age. At that time, the female can only accept the male’s courtship passively, without any right to positively express their love for the male. It can be concluded that the female is suppressed in the male-dominated society, which is fully represented not only in the love relationships between the male and the female, but also in every

respects of the power relationships in the Victorian society.

4 Conclusion

It is regretful that Emily Dickinson chose to live a reclusive life in her latter part of lifetime. She remained single and unmarried all her rest life so that she was misunderstood to have an abnormal sexual orientation. However, from so many love poems she wrote in her lifetime, the intensity of her longing for love is evidently represented through the implicit and explicit description of the love relationships between lovers. Her love poems not only present the vague emotion between lovers but also vividly give a panorama towards the sexual affairs in a love relationship, which provide another interpretation to understand her life experiences, her observation of the inequality between men and women. From this perspective, her representation of burning love in most of her poems in Victorian time is a protest against the male-dominated society, in which the female is always subordinate to the male in almost every social aspects.

References

- [1] Liu Shoulun, the Study of Emily Dickinson [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language and Education Press, 2006.
- [2] Melissa Mcfarland Pennell, Masterpieces of American Romantic Literature [M]. Beijing: Chinese People’s University Press, 2007.
- [3] Thomas H. Johnson, ed. The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson [M]. London: Redwood Burn Limited, 1982