

Harmony and Hostility: Emily Dickinson's View of Nature from Animal Images

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Abstract

As an integral part of nature, animals recur in Emily Dickinson's nature poetry and are an important carrier of her emotions and thoughts. This paper explores the relationship between animal images and the main ideas of Dickinson's nature poetry, and further explains Dickinson's complex view of nature. On the one hand, she believes that nature is harmonious and beautiful as a whole, such as the joyful scenes of bees and butterflies in her nature poems. On the other hand, she sees the natural world as unpredictable and even in a state of hostility, which is reflected in the relationship between animals, and that between man and animals.

Keywords

Harmony; Hostility; Emily Dickinson; Nature; Animal Images.

1. Introduction

Emily Dickinson spent her entire life indoors in a small town of New England, observing the surrounding nature in her study and kitchen and immersing herself in the world of her imagination. Fascinated by the pristine natural landscape of the New England countryside, the cycle of the seasons, and the changing light of sunset and sunrise, the poetess drew most of her poems from rural New England life and natural scenery with a strong flavor of the countryside. She presented the natural scenery of New England, such as forests, meadows, and the garden behind her house, in her poems with a rustic and transcendent interest.

While studying at Amherst School from 1840 to 1847, Dickinson admired her geology teacher, Edward Hitchcock who believed in God as well as science. He was a naturalist, and believed that being close to nature was a way to understand God. What's more, his teaching and writing were always poetic. So Dickinson studied with Hitchcock and excelled in botany and horticulture. Her studies at Amherst School inspired her keen perception and observation of the natural world. Dickinson's observations and vivid descriptions of nature were not confined to the cottage she lived in; she went out and observed nature carefully, recording it in poems, and she often described the smallest things that people tend to overlook.

Dickinson's poems on the theme of nature generally fall into two broad categories: poems of nature scenes, which describe the wonders of nature; and philosophical poems, which reveal the mysteries of the universe and human life. Of course, there is no clear boundary between these two types of poetry, and in some poems the two are intertwined and embodied together. The things celebrated in her poetry can be divided into two basic categories: natural beauty; animals and plants. Dickinson's best and most interesting poems about nature are those about animals, such as hummingbirds, frogs, snakes, flies, and spiders, including depictions of their forms, colors, sounds, and habits. Birds often appear in her poems, but are not confined to a generalized concept. She defines them in her poems as "The Robin's my Criterion for Tune—," "Cuckoo—rules the Noon—", and "a revolving Wheel". In addition, her love extends to snakes, flies, rats, bats, and spiders, which are often considered horrific and even disgusting, and spiders are represented in her poems in this camp. In her poems, the spider is described as an

artist and diligent worker who stays up late every night to weave webs for others in solitude and darkness. In her eyes, spiders are not evil. It can be seen from her poems that her love for nature has penetrated into every creature of nature. She has an aphoristic saying: "Nature is a Haunted House—but Art—a House that tries to be haunted" [1]. That is to say, artists should try to find inspiration in the mysterious nature and make their art take on the characteristics of natural scenes.

After decades of development, American romantic literature has formed a literary genre with unique American national characteristics. After that, transcendentalism, with its independent and new vision of natural world, pushed American Romanticism to its peak. In this cultural movement, "nature" became an important theme in American Romantic literature. In the early stage of American romantic literature, Washington Irving, Cooper and Bryant either regarded nature as an idea, made nature an indispensable background for characters' behaviors and activities, or made nature the object of direct eulogy and praise. By the late period of romanticism, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman and others not only made nature main object of expression in their creative works, but unique understanding and expression of nature made it take on different meanings.

Emily Dickinson lived in the era of American Romanticism, and she was deeply influenced by Emerson's transcendentalist ideas. According to Capes, Dickinson is most influenced by Emerson's transcendentalist ideas among all American writers. Emerson's ideas shaped the soul of Dickinson's poetry, provided an inexhaustible source for her poetry and life, and became the cornerstone of Dickinson's thought, which had a decisive influence on her poetic creation. In her letters and poems, she quoted Emerson's verses many times. When Emerson died in 1882, Dickinson wrote in a letter to a friend, "Emerson . . . touched the fountain of secrets . . .", it was Emerson who helped her to find her faith. Emerson wrote in Nature "Nature is a sea of forms radically alike and even unique . . . What is common to them all,—that perfectness and harmony, is beauty" [2]. Under Emerson's influence, Dickinson turned away from religion and toward nature, which became a constant theme in her poetry (more than 500 poems). And in her early poems, there are many expressions of beautiful things of nature that show a harmonious nature; but she came to realize that nature, too, was also mysterious and even hostile, and not as perfect as Emerson made it out to be.

For Dickinson's nature poetry, most scholars have studied the relationship between man and nature, and fewer scholars have studied it only from the perspective of animal images (They also took plants and natural scenes as their starting point, and the content appears to be somewhat disorganized). This paper focuses on the relationship within nature, which is different from the relationship between man and nature. In addition, this paper only studies from the perspective of animal images in her nature poems. Therefore we can better understand the function of animal images and the motif in Dickinson's nature poems, and explore Dickinson's view of nature.

2. The Harmonious Nature

Animal imagery is one of the important components of Dickinson's poetic imagery system. Humans and animals are both living beings, surviving in the natural environment. The animals that appear in her poems include birds, insects, and beasts. The presence of animals makes Dickinson's poetry lively and full of vitality. Another remarkable feature of Dickinson's nature poems is that the poetess not only focuses on beautiful natural things, but also depicts those easily overlooked and scary-looking creatures, such as rats, flies, snakes, spiders and bats. The poetess does not want to show the ugly side of these animals, but try to see nature as the embodiment of perfect harmony, in which both ugly and beautiful creatures have souls and are equal.

Animal images outline the harmony of nature in Dickinson's spiritual world. According to my statistics, the animal words that appear most frequently in Dickinson's nature poetry are bird (260 times), bee (109 times), robin (40 times) and butterfly (28 times). From this, it is easy to tell that Dickinson prefers cute, small and flying animals. Dickinson once directly compared her friends to birds and bees in her poems because they have wings and can fly. These small and delightful animals with flowers and plants, together with Dickinson's whimsical ideas, create a harmonious and playful picture of nature. In Dickinson's view, it takes a clover and one bee to make a prairie. She is familiar with bees and butterflies, and "the pretty people in the woods" are very kind to her. There are many joyful scenes of bees and butterflies playing in Dickinson's nature poems. For example, in "The Grass So Little Has To Do", the grass has to create "A sphere of simple green, / With only butterflies to brood, / And bees to entertain". All these poems show the readers that animals live in harmony in natural world.

It is worth mentioning that bees are an important element of poetic nature for Dickinson, especially as an indispensable imagery for depicting summer scenes. "Nature Is What We See" highlights the animal imagery of bee in the nature picture:

"Nature" is what we see—

The Hill—the Afternoon—

Squirrel—Eclipse—the Bumble bee—

Nay—Nature is Heaven—

Nature is what we hear—

The Bobolink—the Sea—

Thunder—the Cricket—

Nay—Nature is Harmony—

The poem makes use of some typical animal images, namely squirrel, bumble bee, bobolink and cricket which appear 15, 14, 9, and 8 times respectively in *The Complete Works of Emily Dickinson*. Dickinson depicts the beauty and harmony of nature in three dimensions: vision, hearing and perception. The poetess selects a series of seemingly random but representative animal images to interpret the whole picture of nature, from the vision to the sound, from the heavenly beauty to the harmonious symphony of nature, and finally comes down to the perception: nature is a harmonious unity but we cannot fully understand it, thus giving rise to the feeling that in front of such a mysterious nature, human beings appear so small and helpless. In this way, the greatness and profundity of nature are reflected.

In her poems, the poetess often anthropomorphizes the animals to better highlight their images. In "The Bee is not afraid of me", Dickinson writes "The Bee is not afraid of me / I know the Butterfly". These two short sentences can be interpreted as both juxtaposed and causal. In the latter case, it can be understood that because "I" know the butterfly, the bee is not afraid of "me". The butterfly and the bee are probably close friends. The butterfly is very familiar with "me" and has told the bee that "I" will not hurt them, so the bee is not afraid of me. In this sense, the bee and the butterfly communicate well and get along harmoniously in the woods.

Please look at another poem:

Bee! I'm expecting you!

Bee! I'm expecting you!

Was saying Yesterday

To Somebody you know

That you were due—

The Frogs got Home last Week—

Are settled, and at work—

Birds, mostly back—
 The Clover warm and thick—
 You'll get my Letter by
 The seventeenth; Reply
 Or better, be with me—
 Yours, Fly.

This poem is a letter written by a fly to a bee. The fly warmly invites the bee back to play with him and other animals for a while. In natural world, the beautiful, the ugly, the good and the bad are no longer judged by human values. And flies and bees become good friends, realizing the equality of all beings. Dickinson breaks away from the traditional human culture's symbol of "fly" as greedy and dirty, and gives a new meaning to the fly, which represents harmony and vitality. The poetess paints a picture of the harmony and vitality in nature in the spring with a light-hearted and humorous tone. The nature in Dickinson's eyes is full of humanity and the disgusting fly shares the joy of spring with the beautiful bee. The letter also mentions some other typical animal images—frogs and birds who have already come back and were waiting for the bee. Maybe they plan to have a wonderful party in the warm and thick clover with the bee. In this poem, animals that fly in the sky and swim in the water live in harmony and communicates equally.

The harmony of nature is not only reflected among species, but also within each species. In the poem "Further in Summer than the Birds" Dickinson wrote "Pathetic from the Grass / A minor Nation celebrates / Its unobtrusive Mass" [3]. If one is familiar with Dickinson's poetry, he/she will find that the "minor nation" refers to crickets who are singing a sad chorus of ritual. During her lifetime, Dickinson had a strong interest in music and often participated in hymn-singing activities that honed her auditory acuity. According to Martin Wand Richard B. Sewall's research, Dickinson suffered from an eye disease that kept her indoors much of the time. Perhaps it was the loss of vision that made her more attentive to the world of sound. For Dickinson, "listening" is a crucial artistic response. She captures the sounds of nature, depicting the "singing" of bees, beetles, flies, crickets, and other insects, focusing on the power of their voices. In this poem, the poetess writes about the chirping of crickets as music: on a summer night, there is a mass deep in the grass, with an unending sound and no change in meter. Although we can't see them, we can feel that they are united in singing the unique song—the harmony of nature.

In Dickinson's nature poems, readers can always find a variety of animal images, which bring life and vitality into the poetry itself. Through these animal images, Dickinson perfectly presents readers with a peaceful and harmonious picture of nature. But we know that her view of nature is extremely complex, considering it both harmonious and cruel even hostile. Does the latter point of view also be reflected in the animal images of her nature poetry?

3. The Hostile Nature

Dickinson's nature poetry is varied in tone, and her attitudes toward nature are inconsistent and contradictory because of time, place and mood. In her daily observations, Dickinson finds that nature is not as beautiful as it is made out to be. Nature's indifferent attitude toward humans and other creatures makes the poetess feel both mysterious and awe-inspiring. There are strong and weak animals in nature, and the relationship between them is not only harmonious, but also hostile. In this part, I will analyze the hostility of nature.

In her famous poem "A Bird came down the Walk", Dickinson not only portrays the relationship between the weak and the strong in nature, but also emphasizes that nature is indifferent to the life of all living beings and takes it in stride:

A Bird came down the Walk—
 He did not know I saw—
 He bit an Angleworm in halves
 And ate the fellow, raw,

.....

Like one in danger, Cautious,
 I offered him a Crumb
 And he unrolled his feathers
 And rowed him softer home—

The poetess uses two animal images, the bird and the angleworm, to depict a hostile and dangerous natural world. The angleworm is pecked in halves and then swallowed by the bird, reflecting the cruel side of nature. In addition, the bird does not dare to eat the crust of bread thrown by “me” for fear that “I” will hurt him, which shows that the bird has a hostile attitude toward human beings.

For Dickinson, it is safe at home, but outside the home there are various dangers caused by fierce animals. In one of her poems “Through lane it lay—through bramble—”, Dickinson describes:

The wolf came peering curious—
 The owl looked puzzled down—
 The serpent’s satin figure
 Glid stealthily along—

.....

The hungry Vulture screamed—

In the poem, readers can find four different animal images: the wolf, the owl, the serpent and the hungry vulture. These are the four animals that represent danger in western culture. First, the wolf symbolizes cruelty, cunning and greed in some cultures. In western tradition, the wolf is often the antithesis of the lamb which is a symbol of piety, and the wolf, which threatens the life of the lamb. In the poem, the wolf is such a frightening image that comes and peers at the speaker curiously and greedily. It can come out of the jungle and take the speaker away at any time. Second, the word “owl” is an onomatopoeic word of Latin origin, referring to the mournful cry of owls. In western literature, owl image is also an intertwining identity of the wise. In ancient Greek and Roman cultures, the owl is the goddess of death and rebirth in prehistoric civilizations. As literary imagery, the appearance of the owl in the works of Ovid, Virgil, Dante, Chaucer and others often foreshadows death and uncertainty. For example, in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the owl is an ugly bird; in Chaucer’s *The Parliament of Fowls*, the owl is a metaphor for death. So in Dickinson’s poem, the “puzzled owl” who looks down at the speaker creates an atmosphere of death and foreshadows uncertainty. In a sense, the owl brings out the dark and dangerous side of nature. Then, “serpent” refers to huge snake in western culture. It is also the beginning of mischief and the source of disaster. In Dickinson’s poem, “satin” sounds like “Satan” who is the cunning serpent to tempt Eve. “Glid stealthily” shows that the serpent is a devious and malicious species. It lurks in the grass waiting for prey, which would be attacked by it. Therefore, the serpent also represents the hostility and danger in nature. Finally, the hungry vulture, in Wang Li’s view, is a symbol of death because it likes to eat the decaying flesh of dead animals [4]. It hovers and screams while waiting for food, making the speaker feel frightened and want to run away. In a word, in this grim poem, Dickinson employs four animal images to create a frightening, dangerous and hostile natural world.

In addition to the natural world outside, “nature” at home is not all in harmony. There are many common animals at home: cats, rats, dogs, flies, etc. In Dickinson’s poem “Papa above” she

describes a scene of a poor rat being abused by a cat “Papa above! / Regard a Mouse / O’erpowered by the Cat!” [3]. And in the poem “The Whole of It Came Not At Once”, This kind of scene is portrayed more specifically:

The Whole of it came not at once—
 ’Twas Murder by degrees—
 A Thrust—and then for Life a chance—
 The Bliss to cauterize—
 The Cat reprieves the Mouse
 She eases from her teeth
 Just long enough for Hope to tease—
 Then mashes it to death—

The murder of the mouse by the cat is not done all at once, it is a gradual process. For the mouse, it is also an extremely painful process. It’s natural for cats to eat mice. But it is cruel that the cat “plays” with the mouse instead of eating it at once. When a cat catches a mouse, why does the cat mistreat it? There are two reasons for it. The first is to improve the kitten’s ability to catch mice. The mother cat does not eat the mouse immediately after catching it, but will let it go and then let her child catch the mouse. The second is to show off its skills to the master, increasing the sense of honor. Unfortunately the cat’s complacency is directly proportional to the mouse’s despair. And it is cruel to the mouse that the cat first gives it hope and then despair which comes suddenly. It is not only the physical pain to the mouse, but also the mental torture. So we can see the “nature” inside the house is as hostile and dangerous as the nature outside which show the dark side of nature.

4. Conclusion

As one of the greatest nineteenth-century American poets, Emily Dickinson is expert in employing a range of animal images to convey her complex view of nature. And it is due to her careful observation of animals in natural world. On the one hand, Dickinson believes that nature is harmonious and beautiful as a whole, such as the joyful scenes of bees and butterflies in her nature poems. On the other hand, she sees the natural world as unpredictable and even in a state of hostility, which is reflected in the relationship between animals, and that between man and animals. However, it is worth noting that she frequently uses the same animal image (e.g. bird) to express these two very different views. That is to say, the same kind of animal image may have different meanings and functions in Dickinson’s nature poetry. If we read Dickinson’s nature poetry apart from animal images, we will not only find it hard to grasp her intention, but find that there seems to be less fun. It can be said that Dickinson’s animal image, as a writing technique, is a profound reflection and summary of nature.

References

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